

Sweetest Sacrifice



Book One

Dark Knight

HELEN SCOTT ZOEY SHELBY

DARK KNIGHT

SWEETEST SACRIFICE

BOOK 1

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CONTENTS

[A Note on Content](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Also By Helen Scott](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also By Zoey Shelby](#)

[About the Author](#)

A NOTE ON CONTENT

My Dearest Reader,

I wanted to include a warning ahead of time to let you know that this series will be going to some dark places. This note is intended as a warning so you don't start a book that might not be fun for you.

Within the pages of this series, there will be bloodshed, pain—both emotional and physical—grief, and love. That being said, there are dark themes, situations, and characters. Some of these may be considered upsetting or disturbing. If you are sensitive to themes that are commonly found in dark romances, this may not be the book for you.

EVIE

A scream clawed its way up my throat, stopping just before it exploded out of my mouth. Even sleeping, my subconscious was keeping me safe, stopping me from calling out and getting myself in trouble.

It wasn't like this was the first time I'd had to be quiet or remain unseen, but this time there was a fear that I knew was deadly behind my silence. My life had never depended on it before, and I was pretty sure it did now.

I bolted upright in bed. My subconscious was trying to escape the situation I was in, but as soon as I really woke up, I knew it was no good. I was stuck here in this room that amounted to nothing better than a prison cell. The only person that knew where I was was the man who put me here.

He went by the name Sampson, at least that's what he told me. The man was a kidnapper, so it wasn't like he was above lying. He claimed that he was a family member of my roommate, Lyric.

I took a deep breath and tried to calm my racing heart. The faint scent of mildew filling my nose made me wish I hadn't.

The idea that Lyric knew somebody so vile seemed detached from the girl I knew. She had a troubled past, that much was obvious from the beginning. She had done things that she was ashamed of, and she made it clear that she had skills that most girls around her age wouldn't even know the first thing about. Still, there was a disconnect in my head between her and the man whose footsteps I now heard coming down the hall.

The steady thunk, thunk, thunk of his boots on the concrete echoed through my bones.

His pace was measured, not rushed, and it left no doubt about who was in control of the situation. It sure as hell wasn't me. I had been dreaming about the day he took me again.

I thought the nightmare that was my life ended when I escaped the cult that I grew up in. I thought I'd found freedom. Life was almost idyllic for a couple of years, but this new nightmare I found myself in was even worse than before.

The grating of metal on metal sounded as he opened the door to the room that he was keeping me in. I was sure that if I ever escaped, that sound would haunt me for the rest of my life.

"Blondie," he grunted as light poured in behind him, silhouetting his figure, one that was terrifying to me. I never really understood the phrase darkened a doorway until I saw him standing there the first time.

Sampson was a large, imposing man. Who, even though he was older, had relatively little body fat on him. But that didn't mean he looked like a bodybuilder. In fact, his musculature was almost lean, even given his size. His shaved head made me wonder if he was balding or not.

He walked a few paces in, and I scuttled back on my bed, pressing myself into the corner. The cinder blocks of the wall were cold against my skin as the metal of the handcuffs around my ankles bit into my joints. There was only so far I could move. He'd designed it that way.

The bucket he was carrying thudded on the floor as he set it down, water sloshing over the sides and splashing against the concrete floor. He pulled a towel, a sponge, and some little hotel style bottles of shampoo and soap from under his arm along with a toothbrush and toothpaste.

"Today is the day we're getting out of here. That means that you need to be clean. Can't have you smelling like a month's worth of filth when people are trying to buy you off of me." My stomach turned at his words.

He made it clear from the very beginning that this was just a paycheck to him—just a way for him to torment Lyric because I was her first real friend.

"You need to be as fresh as a daisy when I come back. I don't want to leave bruises right before I'm trying to sell a product, but I will if I have to. Plus, there are plenty of ways I can hurt you that won't leave a mark." He paused, and the silence made my mind race. "I'll give you two hours. Eat this too."

A granola bar or protein bar or something flopped on the floor as he tossed it in my direction. My stomach growled loudly at the thought of

having something to put in it.

When he turned away and walked out, I finally let myself take a breath. There was something about that man that made me freeze like a rabbit in front of a wolf.

It was only once the door closed behind him, the lock sounding once more, and his footsteps fading as he left, that I devolved into sobs. I knew he was somehow related to my roommate, and I knew she would be aware I was missing, but how the hell would she find me? Or stop what was happening? Hell, would she even want to? It wasn't like we'd known each other that long.

I had no idea, and if I was honest with myself, I doubted that she could. So I decided not to count on it. If I was going to get out of here and avoid the life that was awaiting me at Sampson's hands, it was on my shoulders to do just that. I would rather be clean when I made my escape attempt than not, so I was thankful for the water and soap, even if I knew I was just as likely to get hypothermia from the cold water as anything else.

I peeled the clothes I'd been in for the last few weeks off my body before unfolding the towel and setting it to the side. A drab slip of a dress fell out from between the folds of the material, and I assumed that's what I was supposed to put on afterward. No sense in getting clean and putting dirty clothes back on, especially ones that stink worse than a pigsty. I just wish the dress wasn't white. I would have taken any other color—white reminded me too much of my previous life.

After brushing my teeth, I started soaping up. Shivers wracked my body, making me dread rinsing off. Finally, I washed my hair. I knew it was backward and that I should have washed my hair first in case any dirty water got on my skin again, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

I wanted my body to be clean before anything else. Maybe it was the way cleanliness was drilled into me as a child, but I hated being dirty. As I sat shivering in my birthday suit, I rubbed the thin, scratchy material of the towel against my skin in hopes of drying off. The towel wasn't really up to the job, though.

Once I was dry enough, I began to nibble on the protein bar. I knew I couldn't take it too fast, otherwise I would just make myself sick. It was torture, forcing myself to go slow. I tried to recall the way Sampson had brought me here—the route that he took through the building. What anything looked like before he shoved me into this dark room and locked the door

behind me. The memories escaped me, though. All I could feel was the terror that had filled me once I realized that there wouldn't be a way for me to escape anytime soon.

Now was my time, though. I had to try, even if it meant my own death. The only question was whether I tried to escape in this building that I only had the vaguest recollection of or if I waited until I got to wherever he was taking me to sell me. If he was taking me somewhere that might be a more public area or at least more people there, then somebody might be willing to help me, which was why I made the decision to go along with him for now.

I'd be a good girl. I'd follow orders. I'd let him get comfortable, even more comfortable than he already was. And then finally, when the opportunity presented itself, I'd make a run for it. And I didn't care who I had to hurt to get away. Not anymore, even if that meant hurting myself. I'd rather go down fighting than not try at all.

The trouble was with someone like Sampson, going down fighting meant going down permanently. But at this point, that was a risk I had to take. Sometimes death was the answer. Whether it was mine or his, I no longer cared.

EVIE

My forehead slammed into the metal of the trunk as the car accelerated unexpectedly. When Sampson brought me down to the garage, I expected to be in the back seat, but I was relegated to the trunk. Not only that, but I was bound, gagged, and blindfolded. Even if I wanted to try to get out, or try to somehow signal somebody that I was being taken against my will, I had no way to do so.

The worst part was that the trunk smelled of piss, shit, and vomit. Not strongly, but just faintly enough that I knew I wasn't the only person he had transported this way. Though maybe bodies instead of people was a better way of putting that.

I flexed my fingers. With the way my hands were bound behind my back, I couldn't get enough circulation. My fingertips were going numb, leaving me with the pins and needles sensation.

He braked, and I rolled toward the back. I felt a little bit like a hot dog on a grill in a gas station. Sampson wasn't exactly a smooth driver. Aggressive may have been a better way to put it. With me not being able to brace myself, I was stuck rolling back and forth. I probably would have cried if my body thought it could spare the moisture. A knot of tears were stuck in my throat, but I couldn't quite let the emotion escape. I focused on the fact that the last thing I wanted was a soggy blindfold wrapped around my head.

Finally, after what could have been five minutes or five hours, the car came to a stop. I had been transported in the same nondescript, tan sedan he first took me in. Four doors. Generic shape. Something that people would see

but not look at, a car that would pass into their subconscious. It wasn't excessively beat up, but it wasn't brand new either.

I'd been able to tell all of that before the blindfold was put on me the first time. Now, as I heard the engine die and the driver's side door open, I braced myself for what was about to happen. The fierceness with which Sampson slammed the driver's side door closed shook the car.

I listened to his footsteps as he rounded the corner and moved toward the trunk. There was a soft click, and even though I was blindfolded, I knew the light changed. It went from complete darkness to something else. I wouldn't quite say that it was light, but I could see the edges of my blindfold now.

Rough hands grabbed me by the bindings around my wrists and ankles, hoisting me up and over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. I could have struggled, but there wouldn't have been any point. It wasn't like if I got off his shoulder, I would somehow magically be able to run away. With the way I was bound, there was no way for me to move.

"Your name?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

"Sterling." The name sent a shudder through me. I was fairly certain that Sterling wasn't Sampson's last name, but it was Lyric's last name, and he was trading on that somehow. As far as I gathered, Lyric's father was Sampson's employer.

"Room 113," the other voice said.

There was a grunt and then we moved forward again. My stomach rocking against Sampson's shoulder with each step made me want to vomit down his back, but thankfully, my body refused to give up the little food I'd consumed in the last few days.

Instead, I was just drooling.

The ball gag that he stuffed in my mouth didn't exactly make it easy to control that. We walked for much longer than I expected, turning this way and that to the point that I lost all sense of direction. Sampson shifted his weight. I heard the soft, electronic click of something that reminded me of a hotel door or the entrance to my dorm building.

I'd only ever stayed in a hotel once before, and it had been a pretty momentous occasion for me. A lot of the sounds were engraved in my mind, particularly the sound of that type of door being unlocked.

A rush of cold air swept over my skin as we walked into this new room, and I heard the door ease itself shut behind us. I was unceremoniously dumped on the ground a moment later. The feeling of carpeting surprised me.

I pushed onto my knees, kneeling with my hands still bound behind me. Taking a deep breath, I tried my best to just be calm.

The sound of a chain rattling made my stomach drop, though. With the carpet muffling Sampson's steps, I didn't expect for him to be in front of me when he reached out and grabbed me. I jerked away from him on instinct. He wound one of his hands through my hair, grabbing a good chunk of it and pulled, yanking me forward.

Without my hands in front of me, I had no way of bracing myself for the fall, so it was only his hand in my hair that prevented me from face-planting on the carpet. He dragged me a few feet that way. My scalp may as well have been on fire the entire time. The feeling of cold, smooth metal being placed around one of my wrists let me know that I was being handcuffed again. However, the cuff only went around one wrist. He didn't bother with the second. A moment later, Sampson tugged at the rope he used to bind me in the car, undoing the knots that had left me helpless until now. After he was done with my hands, he did my feet and put another cuff around my ankle.

Sensation began to rush back to my fingertips, and I was beyond grateful for it, even if it hurt like hell for a while. I knew that pain would fade.

Next, my blindfold was removed and then finally the ball gag. Sampson towered over me, blocking any view of the room, looking like some kind of demon with all of the black leather he wore.

"Open your mouth."

I did as he asked, knowing I had no other choice. If I refused, he would just forcibly open it for me or put me in a chokehold and make me blackout, in which case he would do whatever he wanted. He withdrew a small, pale-pink pill from his pants' pocket. Instinctively, I closed my mouth, my teeth snapping shut from the force of it.

"Don't make me repeat myself," he grunted.

It was a fight to get my body to obey, but eventually, I was able to get my jaw to drop just enough for my mouth to open. Sampson's hand was like a flash of lightning in the corner of my eye as he gripped my lower jaw and pried my teeth apart even further. His other hand, which was holding the pill, darted forward just as quickly, shoving it so far back in my throat that I gagged.

"You want something to swallow that down with?" he asked. His face was completely blank, not giving any indication as to whether or not this was some kind of test or trap.

It was the first small bit of kindness that he had shown me, though. I coughed and spluttered, fighting with the pill that seemed to be lodged in my throat. Somehow, I managed to nod my head. Just the idea of drinking water was luxurious to me at that point.

When his hand moved to his belt, my stomach dropped. The other hand still held my jaw, his forefinger and thumb pressing between my teeth so I couldn't shut my mouth completely. I was tempted to try anyway, but I knew that it wouldn't get me anywhere, at least not without biting a hole in my cheeks as I tried to take the tip of his finger and thumb off.

"I've been good this whole time and I've barely touched you. You're going to suck me off as a thank you, and then you'll feel real good once that pill kicks in."

"What is it?" I tried to ask around his hand as my anxiety climbed higher than I ever thought possible. I was more worried about the pill he just forced me to take than the idea of giving him head. I didn't want to, but at least with something like that, I knew what to expect.

"Just a little X to help get you in the mood. Or I guess you kids call it Molly these days. Is that it?" He shrugged. "Whatever you want to call it, it'll make your body nice and responsive for your buyer. He's so excited to try you out."

My eyes went round. I could feel the shock showing on my face as the room seemed to spin slightly.

He looked down at me with a cold-blooded smile on his face that showed too many teeth. "Didn't I tell you? You're already sold. You were supposed to go to auction, but your buyer took one look at that pretty little picture I took of you and he decided to pay top dollar. Thank you for that. You've ensured my retirement, and once I get Lyric back, my legacy will be ensured as well." It didn't take him long to fish around in his pants and pull his cock out since it was already hard. "If you were Lyric, I'd have your sweet little cunt wrapped around my cock, but you're not my girl. I haven't fucked in a long time, though, so the least you're going to do is lend me that pretty little mouth for a while."

He pried my jaw open even further, pushing against my top teeth with one finger while he pulled against my bottom jaw with his others. Once my mouth was wide enough, he shoved his cock in. The sweaty, salty, old-sock taste and smell of him filled my senses. I wanted to screw my eyes shut and just pretend like it wasn't happening, but that was close to impossible. It

didn't help that the bitter taste of the pill was still on my tongue either. The combination made me gag.

I retched around his dick, but that only brought a smile to his face as he pushed further in, hitting the back of my throat. My stomach heaved, bringing tears to my eyes. If he wasn't careful, he would make me vomit and throw up that little pill he just forced me to swallow.

I felt like I should be doing more...Clawing at him, screaming, punching him in the junk, something. All I was capable of doing in that moment was just taking it. As though he sensed the directions of my thoughts, he squeezed my mouth.

"Don't you dare vomit. That pill cost me more than I wanted to spend on you."

The urge to scream at him was almost overwhelming. I wanted to yell and fight, remind him that I was getting him more than a pretty penny in return. After all, my entire life was being sold and it only cost him one dose of Molly. Not that it made a difference to him either way.

My body was frozen in place, fear keeping me as stiff as a board while Sampson used me like the tool he thought I was. I buried my emotions, like I always did with my parents before I ran away from home. Growing up I had to bury every single emotion I had, so it was a skill I was practiced at. I didn't know how long we went on like that. His fingers held me in place as he thrust into my mouth. For a while it seemed like he was torn between both trying to and not trying to make me vomit.

When his body went stiff, I knew what was coming next. A sour, bitter explosion in my mouth was the last thing I wanted to wash this pill down with, but it was all I had. Before I was even done coughing and spluttering from the foul taste of his jizz in my mouth, he was already tucked back away in his pants and out of my reach. There was no chance I could take advantage of his refractory period and lift the keys to my handcuffs off of him or anything like that.

"I'll be back soon with your buyer. You throw that pill up if you want, but giving you that pill was a kindness that I did because you've been such a good girl for me, Blondie. You haven't fought back once, and I appreciate it. I wish, if things were different, that you could teach my Lyric a thing or two. Such as they are, I'll have to go through everything with her again. Start her training from the beginning. I'm not going to lie, I'm looking forward to hearing her scream for me again." I did want to vomit, but I didn't want to

taste his seed again, so I refused to give in.

I was able to glance around the room finally, my view no longer limited to Sampson's dick. It was set up in much the same way as the room I was kept in until this point. There was a small cot in a corner, and my hands and feet chained to said cot. Surprisingly, next to the cot was a night stand with a lamp and a bottle of water.

After pushing to my feet I made my way, somewhat unsteadily, to the nightstand and the water that sat there. Was it a trap?

Still, the temptation was too great and I was too thirsty, so desperate to try to clean my mouth, so I cracked it open and took a few gulps, stopping before I made myself sick. I reached for the lamp, figuring I could use it as a weapon if need be, but the damn thing was attached to the table, which was bolted into the floor. There was nothing removable except the bottle of water.

Across the room there was a shower, sink, and toilet, all out in the open for anyone to watch, which made me uncomfortable. Beyond that was the door that led to the outside, though what exactly was out there, I had no idea. Sampson had disappeared through it, but it was dark out there, and I hadn't been able to see anything other than the wall on the other side of the hallway.

I couldn't help but replay the day we met. There had been a knock on the door to the room I shared with Lyric. When I answered it, the last thing I expected was to see a grown man standing on the other side. He smiled kindly down at me and asked if Lyric was in. I told him no and he asked if he could come in and wait for her, to which I had agreed.

He introduced himself as Sampson, explaining that he was one of her guardians. He seemed to stumble over the word guardian, as though it wasn't how he would normally describe himself, but it was the closest term he could use to get me to understand. I couldn't quite remember what Lyric had told me about her family. I knew it wasn't good, but although he looked intimidating, he seemed kind.

At the time, he was dressed in a sweater and some nice khaki pants. He looked just like any other dad that I'd seem around campus, even down to the brand of sneakers that adorned his feet. I stepped to the side and opened the door wide for him. I wasn't the type of girl who was used to saying no, especially to older men, because that was exactly who my parents raised me to be.

I may have fought against the notions of the cult the entire time I was part of it, but agreeing to an older man's demands was a behavior I slipped into all

too easily without intending to do so. As soon as the door closed behind him, his demeanor changed. He told me things that there was no way he could have known about conversations I'd had with Lyric and made it clear that my roommate was his and he wanted to take back his property. As he spoke, he calmly explained to me that she was going to be his wife and the mother of his children one day, which sounded entirely too similar to the life I'd run away from.

Finally, he'd told me that I could either go with him without any struggle or hassle, or I could struggle and he would just wind up hurting me and Lyric. He said that he would leave my battered, bloody, and broken body for Lyric to find, and then he would do the same thing and worse to her.

I couldn't stomach the idea of Lyric being used and abused by the man, so I'd agreed to go. At the time, I thought that I would have an opportunity to escape. The thought was naive of me, but I felt like it was something I could do again since I had already managed it with the cult. How wrong I'd been.

Now, my chance to escape was rapidly disappearing, and to top it off, I'd been drugged and used. I sat on the edge of the cot with despair filling me as I tried to figure out how the hell I was going to manage to escape this time.

EVIE

I stared at the door that Sampson just walked out of, willing him to come back and give me a way to steal the key to these cuffs from him. When I was sure that he was really gone and not coming back, I started examining the cuff around my wrist, pulling at it and trying to twist it. I did anything that I thought might help me escape the cuffs.

The longer I sat there, the heavier the cuffs felt around my wrist and ankle, as though somehow the metal was gaining mass and weighing me down. I ran my finger over the smooth side of the metal before pressing my nail into the cross of the phillips-head screw, hoping that I could somehow work it loose. My nail just bent instead.

The lights seemed to be getting brighter, but I knew it was just because my anxiety was steadily climbing and that it wasn't actually happening. It still freaked me out, though.

What kind of person buys somebody at an auction?

It wasn't just the brightness that was starting to bother me, but the hum of the electricity as well. Everything was so quiet that it sounded like a mosquito buzzing in my ear, except at a lower pitch.

The urge to run was overwhelming, and yet I couldn't. I perched on the edge of the bed instead, bouncing my knees up and down, needing some form of movement without being able to do much. It felt like I sat there waiting for hours. Maybe I had. I honestly had no concept of time in this room since the windows were completely closed off, if they even existed at all.

Muffled voices passed by the room. It was the first sound I had heard

outside of the hum of the lights. I had to literally bite my tongue to stop from calling out to them because I knew if someone was calmly walking through the building, it was unlikely that they could or would help me. Anybody who worked at a place like this wouldn't be willing to put their neck on the line to help the people who were being sold. And I assumed since I had already been sold, I couldn't have been the only item up for auction.

As my legs rubbed against the fabric covering the bed, I realized how itchy the comforter felt against my skin. It was almost as if I could run my fingers over the weave of the threads and count them.

I decided to do just that as a way to pass the time. Maybe it would help me focus on something other than the fact that I was about to meet my new owner. Muffled voices sounded again, but this time they seemed to have stopped in front of the door. I swore I could hear my heartbeat echoing throughout the room as my breath sawed in and out of my chest.

My anxiety reached a whole new level I didn't even realize was possible. Sampson's ugly mug was the first thing I saw. His buzzed hair was longer than it had been when he first took me, which had basically been shaved down to the skin at that point. His cold eyes seemed to snap and lock on me as he entered the room, and it was all I could do not to flinch at the harshness of his gaze.

The air around me stirred and I could feel it move against my skin as Sampson returned with another person following behind him. Something in the smell that wafted in with him was familiar, and it made me remember the days I had spent with my family. The cult. Growing and working and learning. Being a single member of a collective. A microscopic part of a whole.

Movement caught my eye and a figure emerged from behind Sampson right as the click of the door sounded. Before I could get a good look at him, Sampson spoke. "Sean, this is your bitch now. Take a look at her. Make sure your boss is going to be satisfied. Then we can exchange the keys and money, but once I walk out that door, she's your problem. If you're not interested anymore then there's still time for me to shove her into the auction, where I'm sure she'll get a lot of attention."

There was a slight curl to Sampson's upper lip, as though he was sneering at me. What the hell did he have to sneer about? I didn't know.

The thud of something heavy hitting the floor drew my gaze back to my new captor as he fully looked at me and I looked at him.

Shivers broke out over my body.

There was no way this could be happening.

Not here.

Not now.

Not when I'd worked so hard to be free of them.

The blue eyes that stared back at me were a similar shape to my own and the blonde hair almost the same shade, or at least it had been. Now it looked a muddy brown color.

Sean wasn't his real name either. I scooted back on the bed until I was wedged into the corner. Everything suddenly became too much. The echo of my heartbeat. The buzz of the electricity. Sampson's sneer. The faint scent of cigar. The scratchy sheets. The weight of the cuffs. It all made me want to scream. When Sean took a step toward me, that was exactly what I did.

EVIE

My scream of terror was shrill in my own ears, and it was only when Sampson reached out and backhanded me that I stopped, the sound cutting off abruptly. As though the hit shook my brain enough to think again, I realized that Sean might be my perfect chance to escape. I snapped my mouth shut as Sampson retreated.

"Come to me." Sean's voice was soft, with a slight accent to it.

I did as he asked, acutely aware of Sampson's gaze watching us the whole time. It was the first time he'd hit me all day. If I didn't keep myself under control, it wouldn't be the last, and Sampson's hits, even just the slaps, hurt like hell. I could already taste blood in my mouth from the one he'd just given me, and I didn't want to taste any more.

The chains that bound my cuffs to the bed rattled as I scooted forward once more, getting off the bed. My dress slid high on my legs, showing off thigh, more thigh than Sean had probably ever seen before, at least on me.

I scrambled to pull the fabric down, even though it only came to my knees and was thin enough that there wasn't much of a point to it anyway. Still, with him standing there looking me over as I pushed my feet, the fabric felt like a shield, and I wanted to cover every part of my body with it.

"Don't be shy," Sampson's voice sounded disembodied now that I was focused on Sean, and I wasn't sure if the order was for me or Sean until he spoke again. "Take a look at what you purchased, or rather what your boss purchased."

His boss. That was the second time that Sampson mentioned a boss, and I

wondered who the hell his boss was. My greatest fear was that his boss was actually the Light Father, but my hope was that his boss was somebody else. There was no way that Sean was still a member of the same cult we grew up in together. Not with his hair dyed and tattoos peeking out from under the sleeves of his t-shirt. He would be disavowed for mutilating his body in such a way.

Sean reached out a hand and gripped me by the chin, tilting my head this way and that. He pushed the hair that had fallen loose from my ponytail out of my face, likely revealing the freckled birthmark that I had on the top of my right ear. As soon as he saw my ear, a smile spread over his face. The smile seemed hopeful, yet it chilled me to the bone.

Honestly, he was the last person I wanted to see. The Children of Radiance, the cult I grew up in, could have sent anybody else to find me and bring me back, and it would have been better. The only person I hated as much as him was the Light Father. I watched as his mask slipped back into place, his hand releasing my chin.

When he turned, I barely recognized the man who was staring down at me. "She's a good find. We'll take her."

Sampson smiled in a way that only he could, one corner of his mouth curling in a way that reminded me of a greedy goblin from the fairy tales, one that couldn't stop reaching for more. "Let's go chat payment then. You know, if your boss has other specific needs, I bet I could find something to meet them on Welhurst's campus. When I took this little lady, there was a plethora of other easy opportunities for someone like me who's brave enough to take them," he said as he headed back toward the door.

My stomach turned for the other students that attended Welhurst. There was a predator stalking them and they didn't even know it.

Sean turned and picked up the duffle bag that he had dropped on the floor, completely ignoring Sampson's offer. "I think you'll find everything in here is sufficient."

"I don't want to do business in front of her." Sampson's tone was clipped, and I knew Sean was walking a line that he didn't even realize. That line would quickly bring violence if it was crossed.

"Fine, but I need to get her to the boss as quickly as possible."

"Understood, but don't forget to mention my offer," Sampson said before jerking his head toward the door. The two men hurried out with what I assumed to be a duffle bag full of money, though I was surprised I was being

paid for in cash, surely there were easier ways to go about it these days.

As soon as the door latched behind them, I looked down at the cuffs. Both the one around my wrist and the one around my ankle were metal. I knew I didn't really stand much of a chance of getting out of them. If I could at least get my hand free, maybe I could figure out some way of getting the bottom cuff off as well.

I stepped on the chain that connected to the cuff around my wrist, holding it in place as I yanked against it. The furious need for freedom pulsed through my veins. Adrenaline sparked through me, as I knew this was my last chance. If Sean took me back, I wouldn't be able to escape again.

Within seconds, my skin was red and puffy, and I tried to remember what I had seen in TV shows and movies about people escaping from handcuffs—not that I'd seen much of it until I ran away from my family. In shows, they always seemed to have a hair pin or some sharp object they could use to help free themselves.

Unfortunately, I had nothing like that.

The only thing I could think of was breaking my hand somehow, which might make it small enough to fit through the cuff. It was the only thing I could think of that might stand a chance of getting me free, and while I could do that with my hand, that didn't solve the problem of the cuff on my ankle. Plus, would I still be able to escape only having one functional hand? Especially if it was my non-dominant hand?

Small rivulets of blood dripped down my hand, which made the place where the skin and the metal of the cuff connected slippery. It didn't quite make it slippery enough for me to get it off, though. That would just be too easy.

I was so focused on getting myself free that I hadn't even noticed footsteps coming up the hallway again. It was only when the door opened that I realized Sean had returned.

He was alone, which could only mean the sale had gone through.

"Did you think I would forget about you?" he asked, and I couldn't tell if he meant from the sale, or from the cult, or life in general, so I just widened my eyes and tried to give him my best innocent puppy-dog look. He crossed the room in just a few strides. A small key hung from his fingertips in his left hand. The gentle jingle of metal on metal was the only sound filling the space.

"I could never forget about you," he said as he cupped the side of my face

with his hand. I had to repress the urge to jerk away from his touch.

Angering him right now would serve no purpose, so even though I wanted to scream and rant at him at how fucking insane he was for tracking me down and buying me at an auction, I kept my jaw clamped shut.

"I have some clothes waiting for you in the car, but maybe you should change here. At least you'd have some privacy—I wasn't sure what the situation would be."

"Did you run away?" The question slipped from my lips.

I knew from the cloud that passed over his face it was the wrong thing to ask. "Of course not. I am loyal to the Light Father, but even though you were meant to be our Light Mother, you left us. Somebody had to come and find you, and I wasn't about to let anyone else get in the way or risk losing you again."

My heart froze with fear. "You've been looking for me this whole time?" Please tell me it isn't true, I thought to myself.

"Of course I have. You're beyond precious." He looked down at me with nothing but naked adoration on his face, and it made me want to vomit.

There was nothing precious about the role of Light Mother. I had to fight the urge to scream at him. Somehow, I managed to curl my lips into something resembling a smile, even though I just wanted to throw a tantrum and beat the absolute shit out of him the way Lyric had with my ex, Cliff. If only I could channel my roommate.

For what felt like the millionth time, I wondered what she was doing, what she thought of my disappearance. Did she have any idea that Sampson was the one who took me? Was she looking for me at all? We hadn't known each other that long, but we were good friends. Falling down that rabbit hole of spiraling thoughts wouldn't do me any good, though.

"Can I ask you something?" I kept my voice soft and pitched higher than it normally would be, trying to sound as feminine and as meek as possible.

"You can ask me anything. You're my Light Mother, and I'll help you fulfill that role however I can."

I took a calming breath. "You know the-the-the man who took me, he said that you were buying me for your boss. The Light Father doesn't have much money, though, does he?"

Sean frowned. "This isn't going to be pleasant for you to hear."

Gently, he pushed me back to the bed and sat me down before perching on the edge of the mattress next to me. "When I left to find you, I had to find

a job and somehow I fell in with the type of people who would buy somebody like you. It was just luck that I saw your photo mixed in with some paperwork that my boss was looking at a few weeks ago. I tried to figure out where you were based on the photo, but the background was too generic, so I worked on my boss until he agreed to buy you.

"We came to an arrangement, one which he doesn't think I'll break, but as soon as I get you out of here safely, I'll take you back to the compound. I won't let anything get in the way of your destiny. Now, let me go and get those clothes." He looked me up and down. "I'm sure white isn't a color you can wear anymore." His words hurt, but not for the reason he thought. "I know it probably wasn't your choice, but that's something you'll have to discuss with the Light Father."

Sean didn't understand that I hadn't been able to wear white since I was a child, not truly. In fact, none of the men in the compound understood that. He pushed up off the bed, moving to leave. I grabbed the back of his shirt, intending to just tug on it a little bit, but I pulled too hard and he wound up flopping back on the bed. "Don't leave yet," I whispered. "Not when that bad man might still be around."

"He won't come back for you," Sean reassured me.

I leaned closer, suppressing the urge to vomit. "Can you just sit here with me for a moment? Maybe give me a hug? I just want to know that it's okay."

He scooted closer to me on the bed, and I prayed that my plan would work. I just had to get him relaxed enough that he didn't notice when I took the key. "Is your boss going to use me before he sends me back?" I asked as Sean's arms surrounded me.

His fingers tightened painfully around one of my shoulders. "I won't let him touch you. I want to get you away from here before any of the others realize that the sale has gone through."

I pulled away just enough to look up into his face. "Will you touch me?" I made my voice lilt upwards at the end, sounding hopeful, even though it was the last thing I wanted.

His pupils dilated. "I don't think that's appropriate. You're the future Light Mother."

"I just want to erase the memory of his...hands on me." I paused a little before saying the word hands to get a different meaning across, and Sean took the bait.

"Did he defile you?"

I nodded, letting my lower lip quiver. It wasn't hard to summon tears in my current situation. In fact, I'd been struggling not to cry this whole time. I pushed up from his lap, turning away from him as though I wanted to hide my shame.

"Where did he touch you?" Sean asked as he turned me to face him once more.

I stood between his legs as I pulled the dress over my head in one smooth movement. Thankfully, the formless shape helped me in this instance. It revealed everything to him, and I heard his sharp intake of breath. "I shouldn't be seeing this," he whispered, moving one hand to his eyes.

I gently took it from him and placed it between my legs. "This is where he liked to touch me the most." It was actually a lie. Sampson had never touched me there.

"I'll kill him for you." Sean's voice was filled with awe and vengeance in equal measures.

It was now or never, so I dangled the carrot I knew he wanted in front of him. "You could be a Light Brother, you know."

His gaze snapped up to mine, surprise pushing his brows high on his face.

"I know how it works," I said quietly. "I've always known that I was supposed to be the Light Mother and what that entailed, and you're my hero. You're my savior. I can make you a Light Brother if I petition the Light Father, right? Then you could touch me as much as you wanted."

His hand twitched between my legs, as though he couldn't help but try to seek out the most intimate part of me. "You want me to be a Light Brother?"

I bit my lower lip and gave him a very small smile before nodding. "If you become a Light Brother, there's nothing wrong with the way you're touching me, is there?"

He shook his head. "No, in fact, this would be the least of it. You understand that, right?"

"Could you..." I looked down, pretending to be bashful. "Could you show me how I'm supposed to be touched? As the Light Mother?"

"Fuck," the word dropped from his lips, and I knew that I had won. Part of me hated myself. I'd fallen so easily back into the role of the meek, subservient girl, the one who did anything and everything for the men who controlled her. "You swear on the vow that you'll make me a Light Brother?"

I nodded. I didn't want him to touch me, and I didn't trust my voice at that moment to say anything without betraying the way I truly felt inside.

He pulled his hand free from between my legs and grabbed my boobs, squeezing them like he was trying to milk a cow. As he worked, I began to fake little moans so he relaxed even more. "I'll show you how it's supposed to be, Brittany, don't worry. I'll make you feel the love of the Children of Radiance."

Being called by my old name and hearing the name of the cult in one go sent a shudder of disgust through me. Fortunately, he interpreted it differently. "Could you take these off? They remind me of *him*. If you're going to show me the real thing, I don't want to think about him, just you."

Sean made quick work of my cuffs before moving to his belt and pants, pulling them down past his knees so his manhood stood freely. I could tell he was eager to see me on it, but that wasn't going to happen.

Not in a million years.

I moved my hands tightly through Sean's hair, the short strands tickling my fingers. He looked up at me and grinned, clearly thinking I was getting into it. What he didn't expect was me yanking his head down to meet my knee. The crunch of his nose echoed through the room as blood gushed and streamed down his face. He threw his head back and yelled in pain. I took advantage of the opening and kicked him in the balls.

Part of me knew I should lock him up, make him wear the same cuffs that had just been on me moments ago, but I was too panicked, too desperate to escape. I ran from the room instead. I didn't even care that I was naked as I fled.

I ran faster than I'd ever run before. My feet slapped against the concrete floor.

As I pushed for more and more speed, it started to feel like my feet were barely making contact with the floor. My lungs burned with the need to stop and suck in big mouthfuls of air, but I knew I couldn't slow down.

Footfalls sounded behind me a few moments later, echoing thanks to the concrete and the big boots he wore. Sean was following, trying to catch me. I knew I only had this one opportunity, that he wouldn't fall for the same trick again.

I grabbed my boobs, trying to stop them from smacking about as I ran, and tried my best to speed up. My only chance was putting enough distance between us, and if I accidentally knocked myself out with a tit, I was going to be pissed.

The building really was like a hotel, with doors that seemed to be evenly

spaced down the hallway. What I hadn't actually expected was the alcove with the ice machine. That little fact was what sealed it for me that, at some point, this building had actually been a hotel. If there was just a little bit more room, I might have been able to squeeze to the side and get behind the ice machine. I could have hid there until the commotion died down, until Sean gave up looking for me. There was no way I actually could fit, so I kept running.

When I rounded a corner, the last thing I expected was to run into somebody, and it was like running into a brick wall. I bounced right off the person and flew backward. It was only the arm that shot out and caught me around the waist that prevented me from falling and cracking my head on the concrete. When I looked up at the face of the man I ran into, I was shocked to see someone looking down at me who almost looked worried. I expected whoever it was to sneer at me or look angry, but that was the opposite of his expression, at least for a split second.

His dark eyes were almost black as they held me in place with a stare unlike any other I'd experienced. Two equally dark slashes of eyebrows were pinched with concern while soft lips were framed by a slight shadow of scruff on his jaw. He was tall and broad shouldered, giving me hope that he might be able to stand up to Sean.

"Please, please don't make me go with him. Please hide me." My voice was barely audible through my gasping breaths. As soon as the words were spoken, tears started streaming down my face. Two large, rough hands landed on my shoulders and turned us so I was in the other hallway he had just been walking down.

"Ty, go see who's chasing her." The man's voice was gravel. It was a rock slide, the quietest one I'd ever heard. But it seemed to wash over me and rumble through my bones as his words hit me. Was he actually going to save me?

EVIE

"I'll do anything you ask. Please just hide me," I mumbled again, still struggling to get my breathing under control.

"Those are very dangerous promises to make, little girl," the man with the gravelly voice said.

Ty's voice broke through the nerves that suddenly washed over me. "Someone from Bianchi."

I hadn't even really looked at the men who surrounded me now, with the exception of the man directly in front of me. When I glanced up at the man I had run into once more, the dark brown depths of his eyes seemed to swallow me whole.

"I'll hide you, but you might not like my method."

"I don't care. Just don't—don't let him take me, please." I choked on my tears toward the end. If Sean took me then I'd rather end my life than go through with what the cult had planned for me. Desperation filled me, threatening to overflow and send me into a panic attack.

"Boss?" A third man questioned warily. Clearly, he didn't think that hiding me was a good idea. I couldn't blame him either.

The man still holding me just looked me over. "She'll be a good pawn to have," he mumbled over his shoulder. "Jacket."

The other man slipped off his jacket and the one in front of me pulled me forward. He put the jacket around my shoulders, essentially hiding the fact that I was naked. His hand wrapped in my hair, pulling the long strands up and baring my neck to him. He pushed me against the wall and slid one hand

around my thigh, pulling my leg up.

"He's coming," Ty's voice was so quiet I barely even heard him.

The thud of Sean's footsteps was only drowned out by the frantic beating of my heart. And when the man in front of me bent his head and kissed me, it wasn't what I had expected.

His kiss was dominating, all encompassing. It drowned out any thoughts of Sean and the cult.

Sean's voice cut through the daze I was lost in. "Is that my property?"

"You think that our boss would need sloppy seconds from you?" Ty asked, his voice cracking like a whip through the hallway. The kiss broke off, and the man who had me pinned to the wall leaned closer, nibbling on my ear. "Call out my name. Call for Dylan. Call for your master." The words were like a spell being woven right next to my ear.

My voice was breathy with desire as I moaned, "Dylan, Master, I can't wait..." It didn't take much for me to make it convincing as I called out for him the sensations that were erupting through my body weren't just my own but were heightened thanks to the pill I'd been forced to take earlier. Even though I knew that it didn't change how his touches were affecting me.

"As you heard, she just couldn't wait for our boss's dick," the third man said, sounding impressed.

I also got the sense that I was being shielded by all three of them. The man who pinned me against the wall, Dylan, resumed kissing me, rocking his hips against me as though we were having sex right there in the middle of the hallway.

"You're all filthy pigs. I hope she gives you a fucking STI." Sean's voice was full of rage as he took off again, heading down the hallway away from me. Tears leaked out of the corner of my eyes once more. I didn't know who these men were or what I had given myself over to, but anything had to be better than Sean and where I would end up if he got his hands on me, right?

I was in a daze as these men walked me through the halls, the oversized jacket the only thing shielding me from everything around me. My body vibrated, my lips buzzing with the aftershocks of Dylan's kiss.

Everywhere he touched me felt like it had been branded with a hot iron. I couldn't stop my mind from replaying the kiss over and over again.

Ty and Hud both glanced back at me occasionally, or maybe they were checking on their boss. Hud was taller than the other two, but equally as broad as my savior, with hair the color of spun sugar that was roughly cut

around his face giving him a surfer vibe. His look was completed with eyes that were the color of a summer sky. If it wasn't for the sour expression on his face and the tattoos that peeked out here and there I would have said that he seemed like the classic All-American boy. Ty on the other hand was the shortest and had closely cropped dark hair that gave off a military vibe. Dark eyes avoided looking directly in my own as though if he didn't see me then I didn't really exist.

I wasn't paying attention to where we were going until we walked out of an elevator and into a garage. I followed the three of them obediently toward a fancy black car that looked like it probably cost more than my life was worth at that point. I stood by the trunk waiting for him to open it so I could get in.

"What are you doing?" Dylan asked, his tone clipped.

"Are you leaving me?"

"No, come get in the car. Ty, why don't you sit up front with Hud? I need to have a chat with our friend."

"You don't want me in the trunk?" Surprise sparked through me. Maybe these men weren't so bad after all.

Dylan looked annoyed. "Why the fuck would I put you in the trunk? Now, come on, get in the car. Don't make me ask a third time."

I hurried around the side that Dylan was standing on and dove through the open door, not wanting to anger the man who just rescued me, saving me from being forced to return to the Light Father. Ty and Hud moved to their respective doors and got in as well, while Dylan followed me into the car and shut the door behind himself.

He raised a partition between the back of the car and the front where, what I assumed were his two employees, were sitting. Not only was the partition tinted, but so were all the windows of the car. There was plenty of space for us to move around. I could have sat in multiple places and not been anywhere near him, yet I didn't want to be far from him. Right now, he was safe. How long that would last, I wasn't sure.

The power of the engine and the quiet hum of the air conditioning helped me feel even more relaxed. I ran my fingers over the leather seat before finding some stitches that I traced back and forth over and over again. The repetition helped calm my overstimulated mind.

"What's your name?" Dylan's voice was harsh as he undid his cufflinks and shrugged his jacket off. For the first time, I noticed that the shirt he wore

underneath was splattered with blood. And yet, I still wasn't scared. His tie was next to go as he watched me.

"Legally, it's Brittney, but everybody I like calls me Evie."

"And do you want me to like you?" Dylan asked, cocking his head to one side.

"Yes." The word slipped from my lips before I could think about it too much. But I certainly didn't want this man who was now in possession of me to dislike me. Especially not a man who went to an event like that and came away splattered in blood.

His dark eyes studied mine before he looked away as he asked, "Do you know what they drugged you with, Evie?"

"Ecstasy."

His gaze snapped to mine. "I see. That explains a lot."

"Explains what?" I asked.

"Explains your repetitions, your hyper focus on specific things, the way you seemed to want to fuck me in that hallway. You kissed me like you wanted to fuck me. No man in their right mind would see you and not want to fuck you." His words made my body tighten with desire.

I shouldn't want this man. I shouldn't want anything right now other than my freedom, and yet all I could focus on was all of the sensations that had been pressed upon my body recently. Sampson's dick making me gag. Sean's hand grabbing me by the pussy and the way he fumbled at my breast...But then there was Dylan and his kiss that had lit a fire in my veins. Hands that grabbed my ass and my thighs, squeezing just the right amount as he pinned me to the wall.

"What are you thinking about right now?" Dylan's gravelly voice was closer than I expected, and I found that he had moved to sit next to me.

"You kissing me," I replied honestly, too tired to try to lie.

He chuckled darkly. "I'm happy to do so again if you would like. You just have to climb on top."

My body was in motion a second later. The suit jacket flared out around me as I straddled Dylan in the seat. I knew I was being reckless, but I didn't care. Not in that moment. I just needed to feel him. I needed him to touch me. To kiss me again. "Dylan, please." The words were a breath. Nothing more. Nothing less. But as soon as they left me, his hands wrapped around me, pulling me close as he devoured me. I don't know how long he kissed me.

It felt like he was eating me alive in some ways. Not just my mouth, but

my jaw, my ears, my neck, every single inch that was exposed to him. He pushed the jacket off my shoulders. It felt like it had been so long since I experienced a welcome touch. "You're an eager little thing, aren't you?" Dylan's voice was filled with approval.

"Dylan, please. I need..."

"I know what you need. And if you get it, you're going to hate me for it tomorrow. But if you want, I can make you feel good. After all, it's not very often a man like me gets to please a pretty girl like you." His hands gripped my ass, spreading me wide before his fingers found my entrance. "Fuck. You're soaked," he breathed, sending shivers down my spine.

Goosebumps erupted all over my skin.

Without hesitation, he pushed a finger into me, withdrawing it almost immediately after and bringing it to his lips. He sucked it clean. "Tastes like sunshine."

His hands slipped around the back of my neck, pulling me in for a kiss once more, and I could taste myself on his lips and tongue. I wouldn't exactly say sunshine, but I didn't taste bad. His free hand traveled down my chest, skimming over one of my nipples and giving it a slight pinch, which made me gasp, before looping back around to my ass and diving into my entrance once more.

This time he didn't immediately withdraw, though. He fucked me with his fingers until I was writhing on top of his hand, riding it the same way I'd ride his cock.

"Lay on the seat," he commanded, his voice sounding even rougher than before.

I whined as I moved over his fingers, and he grinned. "I'll keep pleasing you, don't worry." With that reassurance, I did as he asked and laid down, spread wide on the seat. His gaze devoured me, lingering on the pink tips of my nipples before locking onto my core.

He kneeled down next to the seat and put one of my legs over his shoulder before he leaned in to taste me. A groan of satisfaction went through him. "Strawberries and sunshine, that's what you remind me of," he murmured against me, and the vibration of his voice almost sent me over the edge.

With no more preamble, he thrust two fingers into me while he flicked his tongue over my clit. The sensations were more than a little intense, and soon, I found myself grabbing his hair and trying to ride him from underneath.

Moans and sighs fell from my lips like the first snow after a brutal summer. His touch was fire, heating me up until I was feverish for him and couldn't think about anything else.

The orgasm took me by surprise, and I almost bucked him off completely. He kept working me, wringing out every ounce of pleasure that he could.

I felt like I'd been washed and wrung out, my whole body tingling with pleasure and my pussy pulsing around his fingers which still slowly stroked in and out of me. I didn't want the pleasure to end, but I wasn't sure I could even handle another orgasm if it was as powerful as the one I'd just experienced.

Even though I knew I wanted more, and wanted to give him the same pleasure he'd given me, I suddenly felt weaker than I had since Sampson first took me. My limbs were heavy and movement seemed impossible even though I heard Dylan calling my name. I wanted to respond, but there was no energy left in me to do so.

It was dangerous to leave myself exposed like this, I knew that. I mean, I was naked in the back seat of a man's car after he'd just blown my mind, but that didn't mean he was trustworthy or wouldn't do something inappropriate. I couldn't deny that I felt safe around Dylan, though, and it was that thought that had me surrendering to the darkness that hovered around the edges of my vision.

My only hope was that when I woke up I wasn't chained up again.

EVIE

I woke up with my heart pounding in my chest. A dream. It couldn't have all been a dream, could it?

Relief washed over me as I pulled the blanket tighter around me, the soft fabric slipping through my fingers.

It wasn't a dream.

There was no way I would have been able to afford sheets or quilts this nice.

I cracked my eyes open to figure out where I was, and suddenly everything came rushing back. I was at Dylan's house. He'd carried me up to bed after I passed out in the car, which was, of course, after he had given me an orgasm so magnificent I saw stars.

Horror washed over me as I realized everything that had happened. I had promised him anything if he saved me, but looking at the luxury around me, I realized that I might have overreached.

If this was a guest room, then who knows what his actual room looked like?

Huge windows made up most of one wall. Sheer curtains fluttered next to them in the draught from the air conditioning. The room itself was decorated in muted colors, and some nondescript artwork hung on the walls, but the star of the show was the bed I was in.

It was a four-poster bed with intricate details carved on the posts. It made me feel like a princess from a fairy tale.

It wasn't just the windows and the furniture that gave away the opulence,

though. It was the height of the ceilings. They had to be over twelve feet tall. Decorative scrolling woodwork ran around the edge of the room, giving it a slightly old world feel. I almost felt overexposed after spending so long in a basement room in the dark.

I lifted the covers and glanced down. I was still in the suit jacket that the three men used to cover me when I first ran into them. Part of me appreciated that they hadn't dressed me without my permission, but I also wished I had something more substantial to cover myself before I figured out what the hell I was going to do.

My only hope was that one of the two doors I could see splitting off from the room led to a bathroom. As silently as possible, I moved the comforter and sheets from my body and crept out of bed. I slinked across the floor, begging for none of the floorboards to squeak under my weight.

I eased the first handle down and opened the door. A hallway lay before me. As much as I knew I could probably make a run for it, I didn't want to be chased by Dylan or throw what he had done for me back in his face. I closed the door just as silently and opened the second.

As I suspected, an en suite bathroom was there. It was all marble and stone with chrome fittings shining in the light that turned on as I opened the door. The soft scent of lavender hit my nose first, and I saw some clothes sitting on the counter next to the sink with a note that simply said, *For when you wake.*

I was surprised that the clothing was left in the bathroom and not in the main bedroom, since that was where I'd see them first, but I was beyond grateful for the fact that there were clothes left for me at all. As I moved some of the fabric around, I silently rejoiced as it appeared that one item of clothing might have been leggings or, at the very least, pants of some kind.

After I took care of my necessary morning business, I washed in the sink, making a bit of a mess as I splashed water all over the place to try and clean as much of my body as I could. The truth was that I didn't trust anyone or anything enough right now to be completely helpless under a shower. That being said, I also refused to be dirty for any longer than absolutely necessary.

Even though I'd washed before Sampson took me to the auction, it wasn't enough. The soap in this bathroom was so much nicer. It was creamy, and I realized it was part of what was giving off the lavender scent. Once I felt clean enough, I dried off as quickly as possible before pulling on the clothes that were waiting for me.

For the first time since I had been taken, I was able to look at myself in a mirror. I had lost weight, which wasn't a surprise given the fact that Sampson barely fed me. My cheeks were slightly gaunt and my skin looked dry, which was probably because I was dehydrated. My hair appeared just as neglected as the rest of me, looking dry and brittle, not the spun gold that it usually was—or at least that it had been since I'd been living on my own.

I half expected the clothes to hang off of me, but they didn't. Even in my half-starved state, I still had some of my curves. Sure, I'd lost some of the roundness I had before, but it wasn't enough to make clothes sit too differently. Dylan must have a good eye for size as well, based on how close these clothes were to fitting me.

When I finally got my courage up, I left the bedroom, walking slowly down the hallway so nobody could accuse me of running and trying to flee the obligation I had to pay Dylan back for saving me from Sean. I also didn't completely trust my body. I'd been chained to a bed and barely fed for the last few weeks, so I didn't want to push myself any more than necessary.

The hallway was just as opulent as the bedroom, and as I progressed through the house, I realized that *everything* was of the level of luxury and comfort. This sort of luxury was beyond something I'd ever even thought I might experience, so I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to keep my wayward fingers from reaching out and touching things that were probably worth more than I could ever repay if I broke them. My nerves jangled as I made my way downstairs.

I wasn't sure why I thought it was morning when I woke up. Because when I finally found someone, it was Hudson, and he was eating the biggest burger I'd ever seen in my life. He didn't seem to realize that I was there at first, so I took a minute to actually look at him, which was more than I'd done when I first encountered them.

His hair was too light to be called brown and almost too dark to be called blond. It was longer on top than it was at the sides, but it was shaggy all over. If it wasn't for the tattoos that decorated his neck and arms and his serious attitude, he would have given off an almost Golden Retriever vibe, albeit a very muscular one. Lord, the man was ripped.

The black t-shirt he wore seemed to be a little on the small size, though it wasn't enough to look like it was bursting at the seams. Still, the color just highlighted the tan of his skin and the dark ink of the tattoos.

He reached up and ran a hand through his hair, making me realize it

wasn't just his neck and arms that were tattooed either. There were tattoos on his temples, and if I wasn't mistaken, they peeked out through his hair as well. With his hair out of his face, he took another bite of his burger. My gaze fixated on the food, mouth watering at the sight of it. The smell of the fries and the grilled meat that wafted toward me as he moved made my stomach growl.

"Hungry?" he asked without looking up, which made me wonder how long he'd been aware of my presence.

I tried to answer, but my voice caught in my throat, fear skating through my system at the idea of being punished for leaving my room even though I hadn't been locked in.

When he looked up at me, his dark gaze locking with my own, I nodded. I wasn't sure what was happening or who these men were who had saved me, but I wasn't going to turn down food if they were going to give it, especially not after the few weeks that I'd had.

He slid a plain looking cheeseburger across the table in my direction, and I couldn't help but stare at the one he was having that was drenched in barbecue sauce and fried onions. Still, any food was better than no food.

I finally got my feet to move and crossed the dining area to the table before taking a seat and quickly unwrapping my burger. When I'd seen him sitting there eating, I hadn't even taken the time to look around. I'd been focused on him and the food, and I still was.

The burger was gone in a few bites, which made Hudson's eyebrows raise. He offered me another one, sliding it across the glass dining table in my direction, and though I started to reach for it, I didn't take it. I knew if I put too much in my belly, I'd just be sick. When I hesitated, he placed a bottle of water in front of me instead, which I was grateful for.

"Where's Dylan?" I asked quietly as I unscrewed the cap.

"He'll be here shortly."

I nodded as an awkward silence descended. I took a long swig from the water bottle, gulping a few mouthfuls down before forcing myself to stop. It was more than a little refreshing, especially after the grease of the burger. I chewed on the inside of my cheek, unsure what to say to this man, not even really knowing who he was.

He didn't seem bothered by the silence as he watched me. He glanced at me, holding my stare over the top of his burger as he ate.

I had to wrench my own gaze away, knowing that if I looked any longer,

I'd just start babbling nonsense, trying to ease the tension I felt. The only option I had, if I didn't want to hold his stare, was to watch him out of my peripheral line of vision. I tried to take in the eating area as well as the man who was observing me just as much as I was him.

The room we sat in was surprisingly modern in comparison to the bedroom and hallways I just walked through. Everything was all sleek surfaces, black and chrome. Even the table we were sitting at was glass with black metal legs. I knew from experience that it was probably a pain in the ass to keep it clean.

"Do you guys have maids or something?" I hadn't meant to ask the question, but I was out there now.

"Why do you ask?" Hudson's gaze narrowed on me.

"Because this table is so clean. There are hardly any fingerprints on it. No food stains, nothing."

Hudson snorted, my answer seeming to both satisfy and amuse him. "Yeah, we have maids, and a cook that comes occasionally as well."

"Fancy," I muttered quietly, which just made Hudson laugh once more.

"You have no idea." I got the sense that, in some way, we were both amazed by this house, the staff, and the amount of money Dylan must have in order to employ people like that and live somewhere like this.

"How do you know Dylan?" I asked. I knew I shouldn't. I knew it was none of my business, but my curiosity was getting the better of me.

"That's a long story." Dylan's voice came from the doorway behind me. "So what's your name?" Dylan asked as he came to sit between me and Hudson, taking a chair at one end of the table.

"Evie. Didn't I already tell you that?"

"You did, but you were high as balls at the time, so I figured I'd ask again." He shrugged. "Do you know how you ended up where you were?" Dylan spoke slowly, and the slight pause before he avoided telling me I was at an auction let me know that he was choosing his words carefully.

"I was kidnapped." My tone was clipped, neither of us wanted to overshare. Since I still wasn't sure what relationship, if any, they might have with Sampson, I didn't want to mention him just yet.

"Do you know why?" Dylan tossed a fry in his mouth, seeming nonchalant about the idea that someone had taken me.

"I think so. I was taken to hurt somebody that cared about me."

"Are you going to ask me to just let you go, so you can be reunited with

this person that cares about you?" The way he said it almost sounded like he was jealous, but I knew that was just me imagining things.

"You don't want me to?" I asked, answering his question with a question.

"Well, I think we should talk about repayment of the debt first. After all, I've saved your life if the man chasing you was as bad as you say."

"Your other friend," I began hesitantly. "He seemed to know who was chasing me, so you must know who he was. He called him by a name..." I wished I could remember what the other guy had said.

"You're more coherent than I expected." Dylan grinned, and it was disarming, changing my perception of him completely. His eyes crinkled at the edges and he looked years younger than he had moments before. He reached out and grabbed a burger from the stack, unwrapping it.

"Do you expect me to not remember the orgasm you gave me in the car?" I asked, and Dylan smirked. Hudson just raised an eyebrow.

"I would have been disappointed if you didn't. The last thing I want is to give mediocre orgasms."

I picked up a fry and waved it in his direction. "You don't. I can assure you of that."

He took a bite of his burger and chewed thoughtfully. "So how do you propose paying back your debt? From what I gathered, the man who purchased you paid a pretty penny for you, which means that debt is now on my head. As such, we need to resolve this before you go anywhere."

"What can I do to repay it?" I wanted to add that it didn't look as though he was hurting for cash, but I kept my mouth shut.

He finished chewing the bite of burger he'd taken and swallowed before he said, "I happen to own a few businesses. You could be an employee at one of those for a while if you'd like."

"What kind of businesses? I'm not going to be a hooker, if that's what you're asking. I may have fooled around with you in the car, but that doesn't mean I'd spread my legs for just anybody. As you said, I was high as balls."

Hudson must have laughed or something because suddenly he was choking on the bite of the burger he had taken, which was his second one or maybe even third. The man seemed to have at least two stomachs. Where it all went, I had no idea. Both he and Dylan looked athletic and muscular, clearly not ones for lounging around.

"I don't intend to make you a hooker. I'd rather explore those skills for myself, thank you." His eyes flashed with desire, the heat in them suddenly

making my own skin warm, and I wondered if I was blushing.

I couldn't deny that I dreaded what he would have me do to pay back the debt. A knot of tension formed in my stomach the whole time we talked. Or maybe that was just the burger I had inhaled earlier. If he actually wanted me to work a legitimate job, that couldn't be too bad, could it?

EVIE

"So you're saying if I work at one of your businesses, which you've yet to describe, that you'll let me go? I can work off this debt?" I asked, pushing for clarification.

Dylan tilted his head to the side slightly. "I never said I'd let you go."

Fear trickled down my spine like an ice cube melting on a hot summer day. "Do you intend to keep me?" The question sounded harsher than I meant.

A cunning smile curled his lips. "I'll keep you until you pay off your debt. Besides, if I let you run around in public right now without any protection, who knows what could happen. That man you were running from, and the organization he belongs to, might very well find you again. And if they take you, then that's me out of the payment for the debt." He shrugged at the end, as if we were discussing whether or not to go out to lunch, not my freedom.

"Would I be allowed to return to school?"

"Maybe in time. It's too dangerous for you right now, though. The organization that purchased you at the auction is not known for its leniency or kindness. They're known more for Molotov cocktails and guns."

I swallowed thickly. Of course they were. "Can I at least go and get my things from my room?"

"Let me think about it for now. Hudson's going to take you shopping. I'm paying, and a portion of it will go back onto your debt. But that doesn't mean I want you to pick out cheap shit. If you're going to be working at one of my clubs, you need to look the part. And if you're going to be wandering around

this house, you need to look the part as well. I can't have people thinking that you're a maid or a member of staff."

Hudson wiped his mouth with a napkin before demanding, "Why do I have to take her?" His voice cut through my spiraling inner dialogue. I wasn't sure if I'd gone from the frying pan into the fire or just from one fire to another fire to another fire. At this point, it didn't really matter, either way I was burning.

At least Dylan wasn't being harsh. He wasn't beating me or demanding sex. He was buying me new clothes and feeding me which was nice, even if he was going to force me to live with him while I paid off my debt. I could understand wanting to keep an asset around. It didn't hurt my reasoning that he was easy on the eyes either. I wouldn't mind spending some time watching him, or Hud for that matter.

I hadn't seen Ty since I ran into the three of them at the auction. When the door burst open, I half expected to see him as though he'd somehow been summoned by my thoughts, but it wasn't him. It was someone new.

The man who entered was nothing like what I expected. His shoulders were slightly hunched. Thick-rimmed square glasses surrounded eyes that were cast down, watching the floor as he practically shuffled in. A hoodie covered most of his upper body, and he had the hood up, though it didn't hide his bleached blond hair with dark roots. Baggy jeans covered his lower half, but where I expected to see boots or Vans, I saw slippers.

"Theo, let me introduce you." Dylan's voice rang out, and Theo's head jerked up. His dark, stormy blue eyes widened when he saw me. "This is our new houseguest, Evie."

Theo had a silver hoop on one side of his lower lip with a chain that linked it to his ear, where another set of silver hoops decorated the upper curve. His other ear had just as many piercings, but they were all studs. And as he turned his head, his hood fell back, revealing a mop of messy bedhead. The tiniest curl of a tattoo peeked out from under whatever he had on under his hoodie.

He looked more like a punk, gamer nerd than somebody who would associate with Dylan or Hudson.

"Hey." Theo's word was clipped, as though he was fighting the urge to run, so I wasn't surprised when he snagged two burgers off the table and left.

"Don't mind him. He's just shy," Dylan said, waving in the direction that Theo had departed. I didn't miss the way his eyes darted to the door a couple

more times, as though Theo's behavior had seemed odd, even for him. "Theo hasn't spent much time around women, especially not beautiful ones. I imagine you're a little intimidating to him. Give it some time and he'll warm up." Dylan's voice had no emotion to it, as though he was simply stating facts.

"That's fine," I said before chomping down on another fry.

"Back to why do I have to take her?" Hudson demanded. He sounded so bored but so annoyed that it was frustrating.

It wasn't like I wanted him to take me shopping. I actually hated shopping. It was my least favorite activity. There were too many colors and noises and patterns and people. It was overwhelming, especially when I grew up not having a choice of what to wear.

"I want you to take her because you're the only one who knows what the guy that was chasing her looks like, as well as the organization that he belongs to. I'd rather keep Evie's circumstances quiet for now, which means it's either you or Tyler that goes. As you know, Tyler is indisposed right now."

I wanted to ask where he was, what had happened, but I didn't. I knew enough to keep my mouth shut.

"I can't accept that," Hud said.

Dylan sighed heavily and shook his head. "It's not a request. It's an order." He looked up and pinned Hud with those dark eyes of his. "But I promise, just for you, I won't leave the house. I'll work in my office until you guys get back."

Hudson still looked hesitant, as though he wanted to defy Dylan. The way Dylan said taking me shopping was an order made me think that it was something Hud would actually obey.

"Fine. Finish eating, there's a mall that's open late. We have a few hours before it closes. We can still fit in some shopping and at least find you some outfits, so you're not wearing the maid's clothes anymore."

I had wondered who the leggings and t-shirt belonged to, and now I knew the maid must have been a similar size to me at least.

Dylan pushed up from where he was sitting and came around to me, squatting down next to my chair. "Evie," he said before turning my chair so I was facing him. "While you're out, you have to obey everything Hudson says, no matter what. He's in charge. Do you understand?" I nodded my head. "That's not enough. I need to hear you say it."

"I understand that Hudson's in charge, and I will do everything he tells me to." My voice was weaker than I'd hoped. I looked away, feeling embarrassed by my fear.

Dylan reached out and gripped my chin, gently turning my head so I was looking at him once more. "So if he tells you to run, what are you going to do?"

"Run."

"Good girl." He released my chin but he traced his fingers down my jawline and the column of my neck, pausing just before touching my chest. My heart raced.

"Come on, let's go." Hudson jerked his head toward the door, breaking the spell that Dylan seemed to have put me under. Dylan stood first and offered me his hand, which I took. Without another word, he left and Hudson walked out shortly thereafter, so I followed. "You can wear these," Hudson grunted when we got to the front door. I saw there was a pair of flip flops waiting there.

I slipped my feet into them and followed him out to a car that was waiting on a gravel driveway. I didn't remember gravel from the night before. Not even in the slightest, which wasn't surprising but did make me uncomfortable.

At first, I wasn't sure whether we would be driven around by someone else or not, so I hesitated. When I watched Hudson go toward the driver's side, I moved to the passenger side and got in. He didn't even wait for me to buckle before he zoomed away. The tiny rocks kicked out from under his tires.

His car smelled like aftershave. Not overwhelming, but as though somebody had recently worn some freshly in here. I glanced at Hudson a couple times.

The atmosphere in the car was stony. He clearly didn't want a chit chat, but I was more than a little curious. It didn't help that he looked so damn approachable either, at least once the initial impression faded. Outside of his tattoos and attitude, he looked like he'd have golden retriever energy, but that wasn't the case. From what I could tell, his personality and his looks were almost complete opposites.

We drove for about twenty or thirty minutes, making what felt like a lot of unnecessary turns. Finally, I asked, "Why didn't you blindfold me or something?"

"Do I need to blindfold you? Are you going to run your mouth about

where you just came from?" His voice was icy cold.

I swallowed, reminding myself that he wasn't there to hurt me. In fact, he was taking care of me, even if it was just because of Dylan's orders. "Of course not, but it seems like an unnecessary risk, that's all."

For the first time, Hudson smiled fully, but it was more like a shark. There was a danger behind the smile that hinted that even though he looked sweet, there was a viper hiding underneath.

"Let's get this out of the way right now," Hudson said, his eyes darting to me and lingering for longer than was probably safe before going back to the road. "The organization that Dylan runs, that I work for...I'm what they call an enforcer. If people don't do what we say, I'm the one that makes them do it, which means that I'm not scared of violence, or blood, or pain, or insults, or any of that bullshit. If somebody needs to bleed, I'm the one that makes them bleed, So if you run your mouth, I'll make you bleed. Clear?"

"Crystal," I said, my heart in my throat. "What kind of organization is it that you two are a part of?" I really needed to control my mouth better. Or at least connect it to my brain so I could think before I spoke.

"Better that you don't know," Hud said, glancing at me and shaking his head. "It's safer that way, trust me."

Trust him? The man who just told me he'd make me bleed if I ran my mouth about them? At first, it seemed counterintuitive. Once I thought about it, though, I realized he'd been as honest with me as he could, so I decided that I would at least try to trust him and Dylan.

"I'll try," I mumbled eventually.

He chuckled darkly. I glanced at him before looking out of the window once more. The slight smile that lingered on his face made my stomach flip-flop, he really was obnoxiously handsome, just like Dylan. I really hoped I was making the right decision and not just being swayed by lust.

EVIE

Hudson took me to store after store. I was surprised that someplace like this was open as late as it was. I didn't want to admit to him that the first time I had ever been to a mall was two years ago. I mean, what kind of twenty-one year old girl says something like that?

Hell, I didn't even want to tell most people my age because they judged me for it. A twenty-one year old who's a freshman in college? People just assumed and judged, and that wasn't something I enjoyed. Because I looked young, I always just faked my age. Even Sampson hadn't really bothered to check. He just assumed I was the same age as Lyric. When Lyric and I snuck some bottles of alcohol into the dorm, I said that my cousin got them for us. In reality, I'd just been out earlier that day.

None of that mattered now, though. I owed a debt to some very dangerous people. I wasn't opposed to repaying it, but I wished I could have done it on my own terms.

I picked up a dress off the rack and held it up for Hudson to see. "What about this one?"

He sneered at it. "If you want to look like you should be at an English tea party, sure."

"Okay, then," I said, as I put it back. I thought it was cute. It was floral and frilly and had some lace on it, but that was apparently not the look we were going for.

It hadn't escaped my attention that all of the customer service people in these shops stayed carefully away from Hudson and I, as though they were

scared to see what we might ask them. We got polite smiles, of course, and they took Hudson's money, or rather Dylan's money, with no issue. Everything else? It was like pulling teeth.

It wasn't something that was completely foreign to me, so it didn't bother me much. When I'd first run away from the Children of Radiance I'd been awe struck by the world around me, especially shops and what women wore. I'd clearly been the odd woman out and had been treated as such by store employees, once I adapted to this new life it was less obvious, but I still wasn't a fan of being treated as less than.

"Here. Go try these on." I hadn't even noticed Hud picking up different dresses and outfits until he gave me an armful of items on hangers and pointed toward the dressing rooms.

I was surprised at how seriously he was taking this when we first started shopping. I didn't really care if the clothes fit well or not, after all, they weren't really my clothes. Sure, I would be the one wearing them, but I wasn't picking them out. So what did it matter? Hudson, on the other hand, was looking at everything with a critical eye and demanded that I show him everything I tried on.

After I took the clothes from him, I trotted to the dressing rooms. I stripped out of the leggings and t-shirt as quickly as possible and shimmied into the first dress, which made me look like a disco ball. It wasn't exactly something I was thrilled about. Still, it could have been worse.

Just as I was halfway through taking it off again, I heard Hudson's voice on the other side of the curtain. "Don't forget to show me."

I paused, sighing before pulling the dress back into place and zipping it up before sliding the curtain open. "The 70s called..." I snarked.

He just glared down at me. "Fine. Not that one."

I gave him a smile, which somehow seemed to just make things worse. He glared at me even harder, his brow furrowing and his lips drawing into a tight line. I slid the curtain closed and proceeded to put on the next dress.

It was essentially a black tube. One that was skintight. It was ruched along the sides, which I would have thought would make it less obvious how tight it was, but somehow it just enhanced the effect. The neckline didn't just dip low though, there was a cutout in the middle. It was shaped like an hourglass, one that started in what would have been the sweetheart neckline being the thinnest part and then flaring wide under my breasts. It was ridiculously sexy and I couldn't deny I felt like a bombshell in it.

"This one's a keeper," Hud said with a nod before adding, "next." This time he closed the curtain, banishing me and the almost obscene dress.

We went on like that for what felt like forever but was probably only a half hour or so. Some outfits worked, some didn't. Hud had final say no matter what, but I voiced my opinion as well. There was a pair of leather-like shorts that he particularly seemed to like, whereas I felt like they looked more like panties. I told him as much, but it just made him grin.

These weren't my clothes, I reminded myself for the umpteenth time. I was just using them for a while. Right as I was just about to put the clothes I was borrowing from the maid back on, Hud's voice sounded on the other side of the curtain, "Put on that halter top and the shorts. We'll pay for them as we leave. Leave the other clothes behind, we'll compensate the maid."

I wanted to protest—to tell him that the top and shorts weren't an appropriate outfit for a mall—but the truth was, we had seen people wandering around wearing everything and anything. Some of them were covered from eyebrows to ankles, while others barely covered anything in between. None of it seemed to matter, so I did as he asked.

When I looked at myself in the mirror, I tried to see the benefits of the outfit. My breasts looked amazing thanks to the cut out of the halter top, but overall, I felt exposed. As I pulled my hair into a high ponytail, I reminded myself that there was nothing more on display than what people would see if I was wearing a swimsuit. When I opened the curtain, I handed the clothes he deemed acceptable to Hud, and he took them over to the cash register.

"She's wearing these out. Can you scan them and take off the tags?" he asked, as I hovered behind him.

The clerk nodded, coming over with a pair of scissors to remove the tags that were still on the clothes I was wearing before scurrying back around the counter once more. The scent of her perfume lingered in the air. It was too floral and made me nauseous.

Once he paid for everything, we started walking out of the store and he said, "I want you to walk twenty feet in front of me. I need to see the reaction people have to this outfit, so I know if it's appropriate for the club or not."

"I see." He hadn't needed to explain what he was doing to me, but he did. For that, I was grateful. I exited the store first, trying to act more confident than I felt as I strutted out, leaving distance between us.

Having him so far away made me feel oddly uncomfortable. At first, I thought it was just the outfit, but as I walked, I realized that it was mainly the

lack of Hudson's presence by my side.

I could feel eyes on me. People watched me, looking me up and down, and though I felt like I wanted to scream, I was determined.

He wanted to see people's reaction, which meant that he needed them to look at me, so I put a little extra sway into my steps. If he wanted people to look, I'd make them look. I never had any trouble getting people's attention before, and I was sure that wasn't about to start now.

My heart thudded in my chest as I realized I was heading toward a group of guys that were probably a similar age to me. One of them grinned at me lasciviously before extending both hands as though he was going to try and wrap me in a hug, my steps faltered. As he got closer, his hands dropped.

"Those are some baby-making hips right there," he drawled, before seeming to come to his senses and passing me by. "Hey, watch it," he said a moment later, his voice carrying over the crowd.

I turned and saw Hud glaring down at the kid, as the two had just bumped shoulders. "You watch it, you little punk." Talking like that made him sound like an old man, which made me laugh and coincidentally drew his attention. "Wait for me," he called out before he started walking to catch up to me.

"Shit, that was that girl's boyfriend? You almost died, man," one of the other guys in the group said. "Do you know who that was?" They were out of earshot before I could hear the answer. Who exactly did they think Hudson was? A sliver of anxiety ran through me, but I'd told myself I'd try to trust Hud and Dylan, and I was going to stick to that, so I banished the thought as soon as it reared its ugly head.

"Come on. We're going in here. I need to get you some essentials." Hud's voice was more business-like than before.

I didn't expect a lingerie store. In fact, I would have named any other store as the next place we were going. Hudson's hand landed on the small of my back as we entered the store. The possessive gesture and unexpected touch made heat flare through the skin that was exposed between the halter top and the shorts.

Unlike every other store, the women here flocked to him like gnats to fruit. They didn't seem to realize that this fruit could be deadly.

"We're looking for some sets for her." He looked down at me, letting his gaze slowly travel over my body. "The sexier the better, as well as some everyday essentials."

"Of course, we'll get some set up for you and she can try them on." The

woman appeared to be the manager or assistant manager, seeming to have some authority over the other employees within the store as she succeeded in shooing them away.

He smiled charmingly at the woman before he said, "I'll give you five hundred bucks to let me in the dressing room as well. A thousand if you keep other people out of the area."

My jaw dropped. "What the hell, Hud?" I whispered.

"I need to make sure it's something he would like. Nobody else should get to see that."

My cheeks flamed, even I could tell I was blushing, and I was sure everybody else could as well. It was just like wearing a bathing suit I told myself yet again. Nothing wrong with wearing a bikini.

The woman who spoke to him flitted through the store, going from rack to rack as she pulled different things from them. I could see straps, lace, shimmery fabrics, and things that I didn't understand how they went on somebody's body. Finally, she came back over to me.

"Okay, sweetie. Let's get you set up," she cooed at me before hustling me back to the dressing rooms. I hadn't even had a chance to look at anything myself.

There was a hot pink leather couch opposite the dressing room curtains, one that I had to assume was for awaiting husbands, boyfriends, and people of that nature. Hud set all of our bags down next to it before he plopped down on it himself, spreading his legs wide and claiming the entire space.

"We'll make sure the area is clear for you," the clerk said quietly, leaning over as she did, likely so he could get a good long gander down her blouse should he so choose. He just nodded and she walked away pouting slightly, clearly disappointed by his reaction.

I slipped behind the curtain, pulling it closed as I began to examine the items she brought for me to try on.

"Don't forget to show me," Hud called out. I wanted to tell him no, to explain that this was not appropriate, but I knew I just had to get through it.

There was nothing really wrong with him seeing me in a bra and panties. At least, that's what I thought until I saw the items I was trying on. It wasn't just bras and panties. It was lingerie. Full-blown sheer, lacy lingerie. The kind that didn't leave anything to the imagination.

"I can't show you all of this," I called, my voice a little shaky.

"You can and you will, or Dylan will find out that you were disobeying

orders." The threat was clear, even if I didn't think they would do anything to hurt me. I mean, after all, I was collateral on a debt I owed them. If they hurt me or killed me, they wouldn't be able to collect on that debt anymore. That didn't mean they couldn't make my stay unpleasant.

I tried on the first set, a blush colored bra and matching panties that were both embroidered with purple flowers. Taking a deep breath, I opened the curtains so that Hudson could see. "Good, next." He barely even looked up from his phone. It was just enough for him to tell me that he was satisfied.

I wanted to snarl at him, to tell him that this wasn't easy for me, that this took everything I had. I couldn't, so I just drew the curtain closed once more and pulled out the next piece of lingerie. A piece of red satin smoothed over me as I put it on.

This time when I opened the curtain, Hud was waiting and watching. The lace and sheer material that made up the bust hid anything I'd be worried about, but I could still feel his gaze traveling over me like it was hot to the touch.

"Next." He hadn't passed judgment, so I wasn't sure what to do with it.

"Are we keeping it or not?" I asked with my hand on the curtain.

He looked me over once more. "No."

With no further explanation, I closed the curtain, only for it to be yanked open again a second later. Hud stood there, his gaze ferocious as he watched me with his chest rising and falling rapidly as though he hadn't expected to be standing in front of me. "Blush."

I frowned. "What?"

"Blush. I want to see you blush while wearing that."

"I can't blush on command!" I complained.

He stepped close to me and turned me to face the mirror in the dressing room. We locked gazes in the mirror, and he bent his head to whisper in my ear, "What if I told you this makes me want to rip it off of you because it covers up the gloriousness of your body?"

I smiled in spite of myself. "Then I'd say you better be ready to pay for it."

"Always." He nipped at my ear. The blush that stained my cheeks moved toward the tips of my ears as well.

Hud growled appreciatively. "That's what I wanted." He turned and smacked my ass as he left, drawing the curtain shut behind himself.

My body was confused. Was I as attracted to Hud as I was to Dylan? Was

that allowed? Or was I scared of Hud? Both were options, and I was getting this weird combination of the two that made me feel like my head was spinning.

I shook the confusion off. We were just shopping. That was it. There was no need to think about anything else.

The red slip practically fell off as I changed out of it. I set it to the side, separate from the others that had been approved so far. When I picked up the hanger for the next piece of lingerie, I practically choked on my own saliva.

It was just straps. What the hell was I supposed to do with that? I hesitated as I looked at what I assumed was the bust. I was so confused.

I slipped my legs through what I hoped were the leg holes and pulled it up. One set of straps went around my hips while three others went up, forming what would be the bones of a corset...you know, if there were actual material there.

Two more straps criss-crossed under the bra, but the bra itself only consisted of two pieces of material, one passing in front of my nipples and one forming the straps that went over my shoulders. There were two sets of hook and eye closures on the back that kept it all in place.

Another smaller set of straps came off the shoulders and connected to what was essentially a collar that went around my neck. They were covered in rhinestones that glittered under the light, as was the collar itself. Two other small chains came off the hip bands and attached to what I assumed were supposed to be wrist cuffs. Like hell I was putting those on.

The worst part was the nipples, though. The two pieces of material crossed over right where my nipples were, so in theory they should be covered. The problem was that the two pieces of material were riveted together with a hole that seemed specifically designed for my nipple to poke through. I didn't even care that the whole thing was crotchless because it wasn't like anyone was going to see that. I barely cared that the piece was almost too small for me and the straps squeezed me a little tightly but having my nips on display bothered me.

"Don't forget to show me," Hud's voice came from the other side of the curtain. Of course the bastard would say that, especially when the black of the material made my face look even redder.

I hardly ever used to get embarrassed about stuff, but it seemed like all bets were off around these guys. With a little maneuvering, I was able to cover one nipple with my wrist and the other with the fingers of the same

hand so I could use my free hand to open the curtain, even though I just wanted to melt into the background.

To my surprise, Hud stood just on the other side of the curtain when I opened it, almost as though he'd been eager to see what I was putting on.

I stepped back, putting some distance between us, though my heart pounded in my chest once more. When I glanced up at his face, desire shimmered there. Heat was rising in his eyes, his pupils were dilated, and his lips parted as though he couldn't quite believe I'd managed to get something like this on.

"Well, keep or no?" I asked, though I sounded breathless.

Taking a step forward, he pulled the curtain shut behind himself, trapping us in the room. The dressing room was small enough that it made him appear even bigger, like he could fill the entire space himself. I wanted to tell him to leave, but I couldn't seem to get my mouth to work.

"Lower your hand," Hud said, his voice gravelly.

I lowered my free hand, knowing that wasn't what he meant.

He didn't even speak, he just let a low rumbling noise of frustration leave him. I lowered the other hand, exposing myself to him. "Good girl," he growled.

My body tightened in response. Why? Why was I reacting this way to him? He'd threatened to hurt me less than a few hours ago.

Hudson took a step closer and I took one further back. He continued that way until I had nowhere else to go and my bare ass was pressed against the dressing room mirror. He came closer still, until he was towering over me.

"You look like a fucking present, all wrapped up, just for me." He reached out and put one of the cuffs around my wrist, gauging my reaction before doing the other. If they 'd been handcuffs, or metal, I probably would have lost my shit, but they had soft, velvety material on the inside that felt luxurious against my skin. "Are you still going to follow orders?"

I nodded, his words barely making it through the haze of desire that was filling me. Hud looked like no one else I'd ever met. Between the tattoos and the general attitude, he seemed like such a contradiction.

He lowered his head to my shoulder and let it rest there in what I was sure was an awkward angle for him. "I want to make you come, Evie. I heard you in the car with Dylan, and I want to experience that first hand for myself."

"We're in a store in a shopping mall. This isn't really the right place for that," I panted.

He kissed my neck in response, which made my knees go weak. If I hadn't been braced against the mirror, I wasn't sure what I would have done other than fall on my ass.

"You want me though, don't you?" I didn't answer, couldn't. "I can feel how fast your heart beats when I kiss your pulse, and your nipples are poking through those holes perfectly. Tell me to stop, and I will." He grasped my breasts with both hands, running his fingers across my exposed nipples, making me gasp at the sensation.

I tried to reach up to grab him, to touch him, but the cuffs kept my hands by my sides. When he noticed the action, he smiled devilishly before dropping to his knees in front of me and sucking on one taught bud after the other.

My breathing quickened, making my chest heave in and out of his reach. His hands slid down my body to my hips, reaching around and grabbing my ass and squeezing it before sliding further down my legs. Gently, he moved my feet further apart, exposing my core to the open air.

"Fucking crotchless, I knew it," he groaned as he slid a hand between my thighs, his fingers slipping through my wetness until they found my entrance.

I knew I should tell him to stop, but I hadn't had much pleasure recently, so I wanted to find it where I could because who knows when I'd feel it again. Hudson's fingers and mouth were giving me plenty, but I wanted more. I wanted his fingers inside of me, filling me until I writhed on top of him. He gave me what I wanted before I could ask, and I moaned in satisfaction.

"Quiet, sweetheart. We're in a shopping mall, after all." He threw my words back in my face, and I knew that there was no stopping us now. The lust train had left the station and was speeding toward pound town.

I bit my lip, trying to keep my noises to a minimum as he worked his fingers in and out of me while licking my nipples through the holes on the bra. There was something oddly erotic about him only being able to reach the taught peaks when I was turned on enough.

He pulled away and looked up at me. I was sure I was a mess, panting and biting my lip, the heat coming off of me dampening my brow. Somehow, the light in the dressing room made it look like his eyes were glowing amber. All I could think was that maybe he just wanted to fuck me as badly as I wanted to fuck him. "Leg up," he grunted.

I lifted one leg and he put it on his shoulder before forcibly lifting the other, leaving me braced between him and the mirror. Without breaking eye

contact, he licked my pussy, his eyes almost fluttering closed as he tasted me. If I had free hands, I would have tangled them in his hair and forced him closer, pushed him where I needed him to go. I couldn't, though, and he seemed to be enjoying this too much anyway.

Hudson thrust his tongue into me, and I swore it felt like he was trying to drink from me. When he pulled away slightly, his face glistened with my juices and he looked thrilled. He quickly replaced his tongue with his fingers and lowered his lips to my clit, licking and sucking until my hips bucked against him. He smiled as he looked up at me. I was so close to tipping over the edge of my orgasm, and he seemed to sense it. He stopped and put my legs on the ground, which wasn't a good idea because my knees gave out and I started to slide down the mirror.

He chuckled as he pinned me in place with his thighs before lifting me so I was standing straight up once more. "I'm going to make you come on my fingers. When you do, you're going to bite my shoulder so you don't scream. Do you understand?"

I nodded frantically. God I wanted that.

"Stop biting your lip and bite me instead." I let my bottom lip go and his gaze locked on it. "You made yourself bleed." I didn't get any warning before he sucked my lip into his mouth, his tongue probing the wound. I was sure it was bleeding more from his kiss than from me biting on it, which only seemed to please him.

A kiss wasn't what I wanted though. I wanted the orgasm he promised me.

He released my lip as I rocked my hips against him as much as I could, given the way he was pinning me. "Impatient, aren't you, sweetheart? And here I thought I scared you."

One of the hands that held me in place released me, and he buried it between my legs, thrusting his fingers into me with force this time. First it was one, then two, and when he added a third, I bit down on his shoulder which made him groan quietly.

"Good girl, Evie. Come for me. Let me feel your body experiencing pleasure." His words were throaty in my ear. "You like that, don't you? Being called a good girl, me telling you what to do and what I'm going to do to you."

I whined slightly, unable to let go of his shoulder with my teeth for fear that I would scream as he fucked me roughly with his fingers. The sounds

that filled the dressing room couldn't be mistaken for anything other than what they were, but at that moment, I didn't care.

His thumb began to circle my clit, sweeping over it occasionally, and driving me closer toward my orgasm. My hands alternated between balling into fists and flexing open, desperately trying to reach for him but not being able to because of the cuffs. I bit down even harder, and Hud groaned once more. When he sucked and licked on my neck, it threw me over the edge. I was barely able to muffle the scream that erupted from me as my entire body clenched and released over and over again as wave after wave of pleasure ran through me.

"Fuck," Hud whispered before slowly pulling his fingers from me. He raised them to his mouth and sucked them clean, and I had to fight the urge to jump him. I wanted him to fuck me. I wanted to see him come undone with pleasure just like I had. "I see that look in your eye, and the answer is not yet. Dylan first, then if he's willing to share, it will be my turn. When it is," he paused and lowered his head so his lips brushed against my ear as he spoke, "I'll make this look like a warmup. You'll be screaming my name, begging for my cock."

He grabbed my chin with his hand and roughly kissed me. I could taste myself on his lips, along with the blood that lingered there as well.

As suddenly as he kissed me, he stopped. "It's a keeper, by the way." Then he was out of the dressing room, leaving me to slump to the floor, all my energy gone.

He was like the orgasm fairy, just popping in, making me come, and then disappearing again. The image of Hud in a tutu or something similar made me giggle as I sat on the bench and got myself together. One thought sobered me up immediately, though. Would he tell Dylan what happened between us?

EVIE

The drive back to the house was awkward, to say the least. It didn't help that my body was still flushed with desire from what happened in the dressing room, or that Hudson was quiet, as though nothing had happened.

Maybe to him, it was nothing.

When we pulled up to the house, I didn't expect Dylan to be waiting for us. It was like he knew we'd be coming home, which could only mean that Hudson texted him to tell him we were on the way. When he did that, I had no idea.

Dylan's hands were stuffed into his immaculately tailored black pants, and the silver of his belt buckle winked in the light as we approached, making me realize just how dark it had become. It was basically night, with the last few rays of sunlight seeping from the sky. We had spent a good couple of hours shopping, which was probably more time than I had spent on it for most of my life.

If I was being honest, I was beat and ready to go to bed. All I wanted to do was flop down on that big comfy mattress, wrap myself in the comforter like a burrito, and not move until tomorrow. Apparently, that wasn't in the cards.

"We got the basics and just about everything I could think of that she might need." Hudson's voice sounded more than a little irritated. A complete one-eighty from how he'd been in the dressing room.

"Good work. Let's see some of it, shall we?" Dylan smiled over at me.

He really wanted to see the clothes that Hudson picked out for me? I

couldn't help but feel a little like a doll at this point. I was just being moved around from place to place, dressed up, and told where to go, what to do, and who to fuck.

"Show him the dresses from the second store," Hudson directed as we all walked into the mansion. "You can change in there." He pointed toward a door off the hallway.

I nodded as Hudson handed me the bags and disappeared into what turned out to be a downstairs bathroom. After finding the bag associated with the store Hudson mentioned, I changed as quickly and efficiently as possible before popping back out and standing in the doorway to a family room area so both of them could see me.

The creamy material folded in a way that gave the dress a sweeping structure and emphasized my curves without looking overtly sexual. It was probably the least sexy dress we had purchased. I gave a little twirl and Dylan nodded. "Next." As I walked back to the bathroom, I could hear the low murmur of their voices, which felt oddly calming.

We repeated this process over and over again until we finally got to the last dress. It was the one I was most uncomfortable in. This dress left me with skin showing in places that I never would have expected. The front was only held together by a few strings of material and barely covered what needed to be covered. The dress was completely backless except for the skirt. One tug on the right piece of string, and the whole thing would come undone.

"Leave that one on." Dylan's gaze roamed over me making me want to hide and show off at the same time. I wanted him to find me attractive, wanted him to want me like I wanted him. "Let's go and show you the club you'll be working at—I think it's the safest bet for you. I like the ponytail as well. Keep that." He turned to Hudson, "Call Alice down and have her take the things up to Evie's room."

Hudson pressed a button on the wall, and I assumed that this would somehow call Alice, whoever she was. Maybe she was the maid whose clothes I had borrowed.

Dylan's gaze stopped at my feet. "Do you have heels?"

I nodded and retrieved the bag that came from the shoe store we stopped at on the way. I took out a box and slipped into the heels which were some fairly standard strappy stilettos. I didn't particularly want to wear them without breaking them in, but it didn't appear as though I had much of a choice. Once I had them on, Dylan circled me, looking me up and down.

"Very good. Walk to the couch and back to me."

I didn't know what to make of the request, but I did as he asked. I could feel him watching me the entire time, silently judging whether I was good enough for something. I wasn't sure what, though.

"Go and take a seat on the couch." I walked over and did as he asked, perching on the dark brown leather. The slinky fabric of the dress had other ideas though, and I slid against the leather of the couch in a way that had me moving backward instead of sitting on the edge like I intended. "You're very compliant." Dylan raised an eyebrow as he moved over to the other couch, leaning against the back. "Why are you doing everything that I tell you to do? You haven't even objected to me telling you that you'll be working at a strip club."

The strip part of the club was news to me. And I said as much. "You only called it a club up until this point, so why would I object? Also, nothing you've asked me to do has been bad or uncomfortable. Plus, you saved me. I owe you a debt, not just monetary."

"And how far are you willing to go to pay off that debt?" he asked, his voice soft and full of promise. Whether it was a promise of pleasure or pain, I couldn't tell.

My heart thudded in my chest at the implication of his question. How far was I willing to go? He had seen me naked. Hudson had bought me lingerie that would please him. It was fairly obvious where this was all heading. Honestly, there were much worse options than Dylan. Like Sean, for example. At least Dylan didn't make my skin crawl when he touched me. "I haven't decided yet," I said honestly.

"So if I ask you to spread your legs right now, would you?"

"Do you mean actually spreading my legs, or are you talking about fucking me? Because those are two different things."

"Just spread your legs."

I did as he asked, aware that I was exposing myself to him with how high the skirt of the dress hiked up my thighs. I was wearing a pair of panties from earlier—the ones Hud picked out for me to wear home, since the ones I'd worn out weren't particularly sexy. It wasn't the same lingerie that Hud made me come in, since that was a whole outfit, but these were just as filthy as that lingerie. After everything Hud and I did in the dressing room, I drenched these as soon as I put them on.

"Hudson told me what you did. What he did. In the dressing room."

I wasn't sure whether Dylan was going to be upset or not. It wasn't like he had staked any claim over me. Sure he had been the one that decided to rescue me, but that didn't mean I was only his. "What are your feelings about that?" I was genuinely curious.

"Jealousy." That single word made me throb with anticipation. He was jealous that Hudson touched me, even though Hudson used Dylan's name in order to do so. "Especially since Hud doesn't usually touch women. At all."

That was news to me.

As he spoke, he moved around the couch and got closer to me. "He must like something about you. I can't say I don't understand. I mean, after all, I don't usually rescue women from situations like that. It sets a bad precedent. Makes me many enemies. But seeing you there, a damsel in distress with tears running down your cheeks? I couldn't turn you away. Then when I kissed you...Well, it became obvious to me that I couldn't let anybody else have you."

"Does that include Hudson?" I asked, my voice sounding breathier than I expected. His words were turning me on. I couldn't deny that. After all, Dylan was powerful and handsome, saying that he wanted me and wanted nobody else to have me was almost intoxicating.

"Don't move." Dylan dropped to his knees in front of the couch. Before placing a hand on each of my thighs, pushing my legs even further apart until the skirt of the dress was no longer really a skirt. It was just a piece of material around my waist. "How wet did you get for Hudson?" Dylan's voice dropped to a low, husky growl.

I frowned, how was I supposed to answer that? It wasn't like I could quantify it. "I don't know. Pretty wet, I guess."

"Wetter than you got from me in the car?" His dark eyes flashed, but I couldn't tell what emotion I was seeing there.

"I was a little too distracted both times to pay attention."

"And if I ask to touch you right now?" He was leaning forward, as though he was being drawn to me against his will.

"I would agree."

"Pull those panties to the side for me."

I slipped my fingers around the dark purple, lacy material and pulled it to the side, exposing my core to him. His hands slipped from the tops of my thighs to behind them, using my legs as an anchor as he pulled me forward. I slid down the couch as he tilted me, completely exposing my pussy to him.

"You're still wet? Or are you wet again? Do you like being told what to do? Does it excite you?"

My breath was coming faster with each word he spoke. "Sometimes." It seemed like the safest answer.

I knew what he was asking, but I didn't know how to answer it for sure. It wasn't like I'd had a plethora of sexual partners who gave a shit about me and what I found pleasure in. Most of the sexual partners I'd had were abusers, or as it turned out to be in my recent ex's case, a rapist.

I pushed thoughts of my ex from my mind as Dylan slid his hands up my thighs, making my entire body tingle with anticipation. He swiped a finger through my wetness before pushing it inside me. I gasped at the sudden intrusion.

"Did your pussy throb around his fingers? Did it milk his fingers the way it milked mine in the car?" His words were unexpected, making me uncomfortable but excited at the same time. I wasn't great at dirty talk and I wasn't sure if he wanted me to answer seriously or not. He moved his finger in and out of me with a slow, torturous rhythm before adding a second and continuing on. My breath was turning into short little pants as his thumb caressed my most pleasurable spot.

The idea of another orgasm was both appealing and terrifying. I wasn't sure I could handle it so soon after the one Hud gave me earlier. From the way Dylan was acting, though, I wouldn't have a choice. Though, this was one choice I was happy to give him control over.

DYLAN

I slipped my fingers in and out of her, enjoying the feel of her wet pussy twitching around me. Some of her slickness was probably left over from Hud's earlier ministrations, but I didn't care. Something about Evie was dangerous for me. I was willing to put aside all of my rules and change everything just so I could be around her, and I barely even knew her.

A noise drew my attention, and I saw Hudson standing in the doorway, hunger written as plain as day on his face. As I'd said to Evie before, it was unusual for Hud to want to touch a woman, or really anyone for that matter. So whatever I was drawn to about Evie, I was willing to bet it was the same for him.

There was a gentleness about Evie that called to both of us, but there was also strength. She'd been through hell, had kept going, and was even able to find pleasure afterward, which brought my attention back to her writhing form. If Hud wanted to watch, I wasn't going to stop him. And if he wanted to fuck her, I'd suck up my jealousy and let him. The man deserved something normal and kind in his life.

Evie's hips were grinding against my hand as I pushed her closer and closer toward her orgasm. Each shiver, each tense and release of her muscles, each moan, whimper, and gasp...They all told me how close she was. It was fascinating to watch her, and I couldn't drag my gaze away. If I was being honest, I wanted to watch her come over and over again until I learned what every one of her small sighs meant. I wanted to make her crave me and the pleasure I could give her the way I craved her, and she hadn't even touched

my cock yet.

It throbbed painfully in my pants as I thought about burying it inside her. Now wasn't the time, though. She needed a release from all the teasing I'd been doing, and then we needed to go to the club. Otherwise, I'd have her up in my room and pinned to the bed faster than a bolt of lightning.

"Please, Dylan, I need—" she gasped as I pushed her ever closer to her orgasm.

I may as well have been a wild animal for the sound of the growl of anticipation that came from me. "I know what you need, sunshine. I'll give it to you." I leaned forward and sucked her clit between my lips, making her cry out. It was the sweetest sound, to go along with the most delicious pussy I'd ever tasted.

Even as her hips rocked, I kept up licking and sucking until I felt her whole body tense. Her cry of pleasure almost undid me right then and there. I would have come in my pants like a teenager if she so much as looked at my cock. Her pussy clenched around my fingers, throbbing and seeming as though it wanted to suck them even deeper into her core. It was a sensation I adored, and I wanted to feel it around my cock more than I wanted my next meal.

Still, we had other business to attend to first, so I withdrew my fingers, which earned me a whimper of disappointment. I popped them in my mouth, tasting her pleasure for myself. It was almost impossible to describe, but there was a sweetness and a smokiness to her that I'd never tasted before.

"Take care of her while I wash up," I said to Hud, who wasn't even trying to disguise the bulge in his pants.

He gave me a nod, and I ducked into the bathroom that Evie had changed in. None of the bags were there—Alice had evidently come and picked them up—but the scent of her lingered, or maybe that was just what was on my hand. I couldn't go out this pent up, though, so I unzipped my pants and pulled my cock free. I stroked it a few times, knowing it wouldn't take much to push me over the edge.

My thoughts danced with visions of Evie and how I'd take all of those different dresses off her body. If I had my way, she'd wander around the house naked or in panties and a t-shirt max. I imagined her bending over the couch to get something and I'd come up behind her, slap her ass, and get her nice and turned on before I ripped her panties away and fucked the daylight out of her. I could practically hear the slap-slap-slap of skin on skin from our

union.

I wanted to come home from a long day and have her spread naked on my desk like an all-you-can-eat buffet. Most of all, I wanted her to want me as much as I wanted her. Suddenly, my head was filled with images of the two of us together, but with Hudson there as well. He was balls deep in her throat while I fucked her from behind, and it was the idea of the three of us together that had me spilling myself into my hand.

Those thoughts were unexpected, to say the least. Still, the scenario was something to explore if given the opportunity. I cleaned up as quickly as I could and tucked myself back into my pants before I left, returning to the sitting area. Evie was there, her face flushed and nipples hard enough that I could see them through her dress. It took everything I had not to go to her, grab her, and take her upstairs.

Even though I'd just taken care of my hard on, it didn't help. My cock was stiffening again in my pants. "Go and put something less revealing on," I grunted. "But still sexy." The last bit was more of a precaution. She knew we were going to a strip club, and I felt sure she'd dress appropriately. Orgasms could make the mind fuzzy, so a reminder didn't hurt.

Evie didn't respond, just stood from the couch and left the room. It made me wonder if anything happened while I was absent. From the way Hud was still fixed to his spot just inside the doorway, I doubted it.

"When do you want her to start work?" he asked, his voice deeper and rougher than usual.

The truth was, I didn't want her to start work at all. The idea of other men looking at her, even if she wasn't stripping, was enough to drive me crazy. Still, I couldn't make exceptions to every rule for her, or my business would become chaos.

If I was smart, I never would have gotten involved in the first place, but that ship had long since sailed. Still, I knew it was a bad idea to get involved with her, to treat her any differently than I would anyone else in my organization. The idea of never seeing her again, of kicking that beautiful sunshine out of my life just because it would help with my image or keep my people in line, pissed me off.

Why did I have to give up something that made me happy, that brought me pleasure, for them? I resolved then and there that I wouldn't. She would be in my life as long as she wanted to be.

"Dylan?" Hud's voice reminded me that I still hadn't answered his

question.

"Let's just see how tonight goes first," I replied. It was a cop out, and we both knew it. He didn't push any further, which I was grateful for.

All I got in return was a grunt, and I took that as an agreement. It was rare for Hud and me to disagree on things, and even though I had a jealous streak, apparently my mind had already made peace with the idea of sharing Evie with Hud.

It was clear that she was attracted to both of us, so I wasn't going to ruin it by making her choose, especially when she didn't know either of us that well. Besides, what would I do if she chose Hud over me?

EVIE

When we got into the club, it was clear that the business was owned by Dylan based on how people reacted as he walked in. Whispers and nudges ran through the staff at an alarming rate. However, it wasn't what I'd expected of a strip club. There was nothing run down or seedy looking about it. In fact, it looked more elegant than most other businesses in the area.

Black marble covered the wall of the building where the front door was located and continued into the entryway. Veins of white were the only thing breaking up the vast darkness. A symbol was the only signage that the place had, a wing-like shape with a swirl around it stood out in stark white neon lights.

As we walked up, all of the bouncers dipped their heads, greeting their boss...or boss's boss maybe. None of them stopped us, or told us to get in line, or do anything crazy like that. I could just imagine Dylan's reaction, and it wouldn't be a good one. I had no doubt that if they treated him like a regular employee, they wouldn't be working there the next day. Dylan wasn't the type to put up with disrespect, that was evident from the way he interacted with others and the way he'd treated me from the start.

Hudson was just a tall shadow behind us, looming and scaring everybody. Actually, that wasn't right. He didn't appear to be scaring the people who didn't understand who he was. It was only those who understood who Dylan was that were scared of Hud. Their gazes would lock onto Dylan before drifting over his shoulder and seeing Hud, at which point they'd turn or walk away from the area that we were moving through.

For the most part, he looked like a puppy dog. It was when you really looked into his eyes that you saw the difference. His eyes were full of a darkness that only comes from living through some shit, which made me wonder what his life had been like.

I half expected us to use an employee entrance, but I guess I should have guessed that Dylan wouldn't do something like that. As we strolled in the front door, the music hit me like a wave.

The bass vibrated through the floor, rattling my bones in a way that I've loved ever since I left the cult I grew up in. Nothing quite filled me with the same exhilaration as music.

A DJ sounded off, announcing the next dancer on the main stage. I couldn't make out her name, but the rest of the audience must have because there was clapping and cheering. As we made our way deeper into the club, my gaze was drawn to her. I wanted to go and watch. I was transfixed by her movements, even from this far away, but Hudson's hand landed on my shoulders while Dylan's landed on the small of my back. They escorted me toward the bar.

The dress Dylan had me change into was positively Victorian in how conservative it was, at least in comparison to what most of the women surrounding us were wearing. It wasn't just the dancers who were scantily clad, but the bartender and the waitresses as well. Hell, I could have come in the lingerie that I bought with Hud and been more dressed than some of them, which made me wonder exactly why Dylan had had me change at all.

The bartender's eyes went wide when she saw us standing there. She immediately knew who Dylan was and came over to see what was going on. "Do you need me to get the manager?" she asked. I expected her to flirt with him, and yet she didn't. She barely even batted an eye. How anybody heard her with her voice so soft and high pitched, I wasn't sure.

The woman was in a corset-like top that practically shoved her boobs up to her chin, and I couldn't deny that I was a little jealous. It looked so effortless for them to be there, and yet whenever I tried to do that with mine, it looked awkward and painful, like I was about to break whatever I was wearing. Her vivid red hair was twirled up in a big braided bun on top of her head while tendrils hung down the sides of her face and neck, curling from heat and sweat.

"What's with the getup?" Dylan asked instead of answering her question.

She winked at him. "It's Wild West Wednesday."

For the first time, I realized I had no idea what day of the week it was.

"That explains the cowboy hats and leather vests," Hudson murmured next to me. I looked up at him, expecting him to be watching the bartender, but he wasn't. He was scanning the crowd, on high alert for threats.

I glanced around as well and saw what he was talking about. What I saw wasn't leather biker vests. They were wild west leather vests. Two very different things.

The place was getting more and more packed as we stood there, as though the bouncers had just let a huge wave of people in. Maybe they had. I had no idea how stuff like this worked.

I scooted closer to Dylan, and he didn't seem to miss the movement. His hand curled slightly around my hips instead, and I jolted a little, having forgotten that he was touching me.

"I wanted to chat with you about this woman working here," Dylan's voice was a low boom that seemed to resonate through the music as he nodded in my direction. For the first time, the bartender's eyes moved to me, resting on my face. I looked back, unashamed of who I was or what I looked like.

"She might be a bit too prim and proper for us." She was politely declining. I got it.

"No, that's just the dress I told her to wear." Dylan waved her off, clearly not willing to take no for an answer, at least not yet. "Mind if she gives the cages a try? You have outfits that you let the dancers use in the back, right?"

The woman shrugged, which made her boobs jiggle almost comically. "Sure, go for it. The dancer in cage three should be coming down soon. I'll let her know the new girl is going to take over."

Cages. I hadn't noticed before, but as I followed the direction of the bartender's gaze, I saw that there were cages dotted around the edge of the room with girls dancing in them. They weren't stripping like on the main stage, but they wore outfits that would be considered scandalous by some people.

Dylan turned and spoke over his shoulder as he released his hold on my hips. "Hud, will you take her back to the dressing rooms?"

Hudson's head jerked, and he gave a sharp nod before he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and angled me away from the bar. The two of us wove through the crowd, and Hud ended up moving me in front of him. There were just too many people to walk side by side. They got out of Hudson's way

before they even saw me, even though I was walking slightly in front of him with his hands on my shoulders, guiding me.

We walked past a bouncer and through a doorway at the back of the room. The man just nodded at Hudson as we passed. There were a few different doors beyond, and he went to one of them, knocking on it.

"Coming in," he announced.

Half of me expected to hear shrieks, giggles, and squeals of excitement in response to Hudson bursting into a changing room. All we were met with were women who had seen it all, and probably bared it all, who just nodded at the man as we entered.

"Who's this fresh little thing?" one of the women asked.

"Potential dancer." A man of few words, that was Hudson.

"She tryin' out the cages?"

He nodded before turning to me. "The outfits are over there."

There was a rack along the back wall, sitting between two sets of lockers that had seen better days. The outfits that hung there seemed to be missing most of their material, since it looked like there were just a few scraps of fabric hanging there. I wasn't sure anybody could call them outfits, but I wasn't part of this world.

"I'll wait outside while you get changed." Before I could even respond, Hud was gone.

I picked the first outfit that I could touch, the silver, metallic fabric slipping against my hands like liquid mercury. When I pulled it off the hanger, I must have looked confused because the older woman asked, "Do you know how to put that on, darlin'?"

I smiled politely at her, unsure of what to say other than, "I can probably figure it out."

"If you need help, just holler." She turned and went back to putting some makeup on.

Some of the other women were stealing glances at me as I stripped off my dress, while others overtly stared. They were watching me, evaluating me, deciding if I was worth extending kindness to.

I didn't blame them for it one bit. After all, I didn't even know if I could do something like this, and if I could, would I be able to form friendships with these women? It was all a big question mark right now.

Without wasting any more time, I finished stripping out of my dress and pulled the other one on. There was no way I could wear a bra with this thing,

so that came off as well. I stepped into what I assumed was a skirt and pulled it up. The material barely covered my ass.

When it got to the top, I got confused, though. It was obviously backless, but how did it stay up? I tried a couple of different things before finally figuring out that it had a halter neck and the material just stretched enough to cover my breasts.

"You want some tape, darlin'? Don't want to give him a free show. They got to pay for it if they want to see that." The same older woman gave me a wink and a smile.

"That'd be great, thank you." I returned her smile as genuinely as I could, though I still felt overwhelmed by everything.

All the sensory deprivation from the last few weeks seemed to be taking its toll on my mental state. Everything was too bright, too loud, and too intense, but I just had to push through.

She handed me some sections of tape that I stuck to the sides of my breasts before sticking the material there as well. "Thanks," I said as I headed toward the door.

"You got a nice figure, hon. You could make a lot of money," she said as I walked out.

"That's the idea," I tossed over my shoulder with a smile and a wink, all bravado, of course.

"I'm not sure what to say." Hudson's voice startled me, and I looked at him just in time to see him rake his gaze over my form as he rubbed his lower lip. "I'll take you to the cage."

He didn't give me time to respond before heading out. This time he walked in front, as though he wanted to block me from people's view, but I was sure I was reading too much into it. He was probably just shielding me from the crowd to make it easier to get to the cage I was going to be dancing in.

When we got to the cage, he swung the door open. I climbed up the two little steps that were on the edge before moving into the enclosed space. He swung the door shut behind me, pushing a latch down, and my heart jumped in my chest. I knew I could get to the latch and undo it myself, but just the idea of being closed in somewhere again was unpleasant.

Tentatively, I looked around at the other dancers in the cages, watching their movements for a few moments until I was comfortable enough to start swaying to the beat on my own. One of them gave me a friendly smile and a

nod of encouragement, while the others just ignored me.

The feeling of people watching me was unnerving. It reminded me of the few days before Sampson introduced himself and kidnapped me. I had felt like somebody was watching me then as well, though I obviously had no idea it was Sampson.

I felt on edge. My movements were jerky. My chest tightened as my heart beat an unsteady rhythm in my ribcage, my panic swelling. I focused on the beat of the music, trying to drown the emotions I was feeling until there was nothing left.

It almost worked until somebody grabbed my ankle. With a yelp, I fell, my head cracking against one of the bars at the back.

As I crumpled to the floor of the cage, my foot was pulled out through the bars toward the gentleman in question. "Let me see you up close," he drunkenly slurred.

If it wasn't for the tape holding my dress in place, I would have flashed everybody. As it was, he probably got a good view up my skirt...if you could call what I was wearing a skirt.

I tried to kick him with my free leg, but he just grabbed that one as well, using it to pull me through the bars until I was pressed up against them. If he knew where the door to the cage was, could he take me and make me disappear like Sampson did?

A high pitched whistle went out, and I frantically searched the crowd for any sign of the bouncers that worked there. There was some movement at the back of the crowd, but that wasn't what caught my attention.

The flash of steel winking in the light was what had me holding my breath. At first, I thought it was the man who had grabbed me, and I waited for the pain from him stabbing me. I was wrong.

Hudson stood just behind the man's shoulder with a grin on his face. "You're going to pay for touching her." I heard his words clearly as the music had come to a halt. The knife was at the base of the man's throat, pressing in enough that it probably hurt but didn't draw blood.

I sat frozen in the cage that I was now straddling as everyone stared in this direction. Hudson quickly put the knife away and jerked the man away from the cage by the collar of his shirt.

The man looked as though he was on the edge of tears, and suddenly all the fear I felt subsided. Fear lived in him now, not me, and it was put there by the man with a murderous look on his face standing in front of me.

Hudson shoved the man in the direction of the bouncer who had just parted the crowd. "Take him out back and show him what it means to touch what's ours."

Dylan was there a second later. They stood next to one another as they looked at me, and I could feel tears choking me, but I didn't want to cry in front of everybody. I wasn't sure my body would give me that choice, though. Hudson was the one who came around the back, opening the cage and pulling me out a second later.

"Wait," Dylan said looking at the two of us. "Just stand up there in the cage for a second."

I did as he asked, though I wanted to run, cry, and hide in a corner. Dylan moved through the crowd like a shark cutting through the ocean as he went and stood on the bar, taking his time and making everybody watch in silence. "This woman is mine," he said as he pointed to me. "You see her out on the street, you see her in a club, you see her in a store...you don't touch her. Nobody touches what's mine. Not unless you want to pay with your life. Go and tell all of your little friends, all of your bosses, and all of the other families. I won't let anybody take her from me."

I stared at him with wide eyes, my jaw slightly dropped. The display he made was unexpected and somewhat unreasonable, but at that moment, I didn't care. All I could think about was the fact that he was protecting me once again, and I had no idea why.

He gave me a nod and then looked at Hudson behind me, giving him one as well. I felt Hudson's hands on my back as he turned me toward the door of the cage once more. He hopped down and offered me his hand, which I took. I expected him to walk me back to the dressing rooms.

As soon as I was even partially out of the cage, though, he swept me up into a bridal style hold before he walked me out of the club straight toward the car. There were whispers on the way, people murmuring and looking at me, trying to figure out who I was and why Dylan cared so much...and probably why Hudson cared that much as well.

These men didn't know me, and I didn't know them, but they were willing to protect me. I had to trust in that, at least for now. As soon as Hudson closed me into the back seat of the car, my resolve to not cry broke. Now that I had the privacy of the tinted windows, tears streamed down my face.

Dylan was next to me a moment later, and Hudson slid into the driver's seat. I felt the engine purr to life and the car pull away, but I was barely

aware of any of it.

"Come here, sunshine," Dylan said as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders, pulling me close. He unbuckled my seat belt and pulled me onto his lap, seemingly unhappy with the distance between us. I snuggled into his shoulder, grateful for the comfort as I tried to control my sobs.

It wasn't so much that a stranger had touched me, but it triggered memories that were still too fresh. The ghost of Sampson taking me had come front and center, along with the feeling of his cold, hard grip on my shoulder as he walked me out of the dorm. The memory was quickly followed by the one of being locked in that basement room in the dark where I sang to myself to try and ease the silence. As though those two weren't enough I was drowning in the memory of him taking me to the auction house, of being bound and gagged and treated like nothing more than a sack of potatoes and a hole to fuck.

My whole life, I'd been passed around, given from man to man for one reason or another. I wasn't sure that would ever change, not unless I did something about it. The only thing I could think to do was to try to get away, but I was finding that I didn't mind Dylan or Hudson. In fact, they were some of the nicest men I'd met in my life. If I ran, that would be the same as spitting in their faces, which I wasn't about to do.

All I knew was that in the back of that car, with Dylan's arms wrapped around me and knowing that Hud was in the front seat, was the safest I'd felt since I was a child. I wasn't about to give that up, but that meant I had to come up with some other way to repay them so that I could know I was by their side because they wanted me there, not because of a debt.

EVIE

When I woke the next morning, I was alone, which was both a relief and a disappointment. Something about the way Dylen had put me to bed last night after I'd cried my eyes out on his shoulder made me hope that he'd still be there in the morning.

I got up and took care of my morning needs before showering. As far as I knew, there was no plan for today, so I was free to do as I pleased. My mind raced as images of what happened yesterday filled me, and all they did was leave me with more questions than answers.

The main question was why did I trust these men? What was it about them that blew past my defenses? Yes, they rescued me from the auction and Sean, but was that enough for me to blindly trust them?

I didn't think so, and yet I did, at least to an extent. There was still the fact that I was a pawn, though, a piece in a game Dylan was playing. It was a game that I didn't understand or even know existed until I met Lyric and subsequently Dylan. Even though I was a pawn and I knew he was using me, I also knew I owed him.

Clearly, I wasn't suited for working in the club as a dancer, so I had to find another way to pay Dylan back for rescuing me. Maybe this could be another opportunity for me to convince him to let me go back to school. I mean, I'd already failed all of my classes from last semester by disappearing, but maybe when the new semester began, I could start fresh.

I was sure that if I explained to the dean's office what happened, they would give me some kind of leeway. I pulled on some sweatpants that were

more luxurious than anything I had ever really owned before, and certainly cost more than anything I had ever spent on clothes before. I wouldn't have even spent the amount that the sweatpants cost on an entire outfit, but it wasn't my money that was being spent. I just dealt with it, even though I wanted to scream that we could just go to the grocery store and get necessities there. Or better yet, go to a second-hand store. Dylan and Hudson didn't exactly seem the type to enjoy thrifting, though.

A sports bra with entirely too many straps and a tank top completed my outfit. I couldn't deny that even though these were just athleisure clothes, I still felt comfier and more dressed up than I would have if I was in clothes that I bought myself. Maybe knowing how much they cost had that effect, but thinking about that also made me a little nauseous at the amount of money they had already spent on me.

It was certainly hard to get out of the frugal mindset, especially since I had only been given certain things at certain times while growing up. Then, of course, when I ran away, I was on my own and had nothing to fall back on. Everything then was a matter of balancing my money against my needs.

I made my way downstairs once more, fully expecting Dylan and Hudson to be gone and at work for the day or something. After all, they couldn't just stop their lives because I suddenly fell into them. I figured the kitchen would be the best place to start since I could make myself some breakfast, but I was surprised when I got in there to find them both standing in front of a blender.

They looked like they had just finished some kind of intense workout. Neither of them wore shirts, basketball shorts hung from their hips, and their hairlines were damp with sweat.

It was like standing in front of an all-you-can-eat buffet. My stomach chose that moment to growl, as though I was actually going to eat them.

They both turned and looked at me. Hudson simply raised one eyebrow while Dylan smirked. "Would you like some shake?" he asked.

"Um. I'll pass. Thanks." Dylan gave me a nod of acknowledgement as he poured the thick green liquid into a glass.

It didn't exactly look appetizing. In fact, I wouldn't even call it liquid. It was more like slush. Somehow, I still couldn't move from the spot I found myself in in the doorway. My eyes were too focused on the expanse of skin before me.

When the glass was full, he set it in front of Hud before picking up a second and pouring the rest of the shake in there. He glanced up at me. "Is

there something else you would like?" Dylan asked, raising his eyebrows with a knowing smile.

As my gaze dipped between his face and the waistband of his shorts, I couldn't stop them from flicking over to Hudson either. They were more than just strong. They were lean and muscular. They looked like fighters, the idea of which I found strangely attractive.

With no small amount of effort, I wrenched my gaze away from them and turned it on the fridge. The first time I saw the fridge, I stood slack jawed as I stared at it. Something which I managed not to do this time. Still, I was left in awe of how big it was, especially when there were only a few people that lived in the house. The thing could house enough food to feed an entire restaurant worth of people.

It was like at any moment, Dylan expected hundreds of people to descend on his house and demand food. As far as I had seen, the fridge was always stocked with a variety of beverages and pre-prepared food. All of it seemed to disappear quickly, even though I never saw anybody except Dylan and Hudson eating. I assumed Theo did as well, but he seemed to take his meals separately from me.

At last, I pulled the jug of orange juice out of the fridge and poured myself a glass while Hudson and Dylan whispered between themselves. It wasn't that I wanted to pry into their business or demand that they tell me what was going on, but I was curious by nature. It was part of what made me such a bad fit for the cult. I didn't just accept what I was told, I asked questions about why things were the way they were.

"There's some cereal in the pantry if that's what you're hoping for," Dylan said when I gave them what was probably a quizzical look.

Hudson moved to a tall cabinet and opened it. A whole other set of shelves were inside, filled with different dry food goods. Boxes of cereal that I'd only encountered once I left the cult lined the top shelf, making it look like there should be kids here. As far as I knew, it was only adult males in the house.

A tiger, a bee, and a leprechaun made up most of the varieties. I went with the tiger because it was the first one I tried when I left the cult, so it was nostalgic for me. A bowl and spoon had appeared on the counter behind me when I turned back around, and Hudson handed me the jug of milk from the fridge.

"Don't you guys have work to do or something?" I asked, feeling slightly

awkward.

"The business can run itself for a little while. I'll only get interrupted if it's something urgent." Dylan was so matter-of-fact as he spoke that it left no room for questions as he took a drink from his glass.

I nodded like I understood, but really, I had no idea. Shouldn't he know what was going on with his businesses, or was he more of a hands-off type that just let managers handle things? Was the business he referred to even really a business? I mean, I knew he had the club, but I also knew there was something deeper going on here than owning a strip club.

I may have grown up sheltered, but I wasn't stupid. "I was wondering, since the club was obviously a bad fit for me, if you might consider giving me an installment plan on the debt and letting me go to school first. Then once I get a well-paying job, I can pay you back," I said as I went to sit at the table with my cereal and orange juice.

"That's a long time to ask me to wait, sunshine," Dylan said while Hudson scoffed.

"You think you can find a well-paying job right after college in this economy? You'll be drowning in student loan debt, not to mention the debt that you owe Dylan. Even if you were to get a decent job, you wouldn't be able to pay them both back at the same time." Hudson wasn't afraid of dropping the reality of my situation on me.

My little bubble of hope popped, shattering like fragments of a balloon with all the air that was inside suddenly releasing. I felt the weight of Hudson's words land squarely on my shoulders. Of course I heard talk about how hard it was to get a job in this economy, and apparently finding a decent job right out of college was more than a little challenging. However, I'd also heard there was no way to get a job if you didn't have a college degree, so I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

I didn't know which was better or what to choose or do, so I'd fumbled my way through my high school years and found my way into college. Not just any college, either—the prestigious Welhurst University.

As I was thinking and chewing on a spoonful of sweet, sugary flakes, I realized neither of these men knew that about me. They didn't know I came from such a strange background. They didn't know I went to Welhurst. They didn't even know Sampson was the one who took me. All they knew was that I was desperate and had agreed to do pretty much anything in order to get away from that situation.

I wouldn't change the choice that I made, but realizing how little we knew about each other was strange. We had never talked about how I came to be at the auction, just that I was there. To them, I was a commodity—one that could be used to irritate one of their rivals, which was fine as long as it kept me away from the cult.

"If you won't let me go back to classes, then would you at least let me go back and pick up a few things from my dorm that have sentimental value? I don't have much in this world, so what I do have means a lot."

Hudson cocked his head to one side at my words while Dylan sipped on his smoothie thoughtfully.

"Dylan!" Theo's voice came from the hallway. "Boss, where are you?"

"Kitchen," Hudson called.

Dylan held a finger up to me, telling me silently to wait, and I was fine with that. I wanted to at least have a discussion and not be shot down with no room for recourse.

Theo's bleached hair was the first thing I saw as he came in, his gaze somewhat downcast, but not as much as the first time I had seen him. He hurried over to Dylan. "Boss, I need to talk to you." His tone was frantic, so I expected the three of them to disappear from the room to let me eat my cereal in peace.

Surprisingly, Dylan said, "Just say whatever it is you need to say."

"But what about her?" Theo's head jerked in my direction, though he didn't look at me.

Dylan replied with confidence. "She's fine," he said easily. He seemed to think there was no chance I could betray them or leak information about them. I wouldn't, even if I was given the chance. They had done too much for me to be repaid like that.

Theo was torn, that much was obvious. Whatever it was, he didn't want to say it in front of me.

I ignored the entire thing, pretending to be super absorbed in what was written on the back of the cereal box.

"Someone's dead." Theo's words were so faint I could barely make out the few syllables.

"What? Just say it normally." Dylan swirled his smoothie in the glass before taking another sip.

Hudson's words were clipped with annoyance as he said, "Dude, it's fine."

"Sampson's dead."

My hand dropped, smacking into the bowl, the spoon ringing out against the porcelain as the entire bowl flipped to one side. Milk and flakes went spraying across the kitchen table. "What did you say?" The words sounded like they came from somewhere else as my body pushed up from where I'd been sitting of its own accord.

The three of them looked at me with interest. "Sampson's dead?" Theo repeated, though he sounded unsure now, like my reaction could have changed reality.

"Sampson, as in related to the Sterling family? That Sampson?" I asked, my heart starting to pound in my chest like a racehorse galloping along a track.

Theo glanced nervously at Dylan, who just gave him the tiniest nod. "Yeah, that Sampson."

The room spun. Suddenly, the guys weren't where they were supposed to be and I could see the ceiling instead.

"Shit!" Someone yelled.

I blinked.

When I opened my eyes again, it turned out to have been a very long blink.

The room that surrounded me was one I'd never been to before, and that was about all I knew. Leather furniture creaked under me as I tried to push up into a sitting position only to have my head spin once more.

Defeated, I flopped back down as I tried to make sense of the words I had heard. Sampson was dead. Theo had announced that clearly, and when I made sure that it was the Sampson that I was familiar with, he had confirmed it. The man who kidnapped me was gone.

The door opened and footsteps sounded on the hardwood floor before Dylan appeared in front of me, pressing a cool towel to my forehead. "Oh, you're awake." Hud appeared over his shoulder, as though he needed to verify Dylan's words.

"Do you guys ever get tired of spending time together?" I asked him and Hudson, who was essentially Dylan's shadow. I hadn't meant to ask the question aloud, but I was struggling with my filter. It was something I'd wondered about for a while now. After all, they were constantly around one another.

"That's a weird thing to ask," Hudson grunted, seeming offended by the question as he crossed his arms over his chest and stepped back.

"Are you feeling better?" Dylan asked. "You fainted."

"Yeah, I think I feel better. My head's still a little fuzzy." The pain that I'd been trying to ignore throbbed in response to me acknowledging it.

"We did try to catch you, but you gave your head a pretty good knock on the tile floor in the kitchen."

"That would explain the throbbing pain," I groaned as Dylan helped me sit up.

He offered me a glass of water along with two small pills that had a familiar brand name printed on them for pain relief.

"Is this your office?" I asked, looking around. I'd already noted the large oak desk and the shelves behind it that were filled with books, binders, and all kinds of businessy things that I probably wouldn't understand. It all looked very professional.

"Yeah. This was the closest place with enough space to lay you down." Dylan's tone was cooler than it was the last time we talked. His deep brown eyes were more than a little intense as his gaze bored into my own. "I need you to tell me how you know Sampson."

My instinct was to tell him whatever he wanted to know, but even though my head was throbbing, I knew that these two were businessmen first and foremost. If they wanted something, that meant it had some kind of value. After a long pause, during which neither of them seemed to move even a fraction of an inch, I said, "I'll tell you after you've let me go to Welhurst to pick up a few things."

Dylan mimicked Hudson and crossed his arms over his chest as he stood, taking a step back from the couch I was on.

"You really think you're in a position to negotiate?" Hudson asked, his tone completely void of emotion, which was somehow scarier than him being angry.

"You can't make me tell you anything," I countered, unwilling to back down without a fight. I quickly took the pain meds that they had given me, hoping they would kick in soon and give me some clarity.

"Oh, I'm sure I can find a way." Hudson's words were cold and something in his gaze made me want to shiver. I didn't think he would actually hurt me. Maybe that was naive of me, but I felt safe with the two of them. Safer than I had since I left the cult, and I certainly wasn't when I was in the cult.

"We barely know each other. Why should I tell you something personal like that?"

"How do you expect us to get to know one another if you're not willing to share?" Dylan countered, giving me a small smile.

I knew he was trying to soften for me, trying to show me the man he was last night when he'd comforted me. I just couldn't quite get myself to tell him anything. Not when I had no guarantee that I'd get my things back.

"If you take me to Welhurst to get my things, then I'll tell you. Or you can torture me, but I'm as stubborn as they come." It was amusing to me that my stubbornness had only come out after I left the cult. Before then, I hadn't been allowed the luxury of being stubborn. Sometimes it felt like I was making up for the lack of it, and now, when I dug my heels in, there was nothing that could convince me to do something I didn't want to do.

"Fine. We'll take a road trip to Welhurst, just the three of us. We'll get your things." Road trip? Just how far from Welhurst were we? I thought I was still in Ascendance Bay, but maybe I was wrong. "Once you have what you need, we'll drive back, and on the way, you will tell us how you know Sampson. If you refuse, we'll leave you on the side of the road and keep your things. That's the deal. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it," I said, unable to stop the smile that spread across my face. "After all, we both get what we want. What's wrong with that?"

Dylan grumbled something under his breath, muttering to himself, before he said, "Go and change." He jerked his head to the door before adding, "As long as you're stable enough to do so."

I tentatively pushed up from the couch, standing straight for a second to make sure I had my balance before leaving the room.

Hudson's voice echoed down the hallway as I walked, "I'll make sure she gets upstairs safely."

I wanted to tell them that I was okay, that I wasn't a baby and didn't need a babysitter for that matter. At the same time, it felt like he was showing me he cared somehow. Whether he cared about me as a person or as a product, I wasn't sure yet. I didn't acknowledge Hudson, even though he loomed over me like an evil spirit.

He dogged my steps as I climbed the stairs, following me down the hallway to the doorway of my room. When I opened it and stepped inside, I expected to be able to close it. When I tried to swing it shut, he was there, stepping inside as well. Before I could even scold him and tell him to get out while I changed, he had me pinned up against the door. Both of my hands were above my head, wrapped by one of his.

"Little girl, I need to make something very clear to you," he growled, a brutality to his tone that had never been there before. "Just because you're cute does not mean that I won't do my job. Just because Dylan is curious about you does not mean that I won't do my job. Do you remember what my job is?" He had been leaning closer and closer to me the entire time he talked, until he was practically nose to nose with me.

"You're an enforcer," I whispered.

"Good girl, and what do enforcers do?"

"They make sure that everything gets done that's supposed to." The truth was, I wasn't really sure. I knew he said that he wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. But other than that, I had no clue what his job actually entailed.

"You are a pretty little thing, and I would love to have you tied up in my room, but if I need to spill your blood to get you to talk, I will. The things that I know how to do to the human body are not pleasant, and you will not enjoy them. The next time we ask you to tell us something, do not try to make a deal out of it. Tell us, or else that pretty little face of yours might end up scarred. And that would be the least of your worries."

I knew I was supposed to be scared. He was threatening me, that much was very clear, and yet my body was having a completely different reaction. "Hudson," I whispered his name, and his nostrils flared. "Don't threaten me with a good time."

His mouth curved into a wicked smile as his free hand came up and cupped my cheek for a brief moment before sliding down to hold my chin between his forefinger and thumb. "I could make you scream and beg for mercy."

"And I'm sure I would enjoy every second. Let's be honest, you know nothing about me." Talking while he held my chin was challenging, but I knew I could get my point across. "You don't know my likes or dislikes. Maybe if you did, you could torture me, but I feel like right now, all you'd end up doing is giving me pleasure."

His chest rose and fell rapidly, just like my own. I wanted to run my hands through his hair, to pull on it. The long blondish strands demanded some kind of action. His piercing topaz gaze dipped from my own eyes to my lips, or maybe lower, I wasn't sure. Suddenly, the distance between us was gone, and I was no longer standing on the floor.

The kiss was brutal but brief. His hand had moved from my chin to my throat, circling it and pressing ever so slightly. His hips pinned me to the

door.

I lifted my legs and wrapped them around him, which made him growl in what I hoped was need, one that matched my own. He wrenched himself away, dropping me like a hot potato. I barely got my feet under me in time to not land on my ass.

"That was a mistake. One that will never happen again. Your Dylan's infatuation, not mine. Don't try to manipulate me. You'll just end up paying for it, and it won't be with pleasure."

He shoved me out of the way so hard that I almost tripped and fell. It was only his hand on my shoulder that steadied me enough to not fall on my face, but then he was gone, out of the door and down the hallway faster than I could even wrap my head around what just happened.

EVIE

When they called it a road trip, I expected the drive to be long. It was maybe an hour to the other side of the city tops. For the most part, the drive was quiet. Neither Hudson or Dylan wanted to talk, and the only thing I wanted to discuss was me going into my dorm alone and leaving those two waiting in the car so we didn't draw too much attention.

There was nothing like two grown men in suits that look like they're about to either kill somebody or take over a Fortune 500 company walking around a small, quaint college campus. "If we can park close enough, you can watch me walk all the way to the door. See?" I said as we pulled up and I pointed out which dorm I was going to.

"You'll watch me go into the dorm, and you'll see me come back out. There's no other entrances or exits, except for the fire escapes, which will set off the alarms. This way, we won't draw a bunch of unwanted attention."

To my surprise, it was Hudson who agreed with me. "She does have a point, boss. We don't exactly blend with the crowd."

"I just have to wait until somebody is walking in so I can get in as well. It's not like I was allowed me to keep my key card or anything."

"Fine. We'll give you thirty minutes. If you're not back out in thirty minutes, we're coming in to get you." Dylan's voice was firm and brokered no argument. I knew it was the best deal I was going to get.

"That's fine. That's fine." I repeated hastily before he could change his mind. "Thank you."

There was a girl walking toward where the car was parked who looked

vaguely familiar. There was a big pedestrian pathway that ran through the center of campus. She could really be going anywhere, but if she looked somewhat familiar, there was a good chance that she lived in the same dorm as me. I hopped out of the car and started walking toward the path I expected her to take.

Just as predicted, she descended the few steps to the entry and I hurried to catch up with her. Her keycard beeped. And the green light on the door flashed as she pulled it open. "Could you hold that?" I called from just behind her.

She looked over her shoulder, her brows furrowing and her mouth turning into a thin line. She clearly wasn't comfortable with the idea of holding the door for somebody in a keyed-entry dorm.

"Sorry, I left my key card in my room. It wasn't like I'd been reminding myself all morning not to forget it or anything." I gave her a charming smile, or at least what I hoped was a charming smile. She returned it and continued to hold the door as I stepped inside. "Thank you so much. You're such a lifesaver!"

"Is your roommate home?"

"Yeah, she should be. I think she's asleep though, which is probably why she wasn't answering the phone," I said, lying through my teeth. I felt a little bad, but at the same time, I didn't have any other choice.

The scariest part was that I didn't actually know what I was going to do if Lyric wasn't in the dorm. I mean, just like there was no way for me to get into the building, there was no way for me to get into the room either. If she wasn't there, maybe I could talk to the floor RA and see if she could get me in somehow. That would probably mean a long conversation explaining my absence and everything like that, which I didn't particularly want to get into.

I boarded the elevator with the girl and pressed the button for the fifth floor. The girl pressed the button for the second floor. "I didn't think there were girls on the second floor," I mumbled, not really meaning to say it aloud.

She heard me anyway and laughed and before saying, "I'm visiting my boyfriend first."

"Gotcha. Have fun!" I winked at her as the elevator slowly eased to a stop and she got off, which made me sigh with relief.

I didn't have to fake it anymore. I could just be the anxious ball of nerves that I was. Almost immediately, I started chewing on my fingernails. It

wasn't the greatest habit, but it was something I picked up when Sampson kept me in the basement. It wasn't like I had anything else to do.

The smell of the elevator was familiar and comforting, even if it was a little ripe thanks to what I was sure was a week of partying or something like that. Finally, the elevator opened on my floor and I headed out, glancing at the closed door of the RA's room and hoping that nobody was inside.

If I could make it into the room with nobody else seeing me, hopefully I'd be able to talk to Lyric and tell her what was going on. I was both excited and terrified by the prospect of seeing my old roommate. Did she know Sampson was dead, and if so, was she upset about it? I wasn't sure how I'd handle it if she really thought of a man like that as family.

The odd thing was that I never once felt compelled to try and run away from Dylan and Hudson. Out of everything that had happened, meeting them felt almost natural. Yes, I owed them a debt, and yes, they were using me as a chess piece in a game that I didn't understand or expect to be a part of. That being said, they also took care of me, and while I did want to come back to school, college didn't feel like my only option anymore.

The last thing I expected when I got to our room was to see the door slightly ajar.

Lyric was too cautious for that.

I knocked lightly before pushing it open further only to find the entire room stripped bare. My breath rushed from my lungs as I took in the scene before me. Lyric was gone? Dread tore through me at the thought of what might have happened to bring about this situation.

The sheets were off the beds, leaving just the vinyl blue mattresses and the wood bed frames that were underneath. The desk chairs were still there, but everything else was gone.

It looked like we had just picked up and left and Welhurst staff were waiting on new students to move in. Honestly, something like this hadn't even crossed my mind as a possibility.

What happened to all of my things? What happened to Lyric? Did she take my stuff when she left? I had so many questions and not a single place to find any answers.

Even though someone had stripped the room bare, I knew there was one thing they wouldn't have touched, and that was the ceiling tiles. It was actually an idea I'd gotten from Lyric.

I'd noticed a couple times that one of the ceiling tiles above her bed was

ajar just a little, and it was enough to make me think she might have been hiding something up there. I never looked at what it was because I respected her privacy. I had some things that were too precious to risk as well, so I copied her.

I pulled the desk chair over to the edge of the bed and lifted it, placing it on top of the mattress before climbing up to it. I braced it against the wall and climbed on top of it, hoping like hell it wouldn't fall or that the bed wouldn't move. Both were a possibility at this point, given how there was nothing else in the room to weigh things down or block them from sliding across the tile floor.

After taking a steadying breath, I popped my hands up over my head, my fingertips brushing against the tile. The styrofoam lifted easily, and I scooted it toward the center of the room. I stretched up onto my tiptoes, which was the most dangerous part of this whole thing, and reached my hand along the wall.

Glossy, slick photo paper slid under my fingers just before the single metal chain did. I grabbed onto both, pulling them free from their hiding spot before reaching the other direction, where I grabbed the other photo I had hidden.

It might have seemed silly, but I figured if somebody found one, they might not look for the other, so I had spread them out. Having retrieved what I needed, I put the ceiling tile back in place and gingerly climbed down off the chair, then off the bed. It only took a moment to put everything back where I had found it and wipe my dirty footprints off the mattress cover. That dark blue really showed everything.

I plopped down on the edge of the bed and looked at the three objects in my hand, two photos and a necklace. That was all I had taken with me when I ran from the cult. That and the clothes on my back, but I burned those the second I could.

The necklace was one of my mother's. It was one of the things that she had given up, hidden away. Like all of the women in the cult did—every piece of jewelry, everything that they ever owned. It all belonged to the Light Father. Any pictures that were taken belonged to him as well.

Photos were taken on two occasions, somebody's wedding day and when a girl got her first period. One picture was of my mother and father on their wedding day. They weren't in the cult at that point, but they gave the photo to him just the same. The second photo was of my mother and me.

I was thirteen at the time and terrified of everything. I'd never had my picture taken before. There were no baby photos of me. There were no cute moments growing up that had been captured like everybody else. This was the one and only photo of my life until I reached the age of sixteen.

The other photos, the very first photos that were taken outside of the cult, were police photos after I ran away. The difference in my mother between the two photos was astounding, especially given it had only been fifteen years or so.

Looking at the photo of the two of them and the one of my mother and me, I suddenly realized that I looked nothing like either of my parents. I knew that genetics were weird, but surely I should be able to see some resemblance to the people who were responsible for my existence.

They had created me and raised me, but they were also the people who destroyed me. I wasn't sure why I was so set on keeping these photos and the necklace. It wasn't like I had a burning desire to remember that part of my life.

Honestly, if I could have just popped into existence at the age of eighteen, that would have been great. No foster family, no high school annoyances, no cult. No expectations to be the Light Father's bride or to become the Light Mother. Just me being a normal girl going off to college.

I wasn't sure how long I sat there staring at the photos or turning the pendant in my fingers, but the sound of someone laughing snapped me out of the trance I had fallen into. I slipped the chain around my neck, fastening it quickly before shoving the photos in my pocket. I tucked the pendant into the t-shirt I was wearing, so it wasn't immediately obvious that I was wearing a necklace unless you looked closely.

When the laughter turned into voices coming down the hallway, I wasn't sure whether to stay in the room or to leave and talk to them. I needed to find out what happened to Lyric, but I had no idea how to do so.

The only thing I could think of was to ask other people in the dorm, but as far as I knew, it wasn't like Lyric and I made friends with anybody outside of each other. She had immediately joined the sorority, and I'd had no interest in anything except my studies.

I was so determined to get my grades up, to keep my scholarship, to get a good job, and to have a good life, that I had pushed everything else to the side. The only exception I had made was Cliff.

Lyric had showed me who he really was, and when we walked in on him

raping a girl during a frat party, I knew that I couldn't even trust myself to make decisions about boys. Not yet, anyway, so I resolved to just focus on my studies. Life had other ideas, of course, since Sampson came knocking and everything I focused on and planned went out the window.

Sometimes it felt like fate or the universe was just laughing at me. Every time I thought something was going well, it got flipped on its head and life just got worse. I rushed out of the room once I realized the voices and laughter had passed, and that the people were heading toward the elevator, their voices drifting.

"Excuse me," I called out. "Do you live on this floor?"

The two girls turned and looked at me. "Yeah, we do. Why?" The one who spoke popped one of her hands on her hip and seemed to be ready for me to challenge her or something.

"Do you know what happened to the girls that lived in this room?" I jerked my head toward the room I had just come out of. They glanced at each other, as though deciding whether or not to share a big secret.

"They went missing."

"Like together?" I asked, playing dumb.

"Nobody knows," the other girl said, sounding sorry that she couldn't give me more answers. "Nobody saw them for a while, and a smell started coming from the room. So the RA investigated, and there was some spilled food and drinks and stuff like that on the floor. Apparently, there was no sign that anybody had been in the room for a long time. And then one day, a week or so later, there were movers here packing everything up and taking it away."

"Movers?" I asked as confusion filled me. "Like somebody came and just took all of their stuff?"

They both shrugged. "That's all we know," the defensive one said.

"Thanks," I called as they turned back around, heading out once more.

I stood staring at the doorway for a little while, unsure how to leave. Part of me wanted to stay, half expecting Lyric to suddenly show up as though she knew I'd be there. The other part of me wanted to run as far away as I could.

If we had both gone missing, it sounded like Sampson took her as well. Based on what he said he was going to do to her, I knew she wouldn't be in any state to try to find me. My only hope was that she had found freedom somehow, either in his death or her own before he made her life hell.

A lot of people didn't understand that death could mean freedom. Those people had never been in a situation where ceasing to exist felt like the only

option when the world was closing in on you, pressing down on you like gravity was twice as strong but only on you. In those situations, there was nowhere for you to run, no one for you to turn to. You could endure, but there was no guarantee that your hell would ever be over.

Sometimes, I wondered if that was what happened to the last Light Mother. Had she taken her own life somehow? The other members of the cult all said the same thing, that she died in childbirth and that the child didn't make it either, but nobody knew if that was actually the truth since we never saw the body. Well, I should say that the women didn't know if it was the truth since we were never told anything and the men were close-lipped.

I shook myself. I couldn't dwell on these thoughts here and now. Not if I wanted to keep moving forward. With a sigh, I turned away and headed back out of the dorm.

The sunlight cascaded across my face as I walked out into the open air. Heading toward the car that Dylan and Hudson were still sitting in, I gave them a small wave. I knew that the drive home wouldn't be fun.

They had fulfilled their part of the deal, and now it was my turn to fulfill mine...in the form of answers to the questions they had asked before. They had likely come up with more while they were sitting there waiting for me too. They were all questions I didn't even want to think about, let alone come up with a response to. I'd have to if I wanted to survive.

EVIE

When I got back to the car, I faced a barrage of questions, mainly about the fact that I appeared to be empty handed. I took the photos out of my back pocket and flapped them around in the air a couple times.

"These are what I wanted," I said before tucking them back in my pocket and putting my seat belt on.

"Surprised you didn't run when you had the chance," Hudson said, the snark in his tone evident.

"First off, I told you there were no other entrances or exits to that building. At least not that you can open without triggering a fire alarm, which I wasn't about to do. Secondly, being with you guys isn't so bad. I mean, clearly you're villains, but you're definitely not the worst I've encountered."

"Villains, huh?" Dylan said with a smirk. "And what makes you think that we're villains?"

Hudson pulled out of the parking lot, pulling onto the road to go back to Dylan's mansion. "Well, you appear to be loaded, but you don't appear to have a job that you go to. Plus, you were at a fucking human auction. Good people don't go to those. Also, Hudson's crazy, and most sane people don't employ crazy people to be their bodyguards."

A bark of a laugh escaped Dylan.

"Well, then they're just missing out, aren't they?" Hudson said, sounding huffy. "I'm very good at what I do. Right, boss?"

Dylan was still chuckling silently to himself. "Right," he said when he finally calmed himself down. "Now, on to more important things. You got

your end of the deal. Now it's our turn. How do you know Sampson?"

I took a deep breath and tried to think about everything as though I was relaying a story instead of the events of my life. "He was the person who kidnapped me. He took me from that dorm room I was just in and me for weeks before selling me at the auction. Well, not even at the auction itself. Apparently, he sold me before the auction even took place."

"That's it? No other run-ins with him? Nothing to link you to him. He just randomly showed up at your dorm room and kidnapped you?" Dylan glanced at me with an eyebrow raised.

"He took me because he wanted to hurt my roommate and he knew that I could be used as leverage."

When I didn't say anything further, Dylan sighed heavily. "And who was your roommate?"

"Lyric Sterling." I didn't miss the way their gazes snapped to one another.

Hudson and Dylan clearly knew the name, which both surprised me and didn't. The Sterling family was, after all, very wealthy. I had known that for a long time, and based on what Lyric said, her dad's company was not fully legit. Based on the fact that Sampson worked for them and was planning on torturing Lyric, it was clear that there was a lot that I didn't know or understand about their family dynamics.

All I knew was that they were not normal. Not that I really had a great concept of what normal family dynamics were, but still, this was so far off base that it was bizarre.

"Lyric Sterling was your roommate in college, and Sampson, her father's bodyguard, kidnapped you to have leverage over her. Is that right?" Dylan said slowly.

"I think so. I mean, this is all just based on what Sampson ranted about when he came to visit me in the basement room he kept me locked up in."

"But Sampson never tortured you or raped you?"

"Not really. He wasn't particularly interested in any of that. The only time he assaulted me was the day of the auction. If I had to guess, I would say that Lyric had turned away from him and maybe from the family in general, and he didn't like that. He kept saying that she was going to be his wife and he was going to start a new generation of mobsters, and this, and that, and the other. From what I could tell, he planned to just chain Lyric up and have her pop out kids."

"God, that man is disgusting," Dylan muttered.

"It's a good thing he's dead," Hudson added. I glanced at him and could see the white-knuckled grip he had on the steering wheel.

"Can I ask how you know he's dead? Like, how do you know for sure?" It occurred to me that I probably should have asked this question before we went to Welhurst, but it was too late now.

Dylan hesitated for a moment before he said, "Apparently, a few important people in our line of work received a text message with a location. When it was investigated, his body was found there along with a message to leave Lyric alone."

Morbid curiosity had a hold of me, and I couldn't let the topic go. "Was he just executed?"

"No, he was tortured." Dylan's words were clipped, as though he wanted that to be the end of the conversation. I wasn't ready to stop talking about it.

"Tortured how?"

Hudson's eyes flicked on mine in the rearview mirror. "Well, aren't you a bloodthirsty little thing?"

Dylan turned toward me in his seat. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't."

"He was beaten, obviously. He'd had both ears cut off, his fingers, toes, and nose were broken, teeth were missing from his mouth but found on the ground around him, and the skin on the soles of his feet and the palms of his hands had been removed. There were also multiple lacerations all over his body and finally, strangulation marks on his neck. There was probably a lot of internal damage that couldn't be seen as well."

"He deserved worse," I said quietly. Inside, I couldn't help but wonder if Lyric did it herself, not that I said that aloud. "Does anybody know what happened to Lyric?" I asked eventually, after the two of them had been silent for a long time.

"What do you mean? What happened to Lyric?" Concern laced Dylan's voice.

"According to some people in the dorm, Lyric and I both went missing. Then one day, a little while later, somebody showed up with a moving truck and cleared out the room."

"If they cleared out the room. How did you find your shit?" Hudson asked, like he was trying to catch me in a lie.

"I had hidden it in the ceiling tiles." He glanced at me in the rearview mirror again, his eyebrows raised, seemingly having not expected me to be

that cunning.

"Let's ask Theo when we get home," Dylan said as he pulled out his phone. He spent the rest of the drive texting back and forth with someone.

Part of me wondered who it was. What was he so busy talking about? Still, it was none of my business. We weren't really anything to each other except a debtor and lender.

I wondered what would happen once I paid my debt off. Would he just let me walk away? That seemed unlikely, given the fact that I knew quite a bit about them already. Plus, he made that declaration in the club about me belonging to him...that nobody should mess with me. Was that just because he saw me as his property?

Sitting in silence made my thoughts run wild. I hated it, but I couldn't exactly ramble on to these two. So I just turned things over and over again in my mind. The whole time, Lyric's disappearance sat front and center. Where was she? Was she even alive? I hoped so. I hated the idea of her tortured soul being snuffed out because of a delusional man.

EVIE

When we got back to the house, we walked straight through to Dylan's office. He said he had texted Theo to meet us there. I wasn't sure how asking Theo for help was going to go, but apparently he was the best person to help us figure out what happened to Lyric.

I hadn't expected Theo to be waiting for us already, and based on the way his face shuttered as soon as he saw me, he clearly hadn't expected me to come with Dylan and Hudson either. For just a second, he had looked open and friendly, but a scowl now twisted his brow and mouth, making it clear that I was not welcome or considered a friend by him.

Dylan moved to sit behind the desk while Hudson leaned against the wall. Theo didn't move from his chair, so I took the one that was still empty, hoping that was okay. When nobody corrected me, I stayed where I was.

Theo's head was bowed, as though he was trying to hide his face from me, which was frustrating. I felt like if I could just catch his eye and give him a smile then it would help break down this awkward wall that existed between us. His bleached hair with the dark roots was the only thing I could really see. The pale white strands seemed to dance in an invisible wind until I realized he was sitting under an air conditioning vent.

"What do you need?" Four words said as quickly as possible as he glanced at Dylan.

"We need you to find out where somebody is, if they're still alive, that kind of thing. Just a current status update. As much as you can find out."

"Okay. What information do you have for me to go off?"

Dylan nodded at me.

I breathed slowly to steady myself before I said, "Her name is Lyric Sterling."

Theo's head snapped up as he looked at Dylan. His gaze slid to Hudson and then back to Dylan. "Seriously? You want me to look up a Sterling? You think that won't raise flags?"

"I doubt it will, but if it does, I don't care. I want to know where she is and what her current status is."

"It's a waste of time. If she's a Sterling and she doesn't want to be found, then she won't be found. I have better things to do."

"This wasn't a request," Dylan said, a hint of annoyance in his voice.

"Are you being blinded by pussy right now? You don't usually make stupid decisions. Tracking down a Sterling isn't something we should be doing."

"The fuck did you just say to me?" Dylan's voice went deathly quiet.

I glanced at Theo to see that he had visibly paled, which was impressive given how pale he was to begin with. Hudson pushed away from the wall, clearly ready for whatever was about to happen. I wasn't sure whether to intervene or back Dylan up.

Dylan slowly stood from his chair and spread both hands wide on the desk, leaning over it like it wasn't even there. "You might have been in serious trouble if this wasn't separating us." He said it as if the piece of wood was the only thing holding him back and keeping him even remotely calm. "Since when do you talk back?" He practically spat each word at Theo, who visibly recoiled.

"I'm just saying, it seems like you've been making some rash decisions recently," Theo mumbled. I thought he would be smart and stop there, but in a spiteful tone, he added, "Ever since she brought her home."

"You think one little girl could change me? That she could dictate what I do, how I run my business?" The absolute disgust in Dylan's voice sent a shiver down my spine.

"No, I'm sorry," Theo relented, holding his hands up while curling in on himself slightly, making himself small in front of a predator. It was a reaction I understood all too well. "I'm just worried. She shouldn't be here. She's not like us."

The way he said it made me tilt my head. It was as though he knew more about me than he was letting on.

"Do what I asked and stay out of my sight for the next twenty-four hours." Dylan spun, facing the wall where he grabbed a glass decanter and poured himself a drink.

"Text me the information you have about her," Theo snapped at me.

"With what phone?" I asked sweetly, hiding my annoyance at this man since he was apparently the only one we could ask to find Lyric.

"Fine. Find me later. Give me her information." Theo pushed up from the chair and stalked out, his gangly frame making him look like he was lurching slightly, as though he wanted to break into a run but knew that was a bad idea.

Hudson seemed like the type of guy that if you ran in front of him, he would chase you down just to find out why you were running. With Theo gone, Dylan turned back around. He had already finished one glass and poured himself a second. "You're starting to become a lot of trouble for me." He watched me over the rim of the glass as he took another swig.

"I'm sorry." I didn't know what else to say other than to apologize. I didn't think I had asked any giant favors outside of the original one. He was the one who wanted to keep me around to pay off this debt that I owed him. If he just let it go, then I could leave and we could all move on with our lives.

"What will you do to pay me back for Lyric? Finding out information about her?"

"What do you want?" I asked.

Dylan's eyes sparked. If he just wanted sex, that was fine. I had no problem giving it to him. I knew it would be good, and it wasn't like it would be the first time we had been intimate with each other, even if we hadn't actually done the deed yet. "I want you to suck Hudson off right here, right now."

"What?" Hudson demanded as my mouth dropped open.

Since the demand was so unexpected, I found myself unable to form any kind of response. From the little I knew about him, Dylan was possessive, and yet he wanted to see me with another man. It was more than a little confusing. "I want to watch you give him head."

"Why me?" Hudson asked.

I turned and raised an eyebrow at him.

"You know I don't like this," Hudson replied, not looking at me, seeming to get more and more irritated by the idea by the second.

"You've been doing good work. Let me reward you." His words were

cold, calculated, and made me want to slap him.

"So am I just your whore? If I do this, will you expect me to spread my legs for anyone you order me to? That's not something I ever agreed to."

"I believe you said you would do anything."

My words were coming back to bite me. He was right. I would do anything to stay out of the cult. I just never thought somebody would put me in this position again.

Dylan drained his glass and poured himself a third. "Hudson. Come and sit down." Hudson reluctantly took a step forward, seeming to fight himself with every step he had to take toward the chair. "Evie, I want you in your bra and panties right now. Give him something to look at."

I didn't like how this was going, but I stripped anyway. I was in one of the matching sets that Hudson had picked out for me, and his eyes gobbled me up when he saw that sending a shiver of anticipation and need through me. It wasn't as though Hudson wasn't familiar with my body.

"Get to work." Dylan's voice was a cold slap against my skin, like somebody had thrown a bucket of water over me.

I dropped to my knees between Hudson's legs and opened the fly of his jeans. Surprisingly, he was already hard. I pushed his shirt up, undoing some of the bottom buttons so I could spread it wide across his lower abdomen, revealing G.I. Joe lines and abs of steel he had been hiding from me.

I'd seen him without his shirt before, so I had known his athletic build was there, but seeing it up close like this was different. The man was more than a little sculpted. He lifted his hips and shifted his pants down along with his boxers, his cock springing free of its confines.

The thick length of him stood tall and proud. He looked like he'd feel amazing inside me.

"Do I get to control this, or are you controlling it?" Hudson asked.

At first I thought he was talking to me, but Dylan was right behind me as he said, "You control."

For the first time, a smile curled Hudson's lips. "I'm sorry, my vicious little ball of sunshine, but you probably won't enjoy this."

I gulped as I stared at his cock, his words ringing in my ears. I'd enjoy it if I was riding it.

I hadn't thought I'd spoken aloud, but they both chuckled.

"Maybe next time," Dylan murmured from behind me.

All preamble aside, I finally took him in my mouth. The salty taste at the

tip of his cock let me know that he was more than a little into this.

I swirled my tongue around him and took more and more of him into my mouth before I started bobbing up and down, sucking and licking as I went. With one of my hands, I cupped his balls, massaging lightly.

He groaned and thrust up, matching the rhythm I'd set. When I peeked up at him, I found him looking down at me, watching me with an intensity I hadn't expected.

The way he filled my mouth was oddly satisfying, but I wanted to do more, feel more. As though he'd heard my request, I felt Dylan position himself directly behind me.

"Spread your legs," Dylan's voice was rough and rocky as he made his demand.

I wiggled my ass at him as I moved my knees further apart, still sucking on Hud's cock like it was a lifeline. When I started to use my hand as well, to cover the part of him I wasn't able to get in my mouth with every stroke, he pulled it away and his hand went to my hair.

Hud's fingers wove through the hair at the base of my head until he could tug on it. When he used it to pull me off his dick, I was surprised. "I'm going to take over now. If you need me to stop, tap me twice on the thigh. Okay?"

"Okay," I replied as anxiety sang through me.

He could clearly tell that he was making me nervous because he asked, "Do you trust me, sunshine?"

"Yes." It was the truth. I did.

"Good, then go and lay on Dylan's desk with your head hanging off the edge here," he said, pointing to a specific area. Dylan backed off and stood, offering me a hand to help me climb to my feet. The whole time he watched with hungry eyes as I pushed up onto his desk.

"Stop," Dylan commanded. I froze mid-movement, which left me on all fours on his desk. When he seemed to realize the position I was in, he stepped forward and grasped one of my breasts, pinching the nipple slightly and making me gasp.

"You have fucking gorgeous tits, did you know that?" Dylan murmured as he took the other one in his other hand.

The more he pinched and rolled my nipples, the harder they became. The sensations all just made me want attention elsewhere on my body. By the time I was panting from holding myself still, Dylan and Hud were both standing there watching me.

"Take your bra and panties off." I wasn't about to object to Dylan's command when it might get me exactly what I wanted, which was one of them inside of me.

"I'm assuming I can move again?" I teased.

Dylan grinned down at me. "Smart ass. You'll pay for that later. To answer your question, yes, you can move again."

Without wasting another second, I whipped my bra off and slid my panties down my thighs until I could kick them off. Once that was done, I positioned myself as Hud requested and saw that Dylan had moved to the opposite side of the desk as Hudson.

"Good girl," he said with a small grin. "Two taps on my thigh, remember."

I nodded and eagerly opened my mouth. He slid into me, the different angle feeling strange at first. At first, he didn't go any deeper than I'd been taking him. As I relaxed more, he pushed further into my mouth, hitting the back of my throat and going past that until his cock was the only thing I knew.

Hud's hand cupped the back of my head and started moving me to meet his cock as he throat fucked me. My hands rested lightly on his thighs, ready to tap out if it became too much, but though it was a little uncomfortable so far, I didn't mind it.

Dylan slid his hands down my thighs, spreading my legs wide in the process. When his fingers found my entrance, he didn't wait or try to warm me up. He just pushed one into me. If I hadn't been so wet already, it would have been awkward.

"She's dripping wet for us," he growled from between my legs. "Are you going to get your juices all over my desk, sunshine? Every time I have to work, I'll smell that tight little pussy of yours and think about what I did to it today."

My body shook in response to his words. I seemingly had no control over any of what they were doing to me, but the truth was two light taps would make them both back off. I didn't want that, though. I wanted more.

The angle of Hud's entrance changed, and I gagged slightly. He backed off for a moment before it happened again. I wasn't sure if it was on purpose or not, but if it kept happening, I'd tap out.

Dylan's fingers were distracting me too much to really worry about it. He slid another one into me, for three total at that point, while he played with my

clit with the thumb of his other hand. The movements he made were all methodical, all pushing me toward an orgasm.

I didn't even realize I was whining around Hud's cock until he pulled it completely out of my mouth and the sound came spilling out of me. "Please, make me come, Dylan," I panted.

"Get Hud off first, then I'll let you come."

I reached for Hud's hips and pulled him close, sucking his cock into my mouth once more and going to town. Based on how he'd been moving my head I had a pretty good idea of the pace and depth he liked, so I started doing that.

He wrapped a hand around my neck, and I could feel my throat expanding every time I took him deep enough. "Fuck, sunshine," Hudson groaned.

I picked up the pace, taking him as deep as I could even if it made me gag a bit sometimes, all in pursuit of my own pleasure. There was no reason to be delicate or hold back, Hud obviously liked it a little rough and sloppy, so that's what I gave him.

The more into it I got, the more he wanted, "Yes, Evie, make me come down that pretty throat. Swallow it all for me." He was thrusting as hard as he would if we were actually having sex, and if he hadn't held back the little that he was, he would have been smacking into my face.

Dylan was still playing with me and keeping me just on the edge of my orgasm, which made me ever more desperate to make Hud come so I could as well.

The more I started moaning and whining around Hud's cock, the more the two of them worked me to the point that I felt sure Hud was holding back on purpose. His cock was throbbing in my throat as though it ached for release.

I had no idea who it was, but someone pinched my nipples hard at the same time, which startled me and made me scream around Hud. I don't know whether it was the vibrations or the sound that sent him over the edge, but suddenly he pulsed in my mouth and pressed tightly against my face as he found his own pleasure.

There was no choice but to swallow, so I did. When he finally released me, I took a great breath of air, just in time for Dylan to push me over the edge into my own orgasm.

My body bucked, and the noises that left my mouth barely seemed human in my own ears. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me as my body

clenched and released, pulsing with pleasure.

"Fuck, Evie. That was the sexiest thing I've ever seen," Dylan growled.

"Then maybe you should fuck me so you can see it again," I replied, though my voice was hoarse.

"Next time I'll make you come on my cock, I promise. For now, I'm just going to make you come on my tongue."

A laugh erupted from me. "I don't know if that's possible with how intense that orgasm was."

"Challenge accepted," Hud growled. "This time I want to see her face when she comes." Hud lazily stroked a hand up and down his wet cock.

"Fine, flip over." Dylan's command was much harder for me to follow this time around since my body didn't want to move.

"Aren't you going to be a good girl for us, sunshine? I'm sure Dylan would love to have you suck his cock as well," Hud growled next to my ear.

I lifted my head and looked at Dylan, raw need met my gaze, and I knew he was barely holding himself back. Why he didn't want to just fuck me I didn't know, but I wasn't about to push him.

If he wanted a blow job, I wasn't going to be the one to deny him. I didn't just roll over, I did a full one-eighty. "I want to taste you, Dylan. Let me?"

He groaned at my words, and his hands went to his belt. My gaze was so glued to him as he undid his pants that it might have made Hud a little jealous, since he chose that moment to smack my ass.

I yelped in surprise, but he was already soothing the sting by rubbing the area he'd just smacked. His hands went from rubbing my ass to spreading my legs.

When I glanced up at Dylan, I saw that he was watching what Hud was doing with interest. I pushed my hips up, wiggling my butt in the air.

"You really are beautiful, Evie." Dylan's voice was soft for a moment before he added, "I want you on your knees in front of me, with my cock all the way down your throat, while Hud tastes that sweet pussy of yours."

I was so drunk on pleasure that I didn't care what position he put me in so long as I kept feeling the way I was in that moment. With no small amount of effort, I wiggled my way off of the desk and onto the floor as Hud came around the desk to Dylan's side.

By the time I was where Dylan told me to be, his pants were undone and his cock was ready and waiting for me. He wasn't as long as Hud, but he was wider, and to top it off, he had piercings. Plural. I had no idea what it was

called, but silver bars lined the underside of his cock. Suddenly, the idea of giving him head was intimidating.

Hud's hands grabbed my ass as he positioned himself under me. "Sit on my face, sweetheart."

"I'll suffocate you!" I protested.

He grinned up at me from where he was laying on the floor. "If that's how I'm meant to go out, then I'll die a happy man."

I reached out and took Dylan's cock in my hand, feeling the piercings. The metal was slightly cooler than the skin around it. Just touching his cock had Dylan's eyes rolling in the back of his head.

As I leaned forward, he seemed to sense my trepidation and said, "Don't rush, and if it feels uncomfortable, stop. The last thing I want is for these to hurt you. They are supposed to be for pleasure after all."

"Also sit on my fucking face and stop teasing me with that pussy that's just out of reach," Hud grumbled before physically pulling me down until I was sure I was smothering him. When I tried to move, he held me there. Once his tongue started flicking against my clit, I stopped caring as much. He was a big boy, he could move me if he needed to.

I leaned forward as much as I could and pulled Dylan's dick down so I could wrap my mouth around the head of his cock. Each inch I took into my mouth was an adventure. I'd never been with someone who was pierced before, and it seemed to make him more sensitive.

Each swirl of my tongue had him groaning and rocking his hips upward, as though he couldn't help but move. His breath was coming in sharp pants as I began to move up and down, tracing my tongue along each of the barbells that went through the underside of his shaft.

Hud thrust two fingers into me, filling me and making me whimper with need around Dylan's manhood, which only made Dylan moan with pleasure. Without worrying about it, I started riding Hud's fingers and tongue, chasing my climax once more as I greedily sucked on Dylan's cock.

I was so lost in the sensations that I didn't even notice Dylan's hands landing on my head until he pushed me further down on his cock, the barbells sliding against my tongue as I swallowed him down. "Fuck, Evie. Your mouth is incredible."

Hud growled with agreement under me, and the vibrations pushed me over an edge I didn't even realize I'd been near as pleasure pounded through my veins. Dylan fucked my mouth hard for a few strokes before finding his

own release, spilling himself in my mouth as my body quivered and shook.

The three of us were spent, and though Hud was still lazily licking me like he was trying to get every last drop he could from me, I knew I wouldn't be able to handle a third orgasm. If they gave it to me, I'd probably just pass out or something.

I kind of rolled off Hud and leaned against one of Dylan's legs as I tried to catch my breath. The experience of being with the two of them was unlike anything else, and I found myself hoping it wasn't a one time thing.

Dylan's hand found the top of my head and patted it almost drunkenly. "The next time we do that, I'm going to be balls deep inside your pussy when I come. Understand, sunshine?"

"Can't wait," I replied with a grin as I tilted my head to look up at him.

Hud turned on his side and pushed up on one elbow. "Same, though I still didn't see your face when you came. Maybe I should go for another round just so I can see your forehead wrinkle as you lose control."

I shook my head. "I can't take it."

"We need to work up to that," Dylan agreed. "She's still recovering from everything after all." The words were an uncomfortable reminder of everything I'd succeeded in blocking from my mind for the last however long they'd been pleasuring me.

"I know some fun ways to build up your stamina," Hud said with a growl as he nipped at my thigh. He seemed to sense that Dylan's words had shifted my mood.

A smile broke out across my face. "I bet you do. For right now though, I'm going to go shower."

"You can walk?" Dylan asked, sounding surprised.

"We're about to find out," I answered as I slowly pushed to my feet. My legs shook, and my whole body seemed to think I was crazy for moving, but I needed air and I needed to be clean. I didn't want to admit that Dylan's words had altered my mood completely.

Everything I'd known was gone.

Again.

This time, I thought I might have found myself in a better situation, but I couldn't be sure yet. After the reminder, I knew I needed to get back on the right path though, eating, working out, and regaining my strength and stamina. After all, who knew when I would need it next?

EVIE

I made my way back to my room on shaky legs, having not expected any of what just happened. When I got there, I shut the door and leaned against it.

Ever since I found out I was going to be the Light Mother, I knew my life wasn't going to be an easy one. This wasn't what I'd had in mind, though. Never in my wildest dreams would I have predicted my current situation.

It took a while before I had the strength to push to my feet once more. My body was still reeling from what just happened. I walked through to the ensuite bathroom and took a shower, rinsing off all the sweat and dirt from the day and its events.

I wandered around dripping dry before going over to the dresser that held most of my clothes. When I opened the top drawer intending to get some underwear and a bra, I hesitated. I could have sworn I left my underwear on the left side of the drawer, but it was on the right now.

It was a small enough change that I couldn't be sure of it. Was I just being forgetful? Maybe the maids had tried to straighten up for me or something. I'd only seen one of them, but I'd heard multiple female voices in the house. Not that that necessarily meant they were maids.

Still, something about the drawer and the way the contents were situated made me uneasy. As I moved around the room and got dressed, it seemed like there were other things that weren't quite where I left them either. The hairbrush that I bought was on the opposite side of the table, and the robe I'd used was inside out, which was definitely not how I left it.

I didn't think it was enough to talk to Dylan about, but it was definitely

strange. I had never lived in a house that had people clean for you before. Maybe this was just to be expected? I was too inexperienced to know either way. It made me want to get out of the room, as though it wasn't mine anymore and I was intruding on someone else's space.

The idea that the room was mine wasn't a good one to have anyway, so I reminded myself that it wasn't. I was just staying there for the time being. I threw on another pair of leggings and a t-shirt with a sports bra underneath. Nothing fancy, but enough that I felt comfortable walking around the house.

For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to just stay in my room. I knew I was there to repay a debt, to be used as a pawn, but I also felt safe with these guys. At least with Hudson and Dylan.

I hadn't spent enough time around Theo to form any kind of opinion. He obviously didn't like me, though, and I wish I understood why. When I'd first met them I thought Ty was the closest to them, but that was wrong. It seemed like Theo was the third pillar of their little trio, and the idea of him not liking me when the other two did made me feel like I was missing out on something. Plus, he was just so different from the two of them that I wanted to figure out how the three of them worked together. I wanted to know how they had become friends.

The day wasn't quite over, and it wasn't time for dinner, so I decided to go take a nap in the living room. I knew it was a weird place to choose, but the idea of sleeping in my room right now wasn't something I could tolerate.

As I came around the corner, I saw Hud walking toward me, clearly fresh from a workout. I would have thought what we did in the office was workout enough, but apparently not. His t-shirt dangled in his hand while he rubbed a towel over his face. Sweat dripped down his body, the rivulets gliding over his skin. The sight made me want to devour him.

The man was a paradox. When he had his shirt and suit on, he looked like any All-American boy with golden retriever energy, as though nothing could ruffle his feathers. As soon as he took his shirt off or mussed his hair and you saw all the tattoos and scars that hid underneath, it changed your perception of him, or at least it did for me. He went from being the boy next door to Mr. Unapproachable.

Hudson's expression could go from open and friendly to serial killer like a flick of a light switch. It was something I'd only ever seen before on Lyric, and it made me nervous, but I also understood it. It was like there was a whole different personality just waiting to come out that had never had the

opportunity to do so.

"What are you doing roaming around here, sunshine?" His use of the nickname that Dylan had given me surprised me. Hudson didn't seem much of a nickname kind of guy, but it didn't bother me. I'd rather be Sunshine than Blondie, that's for sure.

"I was wondering where the gym is?"

Hud jerked his head over his shoulder. "Back that way and to the left. It's the opposite direction of Dylan's office."

I nodded. "Thank you."

He started to walk away, but something inside of me didn't want him to go yet. It felt better having somebody by my side. "Do you think..." I started, but lost courage to finish the sentence. I was going to ask him if he thought he could stay with me. If he thought somebody could break into my room in this place. If he thought I was safe here. Instead, all I managed was, "Do you think you could show me some self-defense moves sometime?"

Hud's gaze narrowed as he looked at me. I presumed he could tell that it wasn't my original question, but I wasn't about to backtrack now. Plus, I really did need to learn something about self-defense if this was going to be my life now. Especially after being at the club the other night and having that panic attack.

I knew I needed to do something to help myself feel more secure in my environment, and if I couldn't control my environment, I needed to be able to control myself. I needed to learn how to fight. Somehow, asking to learn to fight was more difficult than asking to learn to defend myself. If anybody wasn't going to judge me asking, I felt like it was these guys.

He ran a hand through his hair, exposing some of the tattoos that hid underneath for just a second. They weren't noticeable when his hair was combed and he was all put together. It was only when he was flustered or moving about a lot that the thin black lines became visible.

I desperately wanted to ask him about them, but I didn't dare. Tattoos could be extremely personal. Some people just got things because they looked cool. Other people got things because they reminded them of their dead grandmother who raised them and taught them how to write, and bake, and whatever else.

It just seemed like a barrier that we weren't ready to cross yet in our relationship...or friendship for that matter. Could whatever this was even be considered friendship? I wasn't sure, but it definitely seemed like Dylan.

Hudson, and I were more than some kind of tentative agreement.

"You wouldn't like the way that I train," Hudson said finally. "It'd be better if you asked Theo."

My eyebrows shot up. "Theo?"

"I didn't think you'd be the type to judge a book by its cover." Hudson cocked an eyebrow at me and flicked his damp t-shirt over one shoulder before reaching out and gripping my chin with his thumb and forefinger. He ran his thumb across my lower lip, making my breath hitch. "I mean, if I judged you by the way you look, I would think you're as sweet as cherry pie, but you're a vicious little thing underneath it all, aren't you? You liked it when I used you in the office. Is that what you want to be? Do you want to be a good little slut for me? Open that mouth whenever I ask you to?"

My breath was coming faster and faster as the words seemed to boggle my mind. Did I want that? I didn't know the answer. Maybe I wasn't comfortable with it yet, but Hudson just grinned down at me before dropping his hand. "Maybe next time. Seriously, though, if you do want to learn self-defense, then you should talk to Theo. He's good at that shit, and he's a good teacher. If I tried to train you, we would probably just end up fucking on the gym floor after I'd given you more bruises than you could count. That would just piss Dylan off."

I nodded my head in what felt like a sharp, jerky motion. I was more than a little flustered by him.

As if he could see the hesitation on my face, Hud added, "If Theo refuses, then obviously I'll train you or whatever, but you should ask him first."

"Okay." I managed the two syllables, but somehow it sounded like a breathy moan at the same time. The heat of my reaction climbed my cheeks and I knew I was blushing.

Hudson just smiled again before turning around. "Good to know you like dirty talk, sweetheart. I'll keep that in mind for next time."

He disappeared down the hallway while I stood rooted in place, my legs refusing to move while my whole body felt like it was pulsing with anticipation. He kept saying next time like it was a guaranteed thing, and I couldn't help but agree with him. Whatever was happening between us, I couldn't deny that we had chemistry together. I liked what he did to me, the way he made me feel. Not just when we were in the office, but when we were in the dressing room as well.

After a moment, I smacked my face with my hands, trying to break

myself out of the stupor I'd fallen into. I headed to the end of the hallway, intending to turn left to go and work out now instead of napping. I could at least go for a walk on the treadmill.

It had been so long since I had done any kind of movement with my body outside of our office escapades that I felt like I needed to start or my muscles would just disappear. I'd never been particularly strong to begin with, but I didn't want to lose what I had left after Sampson's kidnapping. I was still trying to get my food intake back to normal, so it made sense that I was weaker as well, which was something I wanted to change.

It was the sound of voices that halted me in my tracks, though it was Theo's specifically that stopped me. I turned toward them and found myself edging toward Dylan's office. The big wooden door with its hand carved panels and fancy gold handle was ajar. I knew if the conversation was something that couldn't be overheard, the door would be shut and I wouldn't have been able to hear a damn thing. I didn't feel quite so bad lingering outside. I didn't want to eavesdrop, but my curiosity got the better of me, at least when I heard Lyric's name.

Theo was more riled up than I'd ever heard him. "She's the heir to the Sterling family. Going after her, looking for information on her, is just asking for trouble. We shouldn't be doing it."

"It's not going to cause trouble if you're just looking into what happened to her," Dylan's voice was one of calm reassurance.

"This is a fucking land mine, and you know it. It's a land mine made up of shit. As soon as we step on it, we're going to get shit on ourselves, and it's going to blow up around us. That's what the Stirling family does." Theo was almost pleading with Dylan as he alternated between anger and clearly trying to get his boss to see reason.

Dylan sighed before he said, "Technically, she isn't the heir anymore. She is the head of the Sterling family. Simon Sterling is dead, and since the other sisters are dead as well, she's all that's left. Rumor is she's got herself a merry little band of boyfriends protecting her. I want to know who, and I want to know what the situation is. I don't think she's dead since Sampson is, but we need confirmation."

"You better not be doing this just for some girl." I wished I could see Theo's face when he said that. I was sure it would be contorted in disgust.

"She's not just some girl. She's a bargaining chip. If Lyric is still alive, like I think, and they really were roommates and friends, then it can help us

come to good terms with the Sterling family and, by extension, the Leonardi family. If we can get the Leonardi family to come to the table to talk to the O'Sullivan family, then we could create a strong front against the Sidorov family.

"The more we can stabilize territories in the area and businesses, the healthier the area will be. You might think that this is a shit storm waiting to happen, and it very well could be, but there's also the possibility of a pot of gold at the end of this fucking storm. Do as I've asked and don't piss me off any further." Dylan was clearly getting more than a little irritated with Theo, and it made me wonder just how far Theo would push him.

"You know I'm not trying to piss you off. There's just something about that girl I don't trust. She shouldn't be here. She needs to go back to where she came from."

Silence fell for a moment. "What do you know about where she came from?"

"Nothing," Theo said entirely too quickly, which was unsettling. "I just know that she's not part of this world. She doesn't know anything about our lifestyle and what we do. You think if we told her that Hud was a fucking serial killer, she would just go bake cookies? She'd flip the fuck out.

"I stumbled into this world. I didn't mean to. I didn't know what I was doing, which means I know how overwhelming it can be. She is clearly delicate. She needs to be looked after or some shit. We are not equipped to do that. Our world is not equipped to do that. All I'm saying is that we shouldn't be catering to her when she shouldn't be staying in this world any longer than necessary."

"I took her. Do you understand that? Somebody paid money for her, and I took her. I stole her from underneath them purely to piss them off. You think the Ricci family is going to just let that go? Yes, they are only a subfamily, but that doesn't matter if we piss them off enough. It'll piss off the Leonardi family, and *that* could start a clan war.

"That's not exactly what I want, but Luca always seems to take what I'm looking for before I can get my hands on it. This time it's my turn. She's not just some debt. Yes, she could be, but she's also a bargaining chip, and in case you were wondering, she's also fantastic at giving head." All the irritation had left his voice, and he seemed amused.

Sometimes I wondered if Dylan knew how quickly his moods changed. Looking at him I would imagine he'd be stoic, completely unaffected by those

around him. But when it came to Hud and Theo, that wasn't the case.

"I wasn't wondering. Thanks," Theo said.

Dylan chuckled. "I mean, would it kill you to try it? I'm not saying you have to fall in love with the girl, but maybe if you know what it feels like, it might encourage you to get out a little more. And I don't just mean with your band. Playing instruments with a bunch of dudes is fine. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you have that, but you need to find other ways to relieve stress as well. Sex is a fantastic thing to help with that."

"Why will you and Hud not leave that topic alone? I've told you to just drop it how many times?" The irritation in Theo's voice was rising, and I couldn't help but wonder what it looked like when he was angry.

"We just want you to be happy, man. That's all it is."

"I'm fucking happy in my room. I'm happy playing my bass and figuring shit out for you. I don't need a fucking girl and definitely not her." His tone turned vicious toward the end, and I scurried away knowing that something was about to erupt out of that office that I didn't want any part of. I had just rounded the corner when I heard the door bang open. I also heard what I assumed was Theo's stomping footsteps as he stomped down the hallway. Fortunately, in the opposite direction.

I turned and made my way to the gym, figuring it was best to at least know where it was. When I made it to the gym, I found that it was small and mostly white. There weren't any fancy machines like there were at the gym at Welhurst, just free weights, a treadmill, an elliptical, and a bunch of boxing bags of various kinds. I started to walk on the treadmill. Just something to get my heart rate up, but my head was swimming with the information that I just overheard.

It was only when I stumbled for the third time that I decided to give up and go back to my room. I didn't encounter anybody on the way there. When I shut the door behind myself, I just went and flopped on the bed.

There was so much going on under the surface with Dylan...so many things he was thinking about that I didn't understand. I wasn't sure how I could ever hope to be anything other than a bargaining chip or how I could ever hope to actually regain my freedom.

Part of me wondered if I was just destined to be a prisoner for the rest of my life, whether it was Dylan's or somebody else's. It seemed like I had gone from one cage to another and then to another. I mentally shook myself. That was something I couldn't accept. I would fight tooth and nail to gain my

freedom, even if that meant hurting Dylan and Hud.

EVIE

I spent the next day pretty much alone in my room. I snuck out occasionally to get food, but I made sure that I didn't run into anybody on the way to the kitchen and back.

Conversation with the men in this house was more than I could handle right now, not when I was still trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Sure, I could ask them, but that would clue them in on the fact that I had been eavesdropping. Plus, there was no guarantee they would tell me the truth.

Finally, when it felt like my brain was about to melt out of my ears because I was thinking about everything too much, I decided to take a shower and then go to the gym. It seemed backward to do it that way, but after just lazing around in bed for the last day, I felt kind of gross. After having been denied the opportunity to be clean for the last few weeks before falling in with Dylan, I wasn't about to miss the opportunity to feel clean again. Even if I was just going to get sweaty again.

When I got out of the shower, I reached for the towel to wrap my hair up. As I flipped my head back over after securing the tail of the towel underneath the band I made around my head, I saw the mirror. In the steam, a shape had been revealed, one that I hadn't put there.

It was a heart with an arrow heading toward it, as though I was about to be lovestruck, shot by Cupid's arrow. Either that or I was about to be killed and just, you know, shot with an actual arrow. Either way, it sent a chill down my spine even in the steamy, hot air of the bathroom.

I stood, head and body wrapped in towels, staring at it and trying to figure out where the hell it had come from. There was no way for me to find out, not without telling the guys. Between this and the stuff being out of place in my bedroom, I was officially freaked out. As quickly and calmly as I could, I got dressed, pulling on some random shorts, a sports bra, and a t-shirt.

I didn't know who was watching me, but it seemed like somebody knew where I was and what I was doing. Especially if they managed to put a heart on the mirror while I wasn't in the room.

Unless they did it while I was sleeping, and that scared me even more.

As soon as I was ready, I left my room and I went in search of Theo. I didn't want to particularly seek him out, but he was the only one who could help me if Hud didn't want to teach me self-defense. I assumed all of our rooms were in the same hallway, with Dylan's at the very end, but I didn't know which one was actually Theo's. In fact, I didn't actually know that his bedroom was in this hallway.

I tried a few of the doors around my room, but they were locked. If Dylan's room was at the end of the hallway, that ruled out pretty much everything on this side of the staircase, so I went in the opposite direction.

At the top of the stairs, there was the option to turn right or left. Dylan's room and mine were toward the left, and I hoped that Theo's room was toward the right. If it wasn't, I didn't know where I would start looking. I didn't particularly want to have to hunt through every corner of this mansion just to find him, but I would.

As I headed down the hallway, the twang of some guitar strings stopped me in my tracks. I listened and followed the sound toward a door. I knocked, but there was no answer. When I knocked again and there was still no answer, I wasn't sure what to do. The last thing I wanted to do was to just barge in, but if this was Theo's room...Well, I really wanted to talk to him.

After another few moments of indecision, I finally placed my hand on the door handle and twisted. The door swung open silently, and I saw Theo sitting in front of a bank of computer monitors with his bass in his lap and his headphones plugged in as he strummed away.

I couldn't deny that he actually looked like he fit perfectly in this place. His thinner frame, at least in comparison to Dylan and Hudson, and bleached hair somehow made him look alternative and kind of nerdy at the same time.

It wasn't a bad look on him, which was a thought that surprised me.

A quick glance around the room made me stop and stare. The place was

huge and couldn't have just been a bedroom. It was more like a suite, with a living area and a bedroom area as well. On one side of his desk, textbooks littered the floor. Music stuff crowded the other side. A couch rested against the wall by the door and art decorated the wall above it. There was so much personality to the space that it was almost overwhelming.

The primary thing that separated the bedroom and living area was a massive floor-to-ceiling fish tank. A faint blue light emanated from the tank while brightly colored fish swam about. Orange, green, red, and purple rocks and plants made up a structure in the center of the tank that some of the fish were swimming about in.

It was the craziest thing I'd ever seen, and I couldn't get enough. I could have spent hours looking at the fish tank and not been bored. To me, this kind of thing only existed in actual aquariums, like the big professional ones. I had no idea that people could have something like this in their home.

I took a step forward, and he must have seen my reflection in one of his monitor screens because he said, "You guys know better than to interrupt me when I'm practicing. Get out."

He seemed to still be in a lovely mood after his talk with Dylan the other day. It made me want to leave and go find Hud, but I knew Hud would be annoyed if I didn't at least try to ask Theo about self-defense training, so I stood my ground.

"Theo?" I called.

He spun in his chair. The cord for his headphones ripped out of the amp, and I heard the dying music as the bass quieted itself.

"The fuck are you doing in here?" he demanded.

I clasped my hands behind my back, squeezing my fingers until I had what was probably a white knuckle grip on each hand. It kept me focused and helped me to explain, "I wanted to ask you about self-defense. Hudson suggested that I talk to you. He said maybe you could train me." I nibbled on my lower lip, feeling like a girl confessing her love to her crush, which was stupid.

He turned away from me as he said, "I don't have time to train you. Go ask Hudson again."

"The reason I'm asking is that I found something drawn on the mirror in my bathroom." My voice had this awkward upward lilt to it that I hated. It reminded me too much of talking to the elders when I was part of the Children of Radiance. It sounds as though every sentence was actually a

question and needed their approval.

He turned back to face me. "Something was drawn on your mirror?" he asked, suddenly giving me all of his attention. "And you're sure it wasn't done by Dylan or Hudson?"

I shook my head and struggled not to pick at my fingernails as I spoke. "As far as I know, neither of them have been in my room without me being present as well. It's just been me and I guess the maids since I've noticed my stuff was moved around."

"So you've had your things moved around and something drawn on your mirror, and this is the first time you're mentioning it to us?" He was exasperated with me, and we'd only been talking for a couple of minutes. I didn't know why I triggered this guy so badly, but I did.

"I don't know what goes on here. I didn't want to worry you when it was just my stuff. But the heart and arrow freaked me out."

"Show me." Theo stood and put his bass on a stand that sat just next to his desk, leaving the headphones on the top of his amp. He carefully scooted the desk chair into place under the central monitor and turned to face me. "Lead the way, princess."

I turned to walk out, and once we were out of his room Theo walked beside me. I couldn't help but sneak a few glances at him. I thought he hated me, yet he was giving me a cutesy nickname. Though, there was a possibility he said it with sarcasm, as an insult. Reading him was next to impossible since we hadn't had a chance to actually talk to one another until now, so I wasn't sure.

We walked back to my room where I led him through to the bathroom. I pulled the curtain aside and twisted the silver handle to turn the shower on while Theo closed the door so it could get steamy again. The silence that descended as we waited was more than a little awkward.

"When did you notice your stuff was moved?"

"I don't know, a couple days ago." I chewed on the inside of my lip.

"And there's been nothing between that and the heart?"

"Not that I can think of. It's not like I have stuff for people to steal, unless they want some leggings and lingerie."

His cheeks stained red, and he wouldn't look at me for a second. Did the idea of me wearing lingerie freak him out? Did he think it was disgusting? I had no idea.

I found him curious, though, with his bleached hair, his piercings, and the

jewelry he wore. I was willing to bet that he had tattoos as well, just maybe not as many as Hudson.

All of it seemed to scream rebel and defiance, giving the finger to the man or whatever. Yet he didn't like to look up. He used the shaggy cut of his hair as a shield, letting it fall in front of his eyes sometimes.

Finally, the steam reached the mirror, and although it took a second, the faint outline of the heart became visible along with the arrow that was heading toward it.

"Well, fuck," Theo muttered to himself.

I desperately wanted to ask what it meant for him to react like that, but before I could, he was walking out of the room.

EVIE

As he hurried out of the bathroom, Theo blurted, "Meet me in the gym in two hours." With that, he rushed from my room like he was the one being stalked or maybe like I was going to hunt him down. I mean, I guess I did track him down in his room, but still, it wasn't like I had left any threatening messages on his bathroom mirror.

Some people might assume a heart with an arrow flying toward it was not threatening. I, however, saw the opposite. The only thing in my mind when I thought about the mirror was a threat, one which I wanted to be ready for. It was why I had been so stubborn about learning some kind of self-defense, and why giving Theo the two hours he'd asked for was torturous. Five minutes before the two hours were up I started making my way back downstairs and headed to the gym.

The treadmill and elliptical machines had been pushed to one side, leaving big, blue mats covering the floor.

"Do you run?" Theo asked as soon as he saw me.

"Not really." I shrugged. "I mean I was active before, but the whole being kidnapped and held in a basement dungeon thing kind of put a damper on my workouts."

I was trying to be funny, but he didn't get it. All he said was, "Okay. Walk two miles on the treadmill as quickly as possible to warm up."

"Two miles? That's going to take me like a half hour." I didn't want to be whiny, but I also didn't like wasting people's time.

"Fine, just do one mile. I just don't want you hurting yourself."

I hopped up on the treadmill and did as he asked. He lifted weights, having presumably already warmed up some time earlier. Unlike Hud and Dylan, his t-shirt stayed on, even as he sweated and it began to cling to him in places. I couldn't stop myself from sneaking a look every now and then.

Judging from the weights he was lifting, Theo was much stronger than I expected. He may have been skinny, but he had a wiry kind of strength I wouldn't want to test now that I'd seen him in action.

When I was done, I moved to stand in the center of the mats. He joined me a moment later, wiping the sweat from his brow and slicking his hair back.

"What are the weakest points on a body?" he asked suddenly, as though it was a pop quiz.

"Eyes. Groin."

"Good. There are more, but that's a good start." He nodded, encouraging me. "The first thing about self-defense is knowing how to use everything at your disposal. Claw, bite, kick, punch, elbow, knee, keys, books, purses. Anything can become a weapon if you need it to be one."

"Okay." This wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind. I'd wanted action oriented steps, ways to hurt someone who was trying to do the same to me.

He looked at me carefully, his blue gaze piercing me and holding my own. "I'm going to try to attack you, and I want you to stop me from kidnapping you. If you can, get away before I get to the elliptical machine."

He pointed to the machine in the corner as though I didn't know what it was. "If you can do that, you don't have much to learn. If I get there before you can get loose, we have a few things to work on, and I'll have a better starting point. Deal?" He was so formal and businesslike. It was surprising coming from this punk rock, loner kid. I didn't really know what to make of it.

"Deal. Do I get a warning or..." The words died on my lips as he circled me on the mats. "I guess not," I mumbled to myself.

There was no indication when he attacked. Just a quick lunge forward as he grabbed me around the chest with both arms in something akin to a reverse bear hug.

Theo was easily able to lift me off the floor, and though I struggled, I couldn't figure out how to get loose. Panic rose in me, clouding my thoughts as my mind flashed with the memories of being taken to the auction.

I kicked him in the shin with my heel a couple times, which made him

curse in my ear. I even tried to throw my head back to hit his nose, but I wasn't able to connect. Unsure what else to try, I pulled at his arms, trying to get them to loosen even a fraction of an amount.

Theo was steadily making progress toward the elliptical machine, while I squirmed like a cat getting a bath. His breathing was heavy in my ear, and as much as I hated myself for it, because I knew Theo wouldn't really hurt me, the heavy breaths made me think of other things instead of fighting for my life.

"And I win," he said, his voice almost a growl. His arms released me immediately, and I slid down his frame until my feet touched the floor once more.

It was the briefest of contact, and I stepped away immediately because I knew he wasn't my biggest fan and probably didn't want me clinging to him like a koala. I couldn't deny that it made me curious though. He was stronger, and much more powerful, than I expected. Just what was he hiding under his oversized t-shirt?

"Let's try that again, but this time I'll talk you through some tips you can use to get out of my hold. Okay?"

We walked back to the center of the mat to give ourselves plenty of space, and Theo moved to stand behind me, wrapping his arms around my chest once more. The height difference made things a little awkward, but we did the best we could. He had one arm above my boobs and one below, like steel bands going around my chest.

"First thing, you're never going to be able to pry my arms open. I'm much stronger than you, and it's probably safest to assume that your attacker would be as well. You want to look for other openings and use your hands and feet in a different way. You did well with the shin kicks, that was a good step. Something else you can do is to try to move to the side. Move your hips, I mean."

I was up on my tiptoes from the way we were standing, but I moved slightly to the side. His voice was even as he continued, "Then with the arm that's still in front of my body, and please don't actually do this, you could bring your hand down in an open palm smack to my groin." His words grew stilted at the end, and the businesslike facade melted slightly.

"You mean like this?" I asked as I let my hand fall, stopping just before I hit him in the dick. I felt him tense and flinch behind me. "Sorry, that was mean." I couldn't help the grin that spread over my face.

"Thank you for not actually hitting me," he said, though his tone had a grumpy edge to it now. "The other thing you can do is use gravity as your friend. As soon as you feel arms go around you, you could try to let your weight carry you to the ground, but you really have to commit. You have to go full ragdoll, and that can put you in a dangerous position.

"If you lift your elbow up like this and turn into the hold, then you would be able to push against my chest and use that to get some distance. You could also knee me in the groin. If you can get your hands up through the hold, then you could give me an open palm slap on the ears, which would disorient me.

"You could also use your palm to strike upwards at my nose or chin. Of course, there is the other soft spot you mentioned earlier, the eyes. You can claw and press and do whatever you need to to cause enough pain to make your attacker release you."

He released me and moved to stand in front of me. My head was already spinning from all of the options.

"Now, let's say I'm coming directly at you instead of from behind. One thing you can do is what's called a hammer strike. You want to ball your fist up, obviously with your thumb on the outside, but instead of punching like you're boxing, you'll bring it down, like you were throwing a ball almost, and use the meaty part on your hand to hit your attacker. The important thing with this is to recoil as fast as possible so they can't grab you by your wrist.

"If you have keys or a pen, anything that you might be able to use as a weapon, you could grip that in your hand and have that strike into your attacker as you bring the hammer down."

Hud wasn't kidding when he said that Theo knew what he was talking about.

"One thing I forgot to mention with the bear hug is to try and bend forward so you can keep your attacker off balance. Obviously, this is difficult if they pick you up immediately, but it is something to keep in mind. If you can bend forward, it'll pull them forward and then you can use the way they are off balance to attack them with your elbows or something like that. Plus, if you can turn toward them and push, that can often loosen their hold."

I watched as Theo mimicked each movement like he was shadow boxing, only he was pushing and turning and striking his imaginary foe with his hand.

"One thing I want you to avoid doing is trying to punch like you would with boxing. If you don't do it right, you could seriously hurt your hand, and that could impact your abilities to get away, so try and use your elbows more.

When you do try to bring them up high, swing them around, and aim for the jaw, throat, temple, that kind of thing."

He pointed to his jawline, throat and temple as he spoke and wiggled his elbows around like he was a chicken trying to fly. It would have made me laugh if he wasn't being so serious about it. His attitude was practically contagious.

"If somebody grabs your clothing like this." He reached out and grabbed my t-shirt just under my collarbone. "What you can do is grab them by their wrist with one hand and then grab your clothing with the other. You want to move backward as you push with your hand that's holding that wrist."

He demonstrated by placing my left hand on his wrist as it gripped my t-shirt on the left side before putting my right hand so it grabbed the fabric of the t-shirt right next to his. "So push forward with your left hand and step back, pulling on your clothing with your right."

I did as he asked. It wasn't easy, but it did get the clothing loose from his hands, which was good.

"If for some reason you wind up in an arm bar headlock like this..." He moved behind me and put an arm around my neck. "Then you want to turn your head, putting your chin into the crook of their arm." With his free hand he moved my head, turning it slightly so that my chin rested just by his elbow, before he pushed down. "That should get you the space you need to get out. Also, bend at the waist and just kind of pull your body out."

He kept throwing technique after technique at me. My mind spun from the barrage of information I hadn't expected.

"Okay, I'm going to attack you again. Same rules as before. You need to escape before I reach the elliptical." He paced around me for a moment before he launched himself at me.

We sparred like that for an hour or so. Each time he attacked, I would do my best to get away. Sometimes I did, sometimes I didn't. In a way, it was comforting to at least experience this in a safe way.

He was trying the bear hug attack again when I leaned forward, but I stumbled. I was getting tired from all of the sparring, and when I went down, he came down with me. My knees thudded against the mat, and I was only barely able to brace myself with my hands thanks to the fact that his arms were wrapped around my shoulders, which gave my hands some freedom of movement..

"Well, this certainly isn't what I expected to see." Hudson's voice came

from the doorway. "If you want to fuck, I would suggest taking it to one of your rooms."

"If we want to...What?" Theo's head snapped up, and suddenly I realized that it might look like we were fooling around.

I was on my hands and knees, and he was covering me like a blanket, his arms around my chest. His groin was against my backside. As though he had been splashed with cold water, he released me.

"Uh, don't forget to stretch. Good work," he said before he practically ran out of the room. Hudson just chuckled and shook his head.

Now that I could take a breather, I realized just how tired I was. Instead of getting up, I just flopped down completely onto the mat.

"I told you he would be the better teacher," Hudson murmured.

After a long pause, I pushed up from the mat. "He was very good. He knows a lot about that stuff." I brushed myself off and raised my head so I could look Hudson in the eyes.

"Do you want to try any of those techniques on me? I'll attack you." There was something in his voice that made me shiver, both with fear and anticipation, though the anticipation was of good things.

I shook my head. "I think I'm too tired right now," I said before I tried to excuse myself.

"Theo's a good guy. He'll help you. He'll work with you until you're ready."

"Until I'm ready for what?" I felt like a kid who just found out they had a test the next day.

"Life." Hudson shrugged before putting in earbuds and getting on the elliptical.

We hadn't moved anything back to where it was, but he didn't seem to care. There was enough room for the blades of the machine to work, and he started off with a light jog.

I stood staring at him for longer than I should as I tried to process what he said. Ready for life, huh? Right now, all I was ready for was bed, and the further I got from the gym, the more the exhaustion hit my bones. I barely made it upstairs to my bed before I collapsed.

The last thought that rolled through my mind was how I felt like there was something familiar about Theo. I saw textbooks in his room, so maybe he went to Welhurst while I was there or something. None of those books were from classes I'd ever taken though, so was that really it? Or was it

something else?

EVIE

When I awoke, I didn't immediately realize I had slept all the way through the night and missed dinner until I saw the time on the clock. The clothes I had worn to train with Theo yesterday stuck to my skin with dried sweat, making me feel disgusting.

I got up and peeled the clothing from my body so I could shower. It was only when I was midway through soaping my body that I remembered the heart that was drawn on the mirror with the arrow before.

Suddenly, I felt self-conscious, as though somebody was watching me in the bathroom. I hated the feeling more than I hated the fact that I missed dinner the night before. There wasn't much I could do, though, except get ready to start the day.

I finished the shower like nothing was wrong. When I got out, I expected to see the same heart and arrow on the mirror, but I didn't. Instead, I saw the arrow had become part of an eight-pointed star that surrounded the heart. I had no idea what it meant, but I knew a cage when I saw it.

As casually as I could, I got dressed and left the room, making my way through the house and straight to Dylan's office, hoping that I'd find him inside. Honestly, I had no idea where he would be if he wasn't there, so this was my only hope, especially since I passed through the empty dining area on the way there.

The door wasn't shut, but I didn't hear anything from inside either, so I knocked lightly. Dylan's grunt was the only thing I got in response.

When I pushed the door open, I saw him sitting, staring at a sleek-looking

laptop that was popped open in the middle of the desk. His crisp, white shirt looked brilliant against his dark hair, tanned skin, and the dark wood that surrounded him. He looked every inch the businessman, even if he wasn't wearing a tie.

His dark hair was coiffed just so, making me want to run my hands through it and mess it up. The Dylan I'd become comfortable with was a little more disheveled than the one currently sitting in front of me.

I softly cleared my throat, which made him look up from the laptop. His gaze went from steely to soft in a matter of seconds, which warmed something inside of me.

"What can I do for you, sunshine?" he asked, closing the screen a little too quickly as though he didn't want me to see what was on it. He laced his fingers and set his hands on top of the closed laptop.

"I need to talk to you about something. Can I shut the door?"

He nodded. "Whatever makes you comfortable."

I quickly shut the door behind myself before walking further into the office. After taking a steadying breath, I said, "I think there's somebody following me."

His eyebrows raised. "Oh, what makes you think that?"

"I found things moved in my room, and someone has been drawing messages on my mirror in the bathroom. They're in the house, whoever they are. Do you have any new staff or anything like that?"

"The only new person in this house is you, sweetheart." My heart froze in my chest for a moment before beating again painfully as a wave of adrenaline rushed through me. I hadn't even noticed that Hud was posted up in the corner of the room.

I looked over at him. His normally messy honey-colored locks were carefully combed into place and he wore a suit just like Dylan. His suit consisted of charcoal trousers and a clean, white shirt. He, of course, wasn't wearing a tie either.

The shirt was tighter than I imagined was comfortable and seemed to strain to contain him. If he moved too quickly, I imagined it would burst, which seemed like a waste to me. It certainly made him look more intimidating, as though his muscles were demanding to be used. I wondered if that was the point.

"The first time I saw something drawn on my mirror, it was a heart and an arrow. The second time, which was just now, the arrow had become part of a

star." The star seemed to pique their interest.

"So you're saying if we go up there right now and make your bathroom all steamy, there'll be a heart and a star on your mirror?" Dylan clarified.

"There should be, yeah. Do you not believe me?" I asked.

"It's not that I don't believe you, but you've been through something very traumatic. I wouldn't be surprised if you've got some things that you need to sort through in your head and with your emotions. I'm not saying it's impossible, sunshine, but it's not like we've ever had anything like this happen before.

"The only thing that's changed is you coming here. There's no other new staff members or anything like that. Plus, most people aren't insane enough to try and break into the house of one of the crime families in the area."

"I mean, when you put it like that, it makes me sound like the crazy one, but I swear I'm not." I had to keep reminding myself that what I saw was real. I didn't think Dylan was gaslighting me on purpose.

The problem was that in his mind, his house was a fortress. It was the Cave of Solitude. Nobody could get to him here. But if what I was saying was right, people certainly could get to him in his house.

"I'm going to go up and take a look. You stay here," Hudson murmured as he got up. He slipped soundlessly from the room. The door didn't even make a clicking sound as he walked away.

I went and sat politely in the chair opposite Dylan. "Don't let me stop you from your work. I mean, if there's no heart on the mirror when Hudson gets in there, I'm clearly losing my mind. Right?" There was a bit of spite to my voice that I couldn't control.

I knew he had his own reasons for denying that somebody in this house might wish me harm, but it still hurt that he didn't seem to believe me. I had to remind myself that we didn't really know each other all that well. We only met a week ago at the most.

He made no move to open his laptop back up. Instead, he asked, "Are you upset with me?"

"Maybe a little," I replied honestly.

He pushed up from his chair and came around the desk to sit on the edge in front of me. The position made me feel like a student in front of a teacher. It wasn't that he was that much older than me—I would guess maybe five years, ten at the most—but he had an intimidating presence, one that I couldn't deny. No matter how much I tried.

"This might sound strange, but I trust the people that I employ to keep my home secure. If they can't manage that, then I'm employing the wrong people, and I would hate for that to be the case. It's not that I don't believe you, but I don't want what you say to be the truth. If Hudson confirms that there is a heart and star on your mirror, then we've got a bigger problem."

He ran a hand through his hair before a mischievous glint came in his eye. "Would you like me to distract you until Hudson comes back?" The tone of his voice was suggestive to say the least.

"No, I don't think I would."

He frowned, and for the first time, he seemed to actually take me seriously. "Even if somebody somehow managed to get in, everybody here knows who works for me and who doesn't. An intruder would be spotted right away and brought to Hudson for questioning."

The way he said "questioning" made me think that it wasn't actually questioning but something more along the lines of punishment.

I didn't want to keep pushing the issue, so I let it drop, waiting for Hudson to confirm what I had already said. When Dylan slid his phone from his pocket and looked at the screen, I had to wonder if it was a message from Hudson. If it was, what would his reaction be?

"He says there's nothing there." Dylan's face was carefully blank as he put his phone back in his pocket.

He slid off the edge of the desk and knelt in front of me. The trousers he wore barely contained his thighs as the muscles flexed. He and Hudson were both powerhouses, and if anybody could keep me safe, it was the two of them. They could only do that if they believed there was a threat, and right now, they thought I was a crazy person.

"Listen, how about you stay in my room tonight. Then, we'll know if anything happens, if anybody's trying to get to you? Would you feel safer that way?"

I reluctantly nodded my head. "You sure you don't mind?"

He pretended to think about it for a second before grinning at me. "Having a beautiful woman in my bed would not be a hardship, I can promise you that."

I wanted to disagree. I wanted to tell him that if he didn't believe me and thought everything was safe, then I should sleep in my own room instead of running to him like a scared child.

But I was scared.

I had already been taken once.

I had lived with a cult.

I just wanted to be normal for a little while. It felt like I had finally succeeded in that for the first few months of college, but everything went to shit. Just thinking about it made me want to cry and have a little pity party for myself. I refused to give in to those emotions, so I took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

"Okay, I'm going to go and practice the moves that Theo showed me yesterday. Will you find me later?"

"How about you find me when you're ready for bed?"

I wanted to ask if we were going to eat dinner together—do literally anything together—or if I was just a doll that he was keeping in the house. One that he could dress up the way he wanted, fuck the way he wanted...not that we had actually fucked yet. But I was scared to know the answer.

At some point, something had to give. I'd either need a job, or I'd need to go back to school. I was hoping he would let me do the latter, at least then I could work toward something instead of just working to pay off a debt. I wasn't sure he'd ever be on board with that, though.

"Thank you for looking into it," I said before I walked out, leaving the door ajar as I headed toward the gym.

Whether he believed it or not, I knew there was somebody in this house who was trying to hurt me. It was just a matter of when they would try next. Somehow, I thought the next message on my mirror wouldn't be just written for the steam to show—it would be written in my blood instead.

DYLAN

Sonuvabitch. How the hell did someone infiltrate the house? I lied to Evie because I didn't want her to be scared while she was here, especially not when I'd promised to keep her safe.

Sometimes I wondered why she was here in the first place. Why didn't I turn her away at the auction house? Why did I give in to a naked girl's demands?

I didn't have answers to those questions, which frustrated the hell out of me. I knew I confused Hud, and Theo even more, but when I'd been looking down into those deep brown eyes, I couldn't say no. Not when they were filled with terror.

It wasn't the kind of fear that came from knowing someone had purchased you, either. Evie's fear was palpable. She either knew the man who was picking her up or the man who purchased her, I was almost certain of that.

I hadn't bothered asking her about her connection to the Ricci family. Luca Ricci, the man who'd been a thorn in my side for entirely too long, was the one who purchased her. If I wanted a piece of property, he would purchase it just before I could. If I was trying to make a deal with some officials, they were already on his payroll. But this time, I had something he wanted.

If I was being honest, I was surprised he hadn't already come after her, but now I was second guessing that assumption. Was there a traitor amongst us? Who was responsible for scaring Evie in my home?

The eight-pointed star was a Bratva symbol, the same one on the photo of

her mirror that Hud sent me. Ricci wasn't Bratva, and the Sidorov family, including all of their subfamilies, would never leave a clue like that on purpose. Not unless they were sending a message.

There was no reason for the Bratva to want Evie. They shouldn't even be interested in her in the slightest, so they wouldn't be trying to send a message by scaring her. That meant that it was someone trying to place the blame elsewhere. Whoever this was wanted to get to Evie and either take her or hurt her without starting a clan war.

Or maybe they were trying to start a clan war but between two groups they weren't actually related to. If we fought the Sidorovs, it would make both parties weaker, which would leave the Leonardi's in a very strong position.

I couldn't imagine that Dante Leonardi, the family head, would sanction something like this, though. It was too underhanded. He'd storm the castle and bring the fight to us if that's what he wanted to do. This manipulation and sleight-of-hand was unlike him.

Hud came strolling into the room a moment later, closing the door behind himself. "Did you tell her?"

I shook my head. "She's scared enough as it is. She'll be safe in my room, we can lock the door, which will keep the stalker away from her for the night. That's just a stopgap though. We need to figure out a way to lure the threat out though, or at least get some evidence as to what's going on."

He nodded, accepting my decision, even though I could tell from the set of his jaw that he disagreed with it. "She asked for self-defense training. Theo showed her some moves."

"I gathered since that's what she said she was going to go and practice when she left." When he didn't respond, I knew there was something on his mind. "Say whatever it is that's bothering you."

Hud paced a bit, and I gave him time to formulate whatever it was that he wanted to say. A lot of people thought that Hudson was just the muscle, simply my bodyguard and my enforcer. While they were right, they didn't give him enough credit when it came to his intelligence. The man was as smart as a whip, and just as cutthroat as I was when it came to our businesses and the dealings therein.

Finally, Hud said, "We should tell her the plan once we have one, so she knows she's not crazy."

I shook my head. "Whatever the plan is, we're going to need her reactions

to be real in order to sell it and actually draw the stalker out. If we tell her, there's no guarantee she'll be able to make her reactions seem real when it comes down to it."

He wasn't a fan of the idea of keeping secrets from Evie, which was interesting. Normally, he didn't even like women being around, but he seemed to have accepted her without issue. Not to mention that when he was with her in front of me, I was surprised that he went as far as he did..

The few times Hud spent time with women, it was always in his room in the basement, always private. He wasn't an exhibitionist. Or maybe that was just when it came to his own personal tastes. The idea that he wanted to be with Evie enough to do it in front of me and do as I'd asked was enough to stir a little jealousy inside me.

He went back to business without another word, accepting my decision but clearly unhappy about it. I wanted to call him on his bullshit, but I didn't want to draw attention to what was a big step for him. If I did, he might withdraw and cut off any feelings he had for Evie. I was fairly sure there was at least a little more than lust there for Evie, which was why he was upset with my decision.

When he didn't speak up again, I went back to work as well, still a little disappointed that Evie hadn't taken me up on my earlier offer. But we'd taken some time off work, and now we were paying the price for it with everything we needed to catch up on.

Before I knew it, dinner had come and gone and there was a tentative knock on my door. "Enter," I called.

Evie appeared before me, a sight for sore eyes in her robe and fuzzy slippers. She was both beautiful and cute, something I hadn't really thought possible but that she pulled it off. Her thick, blonde hair was pulled up into the high ponytail she liked, and her big doe eyes watched me warily. She tilted her head to the side slightly as she said, "I was going to go to bed if that's okay?"

"Let me walk you up. Are you sure you don't mind being locked in? Only three people know the code to open the door, myself and Hud being two of them." I smiled down at her, trying to reassure her and not give away the fact that I was pissed off that there was a traitor in my home.

"That's fine." Her tone was clipped, and I could tell she was still upset that I'd basically told her I didn't believe her.

The truth was that I did believe her. The marks on her mirror were there,

and I knew there was someone in my home who was no longer welcome there. The problem arose when I thought about us reacting to the stalker being there in an overt way. What could that trigger? Would they attack her? Try to kidnap her?

My goal was to out the stalker before their behavior got any more intense, but that meant keeping Evie in the dark, at least for a little bit. We walked up the stairs in silence, and I led her down the hallway and into my room. She looked around with curiosity, which I couldn't blame her for.

"The bathroom is through there," I gestured to one of the doors on the side wall. "The other leads to my closet, which you shouldn't need. All the windows are reinforced, so no one can break in that way."

She nodded, wrapping her arms around herself, which made her look small and scared. I reminded myself that she probably was. Still, it tore at something in my chest to see her like that.

"Dylan, I know you don't believe that someone's trying to get to me in the house, but can you at least keep it in the back of your mind?"

I walked over, drawn to her by an invisible thread, and cupped her cheek. "Of course I will, sunshine. I promise." She nuzzled into my hand slightly, and my body reacted with a vicious need. Not just to have her, but to protect her.

"Will you stay until I fall asleep?"

I wanted to say no, to tell her that she'd be safe enough in my room that she didn't need me to stay like that, but she was scared and the need to soothe her rose within me. "If that's your desire."

"And if I have other desires?" She bit her bottom lip on one side, which just about killed me.

"I'd say it's probably best for you to sleep for now and we can tend to any other desires you have tomorrow." The last thing I wanted to do was take advantage of her while she was feeling vulnerable.

"Some desires can't wait until tomorrow," she murmured before pushing up on her tiptoes and kissing me, her lips tender and soft against my own.

The need that rushed through me was so much worse than the last time we fooled around. I wasn't sure I'd be able to hold back from her this time, especially since we were alone, but I wasn't sure she was really ready for this step with me either.

I didn't want Evie to feel pressured into sex with me or like she was repaying her debt with her body. Sex with her shouldn't feel like a

transaction. I wasn't sure why it bothered me that it did, but the thought was something I couldn't get out of my mind. In turn, that meant that as much as I wanted her, as much as I'd dreamed about what I wanted to do with her, I couldn't. Not yet.

"Soon, but not yet, sunshine. For now, you need rest." Each word was painful to say, but I didn't want her to regret being with me or feel like she had to satisfy me somehow to earn her keep.

Evie pouted slightly. "Can we at least cuddle?"

I nodded, and she pulled off the robe and kicked off her slippers before climbing into bed. The tank and shorts she was wearing almost undid the words that had just left my mouth. Would this be a test of my patience and restraint? Absolutely. If there was one thing I was good at, though, it was self-discipline. If I could just remind my dick of that, I'd be fine.

Once she seemed settled, I climbed onto the bed as well, staying above the covers to lessen the temptation, and let her snuggle up to me. Within moments of her head landing on my shoulder, she was out. I was fascinated by her, even as she slept. She was a beguiling woman, one I'd never planned on entertaining for this long, but just knowing her for the short time that I had made me want to protect her.

Whoever was trying to hurt her would have to go through me and my empire first, and I'd make it damn hard for them to get to her. If they somehow succeeded and even one hair on her head was hurt, they'd pay for it.

EVIE

A soft rattling noise drew me back to consciousness. The way I clutched a pillow to my chest reminded me that I had fallen asleep snuggling with Dylan, which brought a smile to my face. Who would have expected him to be such a softie underneath it all?

The noise sounded again, reverberating throughout the room and making the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

As I became more aware of the sound, my body tensed, muscles going rigid. Dylan said he would lock the door behind himself, but that was definitely the door handle moving. The door wasn't opening though, so I assumed he had actually locked it.

So who was trying to get in if they didn't know the key code? The pit in my stomach told me I already knew who was trying to get in. I just didn't want to admit it to myself.

It hurt that Dylan hadn't believed me, but I also wanted to believe him more than I wanted to be right. It was why I let him talk me into staying in his room in the first place. None of that mattered if I was the one who was right and somebody really was in the house and trying to harm me.

The door handle rattled softly again, and I could tell that the person on the other side of the door was trying to be quiet. After all, it was a very subtle noise, but it was one I couldn't ignore.

I wanted to get up and hide, to find some little nook somewhere that I could cram myself into so whoever was searching for me wouldn't be able to find me. The fear that made me want to hide was nothing compared to the

terror that kept me frozen in place.

My limbs wouldn't move, and my lungs would barely even expand. What if the person could hear me rustling around in the sheets? Would they know I was in here if I padded across the floor to look for a hiding spot and a floorboard creaked? What would they do then? Would it increase their resolve to break into the room?

All of these thoughts ran through my head. Different scenarios, different ways that I could trigger the person to be more violent than they had been up to this point. I barely breathed as I laid there. All I could do was listen to the alternating sounds of the door handle rattling and the person on the other side pacing.

After what felt like hours, they finally moved away. The door handle didn't rattle again, and after I counted all the way to five hundred, I convinced myself that they had given up. That didn't mean they wouldn't be back, so now was my time to act and protect myself.

I wanted to find a weapon, something I could use to defend myself if they succeeded in getting through the door next time. Even though I was fairly confident that whoever was trying to get in was gone, I was still cautious as I got out of bed.

I pulled my robe back on and began to prowl around the room. The place was bigger than any room I had ever stayed in before, including the one I shared with Lyric at Welhurst. I was fairly confident that it could serve as a studio apartment for most people. Hell, I was sure there were some places where this would be luxurious for a studio apartment.

The bed was massive. It was at least a California king, if not bigger, and was definitely the dominant feature in the room. A window took up one wall, almost covering the whole thing—it stretched from floor to ceiling, wall to wall. It was only the bookcases on either end of the window that prevented the window from consuming the entire wall.

On the opposite side of the room, there was a small sitting area with two comfy looking bucket chairs and a small table positioned next to a door. I couldn't remember which one Dylan said led to the bathroom and which one was the closet, but the second door would lead to the other of the two. The third door on the third wall was the one I'd come through that led back out into the hallway.

Other than the nightstands on each side of the bed, there wasn't much decoration. A large, sketched portrait hung above the bed, and there were a

few more paintings on the walls. They didn't seem personal, unless Dylan was more artistic than I gave him credit for. It almost looked like everything had been here when he had bought the house, like the art pieces were just for show by the realtor and Dylan just kept them.

I wasn't confident enough to go through the nightstands just yet. It seemed like they would have the most personal items in them.

With a little pep talk, I made myself walk across the empty space in the center of the room. It was where I felt the most exposed and vulnerable. I opened the first door to see that it led to the bathroom. I went and poked around in there.

A huge marble shower took up one side of the room, while a clawfoot tub ran perpendicular to it. A small half-wall separated the bathtub from the toilet, with a sink next to the half wall. A large mirror hung above the sink, and cabinets stretched underneath it.

Everything looked so modern that the clawfoot tub was a surprise. The sight of it made me desperately want to take a bath and soak. I had a vision of being one of those women who drank champagne and ate fruit while surrounded by a sea of foamy bubbles. That was just a dream, though. Hell, if I was really dreaming, Dylan and Hud would be there as well, massaging and feeding me or something like that.

I shook the images from my mind, useless as they were, and opened a few of the cabinets. There was nothing unusual in there and certainly nothing that could be used as a weapon, unless I planned to shave the guy to death. If this had been a woman's bathroom, then maybe the curling iron would have worked. I had no such luck in Dylan's bathroom.

When I rifled through as much as I could, I gave up and went into the closet. I hadn't expected it to be as massive as it was. It wasn't just that there were drawers and clothes hanging all around, there were also display cases.

There was an island in the center that was covered in watches and rings, all of which were protected by a layer of glass or acrylic, so they could be shown off but not touched. All kinds of men's jewelry, that I wouldn't ever expect Dylan to wear since he didn't seem like a jewelry kind of guy, filled the case. The whole time I had known him, I hadn't seen him wear anything except a watch.

As I wandered around, I realized that only half of the closet was filled, maybe even only a third. There was so much space in there, that I could only assume the closet was clearly designed for a couple. And it was clearly

designed for a couple that had a lot of clothes and expensive items they wanted to keep safe.

I didn't bother with the island with the watches because I didn't think there would be anything useful there. But as I started exploring some of the other drawers, I found a small switchblade tucked away. It was well hidden, as though it hadn't seen the light of day in a long time. Maybe Dylan had lost it or forgot he had it, or maybe it was a sentimental piece and not meant to be used. I wasn't sure, but it was enough for me to start feeling a little safer.

When I opened one of the drawers, I realized that it was shallower than it should have been based on the size of it from the outside. If he had filled it with more clothing, the false bottom wouldn't have been so obvious. As it was, I could tell that there were a good couple of inches that I couldn't see.

I pulled everything out of the drawer, keeping it in the exact same order that it was in so I could put it back properly. A couple of t-shirts, some socks, and a swimsuit came out of the drawer.

It was a mish mash of things unlike the strict organization that made up the rest of the walk-in closet, which only served to make me more suspicious about the drawer. Once it was empty, I ran my fingers along the edge of the bottom until I found a small divot on one side that I used to pry the bottom up. I hooked my finger into it and lifted, opening the bottom and revealing a gun.

At first, a wave of fear went through me. I'd never known anybody who owned a gun before, and I suddenly got the feeling that this wasn't the only one that Dylan owned.

I had zero experience handling a weapon like this, or any weapon for that matter, but a gun was something that most people in their right mind would find scary. Even if I didn't know how to use it properly, I figured it could at least use it to scare my stalker. Hopefully, I could bluff my way out of the room if the attacker tried to come in again.

I felt somewhat safer with the gun and switchblade in hand, so I went back to bed. If the attacker came back and tried to take me, if he succeeded in getting into the room, I had two weapons that I could use.

I set the gun on the nightstand and put the knife under my pillow, pointing away from me. After staring at the dark metal of the weapon for a moment, I laid back down and tried to sleep, but it was no good. My mind was racing.

Dylan hadn't believed that there was somebody in his house who was

trying to get to me, and though I still didn't have concrete proof, I now knew that I was right. Somebody had tried to get into his room while I was in here, which could only mean that they were coming after me or trying to steal from Dylan. Neither thing was something I thought he would be happy about.

I tossed and turned trying to find sleep once more, but it never came to me. The shape of the knife under the pillow, seeming to have a princess and the pea effect, was all I could think about. It occupied my mind to the point that I thought I could make out the ridges of the metal through the pillow.

When the door rattled again a little while later and I heard soft voices coming from the other side, terror spiked through my blood.

I pushed up in bed and grabbed the gun from the side table, aiming at the door with both hands holding it. The urge to pull the trigger when the door opened was almost overwhelming.

If it hadn't been for the familiar honey-colored hair, I probably would have fired, or at least tried to. It had to be Hud, right? Until I saw his face, though, I wasn't putting the gun down. There wasn't a chance in hell of that.

I would fight before I went anywhere with my stalker. The last thing I wanted was a taste of freedom only to have it snatched away once more. I wasn't sure I'd be able to handle it if that happened.

HUDSON

The last thing I expected to find when Dylan sent me upstairs to check on Evie was her sitting up in his bed, pointing a gun at me.

"Don't come any closer!" Her voice shook with panic.

"Evie, it's Hud. Look at me, sweetheart, you know me." The tremble in her voice made my heart thud heavily in my chest, something that I was definitely not used to. "Can you put the gun down?"

"Sorry," she blurted before lowering the gun and practically flinging it from her hands as though it was a snake.

With that threat eliminated, I walked further into the room, leaving the door open so the light from the hallway could spill inside. "Do you want to tell me where you found that gun?"

She shook her head.

"I wasn't really asking, sweetheart. Tell me where you found the gun." I picked it up and tucked it in the back of my pants. My usual holster wasn't there, but it was enough to keep it somewhere out of sight and safe for now.

"In Dylan's closet."

"So you rifled through his things until you found a weapon?" I clarified. Part of me wondered if she would have felt the need to do that if we'd just told her that we believed her from the beginning. Maybe if she hadn't felt so isolated she wouldn't have needed to search for weapons. For some reason that thought bothered me more than it normally would.

She nodded her head slowly, like a kid getting in trouble and not wanting to admit what they did was wrong. It made me wonder what her childhood

had been like. No one should show this much fear for just trying to defend themselves.

"Why did you do that?" I wasn't angry at her for doing what she felt was necessary to feel safe. I was angry at the fact that she didn't feel safe in Dylan's room.

It wasn't like anybody could get inside. After all, it had a keyed entry. Any person entering had to use a key card, or they had to enter the code on the number pad outside. The room served as a last-resort safe area, almost like a panic room, except without the food stores and steel walls. All of the windows were bulletproof, though.

"Somebody was trying to get in," she said a little hesitantly.

"Somebody was trying to come into Dylan's room?" I could feel the frown that had formed on my face. Between her reluctance to tell me what had happened and the way her gaze shuttered at my question I knew she was taking my expression the wrong way.

The idea of somebody trying to get into Dylan's room was so foreign to me that it was almost like the first time I saw somebody dip fries in a milkshake. At first, it made no sense. The more you thought about it, and maybe even tried it, the clearer the reasoning behind it. I couldn't seem to figure out the reasoning behind somebody trying to get into Dylan's room if it didn't have to do with Evie.

"The door handle kept shaking, like somebody was trying to get the lock loose." She drew her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, balling herself up as much as she could. I wasn't sure what kind of pajamas she had on, so I was grateful for the sheet that covered her, preventing me from being a complete perv. The spaghetti straps on the top were tantalizing enough—not that I should be thinking about any of that right now.

I forced my mind to the situation at hand. "Did you hear anybody trying to press the code into the pad? Like beeps or anything?"

She shook her head no, her blonde locks tumbling over her shoulders as she dropped her head to her knees in what looked a lot like defeat. "I don't know what's going on. I don't know who's in the house, but somebody is trying to get to me."

I finally sat down on the bed and placed my hands on the top of her knees, sliding them until I could get them under her head and lift her face to look at me. "Evie, nobody here is going to hurt you."

"But somebody is here, somebody that wants to hurt me!" She stressed,

pleading with me to believe her. I did believe her, even if I couldn't say that just yet. "There were things drawn on my mirror. Somebody tried to break into Dylan's room. Someone went through my things, moving them around. You can't tell me that I'm imagining all of this."

The idea that somebody was in Dylan's house, wandering around and trying to get to Evie to scare her into running away would seem preposterous to most people. I wouldn't take the threat lightly, though. Evie felt sure that somebody was watching her and trying to get to her. As much as Dylan wanted to keep her in the dark, I didn't agree. I wouldn't go against Dylan and tell her that we completely believed her, I couldn't sit here and make her feel like she was going crazy either.

The fact that I even felt the urge to protect this woman was beyond strange. The idea of somebody actually getting to her and hurting her made fury rise in me faster than anything I'd experienced in years. It was the kind of emotion that, if I unleashed it, I would leave a bloody path in my wake until I was able to lay the corpse of whoever hurt her at her feet.

I didn't usually feel connections to people. The only person that I'd ever felt any kind of connection to was Dylan, and to a much lesser extent, Theo. He was the newest member of our little trio, which up until the point that he joined us, had been a duo. Even Ty, who had been part of the family for a long time now didn't feel as connected to me as Evie did. He was our third when we were out and about since Theo didn't like leaving the house, so I knew I should feel some kind of connection to Ty and yet I didn't, which was why this feeling I had toward Evie was so strange.

If Theo hadn't proved himself to be both absolutely trustworthy and talented, I never would have given in to letting him stay in the house. Being a member of the family was one thing but living with us was a whole different ball game.

All I wanted to do was make sure Evie was safe, but having her around like this...going shopping with her, touching her, tasting her...It all created a craving in me, one that I knew I wouldn't be able to satisfy anytime soon.

She was still too traumatized for what I wanted to do to her. I wanted that pretty pale skin of hers marred with my handprints, flushed red from our activities as I buried myself deep inside of her.

Now was not the time to think of those things, though. I reined in my thoughts, which was a battle in itself. "Did you find anything else you're not supposed to have?"

She pulled a knife out from under her pillow. My eyebrows raised.

"What a good girl you are," I murmured as I gently took the knife from her. The fact that she'd been resourceful enough to find two weapons made me want to reward her.

A blush stained her cheeks. It wasn't the first time she reacted this way to the praise. She enjoyed being called a good girl, which was information that I would most definitely make use of later.

"I'm not a dog," she snapped, denying the fact that she enjoyed the term.

"Believe me, I know exactly what you are." I let my gaze travel down her body. Still, consent was important. "Do you not want me to call you that?" I asked, letting my voice drop to a low, husky tone, showing her the desire that I felt for her.

"It's fine," she said with a slight pout to her lips, one that made me want to bite her.

"I already know you like it, and I know how to make your body sing, Evie. Don't test me, or I'll tie you up and make you mine in ways that you can't even imagine."

Judging from the blush that I saw staining her cheeks in the low light, I knew she was trying to imagine all the ways I could make her mine. Her face looked as red as a tomato.

"You better not be getting handsy on my bed." Dylan's voice came from the hallway.

"No, sir," I said as I pushed to my feet. "Just trying to talk your panicked little sunflower down." I flashed him the knife that was in my palm and pulled the gun from my waistband.

"Talk her down?" Concern laced his tone. "Is that my gun?"

"Yep." He strode over and took it from me.

"What were you doing with my gun, Evie?" He asked as he sat in one of the bucket chairs. He rested his elbows on his thighs, pinching the bridge of his nose with one hand and letting the gun hang from the hand between his knees.

"And your knife," I added as I strode toward him, handing it over to him.

"Somebody tried to get into the room," I answered for her. "Obviously they didn't know the code, but it's odd for someone to try to get into your room, right?" I was trying to make sure that Dylan at least appeared to give it some serious thought by forcing him to answer the question.

The idea that somebody could get this close to him was more than a little

uncomfortable, especially after all the security measures we had in place. He ignored my question, probably understanding what I was trying to do but having none of it. He was as stubborn as they came so if he'd made his mind up to not tell Evie that we believed her then he wouldn't let a simple question derail that plan.

"Have you ever used a gun before, sunshine?"

She shook her head, her lower lip trembling slightly. I crossed back to the bed, sitting down and patting the top of her head. "We won't let anybody hurt you."

The slightly sharp intake of breath that came from Dylan in response to my actions told me everything I needed to know. He could see the interest I had in this woman and was surprised by it. Hell, I was surprised by it too.

"So you were ready to use it, even though you don't know how?"

"I was ready to try," she snapped. "Somebody was trying to get into the room, trying to get to me. I needed to defend myself."

"You shouldn't handle a weapon you don't know or understand how to use," I said softly as I stroked her head a little more. "You could hurt yourself."

"Such reckless behavior should be corrected," Dylan said, his voice carrying a soft menace to it. I knew he didn't mean anything by it, but I couldn't help imagining me punishing her.

"What do you mean by that?" Evie demanded.

"I mean that I think Hudson should give you a spanking." My blood rushed to my cock at the thought alone.

"I'm not a child," she said, tossing the covers aside and pushing up from the bed. The little nightdress she wore barely slipped over her hips in time to cover herself.

How Dylan walked out of this room and left her in bed, I simply did not understand. The man had more willpower than I did, that was for sure.

My hand grabbed her wrist, tugging her to me until she stumbled into my lap. "You never know, you might end up liking it if you're my good girl."

She squirmed slightly, and my cock throbbed against my zipper. "I can't handle this right now," she said softly.

It was the edge of tears in her voice that made me release her immediately. "I'll punish you later, okay?"

I looked at Dylan, who was just scowling at me. Had I gone soft for this woman?

EVIE

The lights flashed, blinding me as I climbed into the cage. The thump of the bass vibrating through the floor and up my legs made me feel like the ground was shaking slightly.

I never wanted to come back to the club, but here I was. It was a Friday night as well, so it wasn't just the regular performances. The place had turned into an actual dance club as well.

The thin strips of material that covered my body weren't enough to make me feel protected, and my heart felt like it was trying to beat out of my chest. It was the most revealing dress I'd ever worn. One wrong move, and I would flash someone.

I swayed to the rhythm of the music as I tried to calm down. Nobody seemed to be paying me any attention, which was a relief. For once, I didn't feel as though I was being watched, so I eventually started to relax and get comfortable as I danced. Dancing was not my forte, but all the bar really needed was a pretty girl in a cage. Apparently, I qualified as pretty, especially with my hair being light blonde the way it was.

It showed up in the darkness like a beacon, and I could almost feel the moment people started noticing me. My hair drew them to me like moths to a flame. I wished it worked like a lighthouse in the sea that warned them, keeping them away. Some of the other girls had blonde hair, but it was obviously dyed with that brassy yellow undertone, and most of the others were brunettes. I stood out.

I didn't dare let myself look down at the crowd. If I did, I might not be

able to stop myself from freaking out. Instead, I focused on the women on stage who were dancing together in some kind of choreographed routine.

It wasn't a strip show like it was the first night I was here. It seemed more like a halftime dance at a football game, except these cheerleaders were more scantily clad than any cheerleader I had ever seen...and that included the ones that did professional games.

I copied some of their movements once I realized which moves they were repeating, and it felt good to be part of something, in a way. I mean, I knew I wasn't part of their dance team, but knowing some of the choreography made me feel like I was actually an employee at the club, not just a woman who had been shoved into a cage and told to dance.

The first time I felt the brush of fingertips against my skin, I ignored it and moved away as much as the cage would allow, I guess. Moving away didn't stop my heart from galloping in my chest or my breathing from becoming frantic, especially when the same fingertips brushed against me again.

I knew they were the same from the calluses I could feel on the person's fingertips. The lingering touch made my skin crawl.

The music shifted to a song that was slower and more sensual, and I did my best to adjust while also keeping my panic at bay. Each time I felt somebody touch my feet, I moved to the other side of the cage, but it seemed like the touches just followed, until finally someone grabbed my ankle, preventing me from stepping away completely.

As soon as I couldn't move, their other hand moved to work on the buckle on my shoe, as though they were trying to take it off me. The bizarre actions finally made me give in and look down.

I couldn't properly see who was touching me inappropriately. The person wore a black hoodie, which seemed strange in a club like this. Surely it had to be too hot, which led to me freaking out completely.

There was no way somebody would voluntarily wear a thick hoodie in the middle of a dance club, especially with the hood pulled up. Not unless they were trying to do something they weren't supposed to.

I yanked my foot away. The sharp jerk of the movement tore my ankle free from his grip. A sharp whistle sounded over the din of the crowd and the music.

Dylan ordered the bartenders to keep an eye on me to make sure that I was safe and didn't have a panic attack in the cage like last time.

Unfortunately, that was exactly what was happening this time too. I couldn't get far enough away, and I was being touched against my will.

Somebody was trying to take my shoes, of all things. Or maybe they were just trying to somehow get me closer to their level since I was wearing heels. Whatever the reason, it didn't matter. All I knew was that I needed to get away from them, and I had nowhere to go.

The door to the cage swung open on my left, and I almost lashed out at the person that was there. But it was the bar manager. Her busty corset was more modern than the last time I saw her, but it was becoming clear to me that she definitely had her own style.

"Come on, sweetie. Your shift's over." Her words made no sense. She nodded at me, as though willing me to follow her lead, so I did.

I hadn't been dancing that long, but I wasn't about to turn down a chance to escape this cage and the person who kept touching me.

She escorted me to the back. Once I was through the employee door, though, she went back into the crowd, blending seamlessly with the patrons. I scurried into the locker room, pressing the door shut behind myself and leaning against it, ready to brace in case somebody tried to push their way in.

When that didn't happen, I finally breathed a sigh of relief. My heart rate came down slowly, and I stood shakily, moving away from the door toward the lockers.

The flash of red in my peripheral vision caught me off guard. When I turned toward it, which also happened to be the direction of my locker, I froze in place. At first, I didn't understand what I was seeing, and then I wished I hadn't understood, better yet I wished I'd never even seen it.

A red, viscous substance covered the front of the locker I'd been using. I wasn't here everyday. In fact, I'd only been here once before, so no one should have known that the locker was mine...unless they knew what I'd worn into the club and used that information to figure it out.

I desperately wanted my things, wanted real clothes, but for a long time, I couldn't bring myself to touch the locker. The blood that covered it had to come from somewhere, and I didn't want to think about where.

With one shakey step, I stood in front of my locker. The tang of metal coating my nose and tongue made me gag. I hooked a finger through the handle of the locker and lifted the latch, ready to grab my stuff and flee, but that was the last thing I could bring myself to do when I saw what was inside.

I staggered backward until I smacked into the counter. Then I dropped to

the floor and covered my face with my hands, knowing that I couldn't force myself to look away from the bloody heart that was hanging in my locker.

This was more than a message on a mirror, and definitely more than my things being rearranged. This was a threat, plain and simple. One that terrified me.

HUDSON

Of course shit hits the fan at the worst possible moment. When I came back inside after making a phone call, I could see that Evie was no longer in the cage she was dancing in. I made no bones about pushing through the crowd to get to the bar.

"Where is she?" I called out to the closest bartender, not bothering to specify who I was talking about. They should all know.

"Dina took her in the back," the guy responded, barely sparing me a glance.

I nodded and made a beeline for the employee door that would take me back to the locker rooms and other employee areas. A hand grabbed me as I made my way through the crowd, and I almost punched them. I turned in time to see that it was Dina.

"Your girl's not doing good. You should take her home." For her to say that meant that Evie was in bad shape, which only made me worry even more.

I scowled, wanting to ask her what happened, but the truth was that she might have no idea. "Locker room?" I asked. I wanted to get to Evie as quickly as possible so I could shake the bad feeling that had settled in my stomach.

"Probably."

I hoped like hell she hadn't come out of there. If Dina was just on her way back, I doubted it, but I couldn't rule it out until I found Evie. I pushed through more and more people until I got to the employee areas. I didn't

hesitate to knock on the locker room door before I pushed it open.

What I didn't expect to find was Evie crumpled into a ball on the floor with blood smeared over her face, shaking violently. I started to move toward her, to figure out where the blood was coming from, but the locker door that was hanging open drew my attention as well.

To say the locker she'd likely used earlier had been vandalized was putting it lightly. With a quick glance, I tried to take in as much of it as I could without taking my eyes off of Evie for too long.

A sheet of paper hung from something in the locker. The word *whore* smeared across it in what looked like blood. Beneath that was a heart, blood dripping from it and onto the clothes she had worn to the club. The worst part was the dagger penetrating the heart.

It was clearly a threat. One that made my blood boil.

She had offended somebody somehow, and they were letting her know they planned on filling her future with pain. The only thing I could think of was that it was someone from the Ricci family, who originally purchased her at the auction. Did they think that this would be enough to scare her or for us to let her go?

They were mistaken, of course. At least about the part where they might force us to let her go. There wasn't a chance in hell of us doing that now, but it seems they *had* succeeded in scaring the shit out of her.

Not seeing anything else worth noting, I moved toward her slowly so I didn't startle her. I squatted in front of her, voice soft as I said, "Evie, it's Hud. Can you look at me?"

Her head jerked up at the sound of my voice, and her eyes went wide. Not just wide with surprise, but wide from shock as well, which was something her pale skin and rapid breathing could attest to.

"Hud. Th—there's—there's—"

"I know. I saw." I cut her off before she started to talk herself into another panic attack. "We're going to get you out of here and get you to safety. Don't worry. Are you hurt?"

"No," she mumbled.

When I looked at her, I realized there was blood on her hands, probably from her opening the locker, and that's what had smeared over her face. As far as I could tell, there wasn't any fresh blood coming from anywhere on her, which was a relief.

"I'm just going to text a couple of people, okay? I'll be right here,

though." I slid my phone from my pocket and messaged the two other members of our team that were outside, telling them to send one to the locker rooms and for the other to drive the car around to the back exit. I also texted Dina, asking her to come back to the locker rooms as well. As much as I didn't want this kind of thing on my phone I took a couple of photos for evidence.

I knew I should call Dylan, but I didn't. I didn't want to face the anger I knew he would be feeling, not over the phone. I'd rather see the fury in person, be able to gauge how reckless he might be instead of him hiding it from me. Whether or not he wanted to admit it, Dylan was attached to this slip of a woman.

Evie ran into our lives buck naked and took them over with just a few bats of her eyelashes. How that managed to happen, I wasn't entirely sure, but I knew that Dylan and I were both well under her control.

Not that she seemed to realize it.

The door burst open, and Evie screamed.

"It's just Ty." I dropped to the ground and pulled her to my chest, cradling her against me as I rubbed soothing circles on her back. This whole thing had gone tits up.

"Jared's pulling the car around now." Ty's voice was quiet as he took in the scene before him.

I nodded in response before I said, "Give me your jacket."

He did as I asked without question, and I wrapped Evie in the jacket, shielding her body from view. I didn't care that she had just been dancing in front of a crowd of strangers. There was something very different from standing up there and doing your own thing to being vulnerable and carried in somebody's arms while you had a panic attack.

I could have given her my own jacket. But honestly, I didn't want to let go of her long enough for me to take the jacket off and wrap her up in it.

Dina appeared a moment later, her eyes going wide as she took in the scene in the locker room. Before she could speak, I said, "Don't let anybody touch this locker. I am dead serious." I paused and held her gaze so she knew exactly how pissed I'd be if that order was disobeyed. "Ty is going to stay here. He's going to watch it, and I'm going to send somebody to do some analysis on whatever the fuck this is."

I really hoped it wasn't a human heart and blood, but I couldn't rule that out. Not yet, at least. The heart looked fairly human, but there was a good

chance it could be a pig's heart.

How somebody would randomly know that Evie would be in the club today and have a bucket of blood and a pig's heart on hand I didn't know. I wasn't ready to rule anything out at this point.

The worst case scenario was the first that came to mind, though. There could be a body around here somewhere that was missing most of its blood and its heart. If that was the case, there wasn't a chance in hell I'd tell Evie about it. The last thing she needed was to feel responsible for the death of a person, so I had to hold to the fact that it could be a pig's heart. I didn't actually know anybody that could actually analyze what kind of blood and heart it was, but I knew Theo would.

"I have to get her back and get her safe and cleaned up. Ty, you're on guard. Do you know why she was pulled down from the stage?" I looked between him and Dina.

"Someone kept touching her, and she was starting to panic. One of the bartenders saw it and let me know with a whistle. By the time I got there, I didn't see anybody suspicious around, but I could have missed them. The place is crowded tonight." Dina was as white as a sheet. Still, she was able to conduct business, which was partially why she was the manager of this club.

She could handle shit like this, as much as it sucked, and she was usually right about people as well. Dylan's plan was to try to draw the stalker out, and the plan may have worked a little too well. The fact that this place was busy was something we had both banked on and feared. If the club was busy, it was more likely that the stalker would try to make a move. On the flip side, the size of the crowd would also make narrowing down who the stalker was more difficult.

"I'll text you when I have more information," I said to Ty before pushing up on my feet and carrying Evie out. Before I was completely out of the door, I called over my shoulder to Dina, "Keep the rest of your girls safe tonight, yeah? I'm sure Dylan will want to talk to you."

She nodded, and I made my way down the hallway toward the back exit with Evie in my arms. A swift kick to the safety bar on the back door had it swinging open, and I got us through the door before it could close again.

Jared waited there with the car, just as I had instructed, which was a relief. At least something went right tonight. "Take us home as quickly as possible. I don't care how fast you have to go."

He nodded, though he just stood there staring at Evie for a moment.

"Open the back seat," I snapped. Jared wasn't a high ranking member of our organization for a reason, and that was mainly because he was a little slow on the uptake.

Once the door was open, I slid into the car, gliding across the leather seat while still holding Evie. I didn't give a fuck about seat belts or anything like that right now. The way Evie clung to me was like she was drowning and I was her lifeline.

Neither of us wanted to let go of the other.

Jared slid behind the wheel and took off. He gunned it when he saw lights turning yellow so he could make it through and zipped between cars that were driving too slow. All the while, I murmured random shit to Evie. I said anything that I could think of to help calm her down.

It turned out my years of watching the Discovery Channel had paid off. I never thought my binge watching would be used for something like this, though.

We were back at the mansion in record time. As the car skidded to a stop on the gravel, I let go of Evie for a split second to open the car door. She whimpered, and the block of ice that had been around my heart for most of my life cracked.

For once, I knew what it was to want to take somebody's pain away instead of inflicting it. I also knew a fury the likes of which I hadn't felt for a long time.

Dylan was there a moment later, likely having been alerted to us arriving back on the property. "What the fuck happened?" he demanded.

Evie burrowed her face into my chest. "We need to go somewhere private," I said as calmly as possible.

He just jerked his head in the direction of his office like I expected he would, and the three of us set off in that direction. Evie seemed to weigh next to nothing as I carried her, which surprised me.

Once we were inside, he shut the door, guaranteeing us privacy. Nobody outside of the room would be able to overhear anything, which was the way the office was designed. I sat on the couch with Evie in my lap, and she continued to tremble slightly.

"Evie, are you okay?" Dylan asked as he moved toward the couch as well.

I wanted to snark at him, to tell him that snapping at us as soon as we walked through the door probably didn't help the situation, but I understood his fear. Seeing her come back to the house with blood smeared across her

face, seeing me clearly rattled for maybe the first time ever...It had set him on edge.

"Somebody touched her again," I began before carefully choosing my next words. "When she got down from the stage and went back to her locker, she found that it had been vandalized." After shifting a little of Evie's weight, I pulled out my phone and showed him a couple of the pictures I snapped while I was waiting for Ty and Dina to get back to the room.

As I had expected, he was furious.

Red crept up his neck and onto his cheeks until it went all the way back to his ears, covering his face like a damn cartoon. The bloodlust shone in his eyes for a moment before he spun and pulled out his phone, hitting two buttons. "Theo, get to my office. Now."

He didn't even wait for Theo's answer before hanging up. The three of us sat in silence. Well, Evie and I sat in silence while Dylan paced like a caged animal. Theo appeared a moment later, clearly having run from his room.

"What's wrong?" he panted, his face going white when he saw Evie in my arms.

"We need to go to the club. I need you to get the security footage and any other information that we can find about the guests that were there tonight." Dylan gritted out each word like it was causing him physical pain to talk instead of growling like an animal.

"Theo can do that remotely. I'll go with you," I said.

"No, you're staying with Evie. Send me those pictures."

I nodded, knowing that Dylan was in no mood for me to pick a fight with him. "Theo, if you know anybody who can do blood typing or whatever bullshit, you might want to reach out to them."

His face went even paler, which I didn't think was possible, but he gave me a nod. As much as I wanted to go with Dylan, I also recognized the wisdom in his decision to have me stay with Evie. Theo, as good as he was, wouldn't really be able to protect her if we did come under attack at the mansion. I was decent with a firearm and excellent at physical combat, so I stood more of a chance of protecting her, which I knew was what Dylan wanted the most.

Still, him leaving made me uneasy. "Take one or the other guys with you. We don't know whether this was targeted specifically at Evie or if it happened because of the display you made out of claiming Evie as yours at the club last time. This might just be a lure to get you out of the house."

Dylan nodded as he shrugged into his coat. The long, black wool would hide the multitude of firearms I was sure he would be wearing by the time he left the property. "Put her to bed. Keep her safe." Seven words and he was out the door.

I understood his need to be active, to go and do something. If I hadn't been there to find Evie, I would have put up more of a fight about going with him. The image of her shaking and covered in blood with wide, terror-filled eyes was still at the forefront of my mind, though.

"Let's go get you cleaned up," I said. I lifted her and carried her upstairs to Dylan's room, going straight through to the bathroom where I ran some warm water into the tub. "Can you stand?" I asked.

"Yes," she squeaked the word out.

I wanted to ask if she was sure, but she was an adult. I took her at her word, turning away from her so I could properly turn on the bath. "I'm going to take your clothes off and we're going to get you cleaned up, okay?"

She nodded, but in her state of shock, I wasn't sure she really understood. So I was tentative as I began to peel the skin-tight clothes from her body. About half way through, I gave up and pulled the pocketknife from my boot and sliced them off. I made sure to only use the knife where she couldn't see, not wanting to cause her panic.

Once the tub was ready, I set her down in the warm water. It quickly took on a pink hue as the blood washed away from her skin. I vowed to myself then that we would find whoever did this, this person who's been harassing her. I had no doubt that she was right, that whoever it was was somebody in the house.

When I found that person, I was going to punish them for everything that they had put her through. I would bleed them dry. There wouldn't be a corner of this earth that was safe enough for them to run to to keep me from them. There wouldn't be a scream loud enough to stop the punishments that raced through my head.

EVIE

"Tilt your head back." Hudson's voice was the only thing that I could seem to hold on to and had been since the moment I first heard it in the locker room.

I did as he asked and felt warm water sluicing through my hair. He'd already cleaned off my face, removing whatever makeup I had been wearing along with blood that had come from the locker. His touch with the washcloth was gentle.

A vague sense of awareness told me he'd taken me from the club and that we had driven home. I'd even been somewhat aware that he had talked to Dylan, but everything felt like I was watching it from an outside perspective. It seemed like it was all happening to somebody else, not me.

Considering everything I had been through, it was almost funny that seeing some blood and a heart sent me over the edge. Still, as Hud worked to gently and thoroughly clean me as I'd come back to myself, reality crashed into me like a ton of bricks.

I knew that until whoever was behind this was caught and stopped, I wouldn't be able to leave the mansion again. If I was right and they were in the mansion, I was probably as good as dead. It felt inevitable, unless I had Dylan or Hudson by my side at all times. Or Theo, though I didn't think he would be on board with that.

"You were at school before you were taken, right?"

The question surprised me. "Yeah."

"What were you studying?"

"Sociology." I wasn't trying to be terse, but a lot of shit had just gone down, and now he was asking me about school? It just seemed kind of random.

"Huh. What were you going to do with it?"

"I hadn't figured that out yet. I'm still just a freshman."

His hands stilled against my head for a moment. "You're only 18?"

"No, I'm 21." This was starting to head into the territory of things I didn't want to explain or talk about, especially not right now.

"Did you take some time off between high school and college?"

"No...I attended high school late." I knew as soon as I paused that he was going to ask about it, and I didn't really want to spill my entire life story to him. But if anybody had earned it, it was him and Dylan.

"Are you going to expand on that, or is that all I'm getting?" His tone was light, a little bit joking, but I could hear the genuine curiosity behind it.

At first, as I thought about the questions he was asking, I wondered if he was genuinely interested in me. Was he really trying to figure out who I was and what I had been through? I wasn't sure since that seemed unlike him. After all, he'd made it clear from the beginning that he thought of me as an outsider, so why care now? Finally, I said, "I grew up in a unique situation. When I escaped from it, I had already aged out of what you would consider normal high school years, so I took some classes, got my GED, and applied for college. But when you haven't ever really been to school before, it takes a while to learn all that stuff, you know?"

"You hadn't been to school before? What was this unique situation?" His fingers rubbed over my scalp, making me feel more relaxed than ever. I think it was only because of that that the truth slipped from my mouth. "I grew up in a cult—the Children of Radiance. I ran away because I didn't like what they were doing. When I was found, I was taken to what essentially is a rehab program for people who have escaped cults. The problem is that it's more targeted to older individuals who went to the cult of their own accord. Not so much for young people who were forced to grow up in it without a choice."

"So this rehab program didn't really help?" Hud asked as his fingers moved from massaging my scalp to my neck and shoulders.

"No, they did, but the people who ran the program also took advantage of me in some ways. They did their best, though." I didn't want to tell him that they had also scarred me, that it felt like I had gone from one fire to another. I didn't want him to know that there were other people I ran into in the

program, ones who had left the same cult in recent years, who knew who I was and hated me. I couldn't tell him any of that without getting into other things that I wasn't prepared to talk about, so I kept my mouth shut.

He seemed to sense my reluctance and moved on to soaping a new washcloth before he began to wash my body. "So what were the beliefs that drove your cult?"

"Oh, you know, the typical stuff. Male superiority. Women are inferior—they're supposed to help around the house and bear children and nothing else, that kind of thing." He grunted, and I wasn't sure if it was acknowledgement, agreement, or what it meant. Water rushed over my body as he rinsed me.

His hands gently pushed me down in the bathtub, making sure all of the soap was rinsed from my body. If I didn't trust him so much, I might have thought he was about to drown me. For some reason, he had never really scared me. Hud and Dylan made me a little nervous, sure, but fear was never a part of the equation with them.

We fell quiet as he continued to soap different areas of my body before rinsing me off. He worked diligently, and even when I might have expected things to turn sexual, they didn't. This was a kind of intimacy I'd never experienced before. It was a type that I had no clue even existed.

I had never felt so cared for, or so precious, which was saying something since Hud hadn't known me all that long. This was the opposite of how my parents made me feel. The staff at Long Way Home, the rehab center, never came close to making me feel cared for like this.

Hud made sure every inch of me was taken care of before he said, "Come on, let's get you out of the tub before you turn into a goldfish." He moved around to the side of the tub and reached for a big, fluffy towel from the shelf before opening it and standing in front of the bathmat. "Do you need help getting up?" he asked.

I shook my head and pushed to my feet, standing there a moment while the water dripped from my body before I stepped out. His eyes never dipped to my body. I knew that because as soon as I stood from the water, his gaze seemed to be fixed on my face.

He wrapped the towel around me like a hug, leaving me feeling like I was being wrapped in a cloud. A cloud with very strong arms. He pulled me close and squeezed, giving me a gentle, but firm, hug. "I'll never let anybody hurt you," he whispered against my ear.

I smiled ruefully into his shoulder. "Don't make promises you're not in

control of keeping."

"I'm the only one who's allowed to mark that beautiful skin. Do you understand?" He pulled away and lifted my chin with his hand so I had to look him in the face.

"I understand," I replied, the heat of a blush spreading over my cheeks. "But you can't control other people's actions, and you can't be around me twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. That's just not feasible." I shook my head and gave him a small squeeze.

"We'll figure it out, though. Nobody's going to hurt you again. You're ours now. Do you understand that?"

I nodded slowly. It seemed like there was a deeper layer to what he was saying, but I didn't want to make assumptions that weren't true. He leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on my forehead. It was a tender gesture coming from a man that I knew could be brutally violent should he choose to be.

After he pulled away, he started drying me off methodically, moving from my neck down to my arms and chest, working his way down my body. He still wasn't flirting or making any crude jokes like I was used to.

"Hud?" I asked. He paused and looked up at me, his cerulean gaze locking with my own. "If it turns out to be human remains in my locker.." I swallowed thickly as I said the words. "Can we find out who they belong to? I'd like to go to the funeral."

"That would just be torturing yourself," he said sharply before looking back down. "You don't need to know whether it was a human or not, and you certainly don't need to know who the heart belonged to if it is human. Besides, it was probably a pig's heart. I've seen that tactic before."

"If it is a human heart, though...Then I need to pay my respects. You might not understand that, but to me, that's an important part of death." I didn't say it out loud, but when a member of the Children of Radiance died, it was expected that everyone went to see the family. We would take them some food, help them grieve, and help manage the process for them. There was a schedule that we all followed. The schedule staggered us, so we didn't overwhelm the poor grieving family. Despite coming from the cult, the process was something that I appreciated more as I got older.

As Hud finished drying me off, he wrapped the towel around me once more. "I'll ask Dylan what he thinks. I'm not promising anything, though."

"Passing the buck, huh?" I offered him a small smile.

Hud shrugged and grinned, seeming happy to see me acting closer to my more normal self. "What good is having a mob boss run your life if you can't pass the buck occasionally?"

It was the first time he openly admitted that Dylan was a mob boss to me. It startled me slightly, but was oddly comforting since it was finally confirming something I had suspected from the beginning. "Fair enough." I shook my head as we both walked out of the bathroom.

"Make sure to dry your hair as well," he said as his phone started ringing. When he pulled it from his pocket, I saw Dylan's name on the screen. "I'll be right back," he said. "Don't leave the room."

"I won't."

He disappeared through the door. For some reason, I expected him to stay just outside so I could hear his voice through the door, but as he answered, his voice faded down the hallway. A shudder ran through me, and I quickly pulled on some underwear, leggings, and a t-shirt with some house slippers before toweling off my hair.

I wasn't sure what to do now.

I was clean.

I was dressed.

And somebody had potentially died to prove a point.

It wasn't something I was comfortable with.

I paced the bedroom, and the more I thought about it, the more antsy I was to know if the heart and blood belonged to a human, a pig, or something else. What kind of life had been taken so selfishly?

The longer I was on my own, the more my nerves seemed to rattle. I didn't want to be by myself right now. It didn't feel safe, but I understood that Hud and Dylan had things to take care of that they couldn't do around me.

If they had left Theo, I could have stayed with him, but Hud had stayed instead. While I didn't object because I felt like he would be better in a fight, it still sucked that he had to go and take phone calls out in the hallway just because they didn't want me to hear what was going on.

As I started to hear the sound of his voice moving back in my direction, I went and waited for him in front of the door. I didn't stand close enough for him to smack me with it when he opened it, but I was close enough that it was clear I was eager for his arrival.

I promised myself that as soon as he came back in, I would latch onto him and not let go, no matter what he had to do or talk about in front of me. When

the tone of his voice changed, rising and growing panicked, I wasn't sure what to make of it.

"Dylan? Dylan!" Hud yelled. "The fuck is going on?" Unlike before, his voice was loud enough that I could hear it through the walls. "Is that gunfire? Get somewhere safe. I'm on my way." Those words were the last thing that I heard before his footsteps thudded down the hall.

Away from me.

The idea of being alone in this house, or with just the staff who I didn't know or trust, was too much. I bolted out of the door after Hud. I had to go with him to wherever Dylan was. He wouldn't like it, but I knew he'd be in too much of a rush to fight me. I just had to make sure that I caught up to him. No matter what.

EVIE

As I rounded the corner of the hallway to go down the stairs, I felt a presence behind me. Chills broke out over my skin. I tried to run, only to feel a hand clamp down on the back of my t-shirt and yank me backward.

"Hello, Brittany." Sean's voice froze me in my tracks.

No, no, no, no, no.

Anybody but him.

Panic seized me, and I threw myself forward. I almost fell down the stairs, but I achieved my goal of yanking my t-shirt free from his grip. I didn't waste a second as I began moving down the stairs toward the main area of the house.

Sean followed me with frantic leaps and bounds, covering the same distance in less time until he was at the bottom of the stairs only a second after me. With the length of his stride, he caught up with me in a matter of heartbeats. Before I had the chance to pivot to try and get away, his hands wrapped around one of my wrists, holding me in place.

"You can run, but I'll always catch you. I'll always find you. This time, if you don't willingly come with me, if you try and pull another stunt like you did back at the auction house, your new boy toys will suffer. Would you rather have them pay the price for your disobedience?" His grip tightened on my wrist as I struggled. Apparently he wasn't worried that I would break free because he released one of his hands and pulled his phone from his pocket, holding it up to show me a photo.

It must have already been pulled up for this exact moment, which was

annoying. He was so damn confident that he'd catch me that he had everything ready to go.

The worst part was the photo itself, though. Dylan was on his knees with a knife pressed to his throat. There was murder in his eyes.

How the hell had they gotten the drop on him? I had no idea, but I wasn't about to sacrifice Dylan's life for my own. I stilled and stopped struggling.

"I knew you could be reasonable, Brittany." It was almost like he was saying my old name just to drive home the point that he was taking me back to the cult. Or maybe it was that he still saw me as the person I had been before I ran away.

I didn't respond, didn't want to give him anything to work with or any opening to try and weasel his way into.

He slipped his phone back into his pocket. The hand that had been holding the phone lifted until he cupped my face. I had to fight the urge to pull away. "You were so beautiful and pure once, and now look at you. You've turned into such a whore."

The pity on his face was only there for a moment before it turned into some kind of sick glee. "I'm sure the Light Father will have a hard time making you pure once more, but if anybody can do it, he can. Once the filth has been scrubbed from your soul, you can become the Light Mother, and I'll be your Light Brother. Everything will be as it should be. Who knows, maybe the Light Father will realize what a good bond we have and allow me to take over his position."

I wanted to snort. There was no way the Light Father would ever give up the power he had over the cult. I didn't make a sound, though.

I kept my face carefully neutral. If Sean was just power hungry, there was no telling what he might do to get what he wanted. Especially if he had me as a bargaining chip.

"We're going to go down to the garage, and I'm going to put you in the trunk of a car. You're not going to fight me, do you understand?" I nodded. "We're going to get out of here. Once we're a fair distance away, I'll let you out and you can sit in the back seat, provided you promise good behavior. Do you think you can handle that?"

I nodded again, but the simple action didn't seem to be enough for him.

"Tell me you understand, Brittany."

"I understand, Sean." Those three words tore at my soul in a way I hadn't expected.

I didn't want to understand, and I sure as hell didn't want to obey. How could I not if my reckless behavior was just going to punish those I cared about? The thought wasn't completely foreign to me, but I'd been ignoring it until that point. The truth was, I *did* care about Dylan and Hud. Whether they saw me the same way wasn't in my control, so I hadn't allowed myself to contemplate my feelings for more than a few seconds.

"Good. Once we're back on the compound, I'll have them let Dylan go. However, until you're safely ensconced within the walls of the compound again, I won't put up with any shenanigans from you. No desperate attempts to save your demonic boyfriend's life. No heroic attempts to escape and go to him. No escape attempts, period. Do you really understand what I'm saying to you?"

"Yes."

"Yes. What?"

He had let me get away with calling him by his name before, but I knew that wasn't what he wanted this time. "Yes, Elder Brother." I bowed my head and rounded my shoulders, assuming the submissive pose of the women who were members of the Children of Radiance.

"Just so you know, don't think you can trick me again like you did before. I have this and I'm not scared to use it." He pulled a knife from his pocket, flicking it so the blade extended. "And if I have to get this out, I'll take my frustrations out on you and satisfy myself with your body. What's one more sin when the Light Father will be cleansing you anyway? It's not like you aren't familiar with the act. I've heard you screaming their names, filling your body with their filth."

The urge to vomit was strong, but I took a deep breath and quietly replied, "I understand, Elder Brother." Of course, the women of the Children of Radiance weren't loud and their voices weren't harsh. They were soft, weak, and controllable.

Sean led me through the mansion, going through hallways and doors that I had never seen before. I followed him just as he asked, maintaining the same meek posture that I had grown up with. It didn't matter that it was slowly killing something inside of me. The part of my soul that was hurting was fragile and small like a flower. It was one that had just started to grow but hadn't quite bloomed. It was a flower that was being crushed under the heel of a boot.

Finally, after going down another small set of stairs, we emerged in the

garage. I'd been there a couple times before, but the car had always been waiting, so I hadn't really had a chance to look around.

This time, we came out through a side door instead of the main doors or the elevator, which gave me more of a chance to see the cars. Not that I should have wasted my time paying attention to them. For the time being, however, I didn't see a way to escape without risking Dylan's life, and I wasn't about to do that.

There were all different kinds of vehicles down here, everything from SUVs, to sports cars, to motorcycles, and even to vans that looked like they would be used to kidnap a person. The vans were not an encouraging sight. Sean seemed to know exactly where he was going and stopped by a box on the wall that looked like it held the keys.

He opened it, clearly expecting to find the key he needed waiting inside, and yet it was empty.

"Looking for these?" Hudson's voice echoed through the garage.

I turned toward it, like that same flower reaching for the sun, and I saw him and Theo standing next to one another. I thought Theo was going with Dylan to the club to get the security footage, so I was surprised to see him here at all if I was being honest. I wasn't sure if they would be able to save me without also risking Dylan's life, and I wouldn't blame them if they chose Dylan over me. After all, he was their boss and longtime friend. I had only known them a few weeks.

"Just let me take what's mine," Sean snarled.

Hud shook his head. "She's a human being. She's not yours."

"She is mine, and I'm going to rightfully restore her to the place where she should be, where she can fulfill her destiny." Sean was so angry that I could see spittle forming at the corners of his lips.

"The fuck do you think this is, boy? Some fantasy novel?"

I felt a sharp sensation against the base of my throat, and I realized that Sean had moved behind me and was pressing the knife that he carried into my skin. This was not the turn of events that I had been hoping for.

The steel pressed further and further in, until I winced at the pain. Surely, he had to be breaking skin by now. A fact that was confirmed by the absolutely feral look that crossed Hud's face. Even Theo shot a concerned glance Hud's way.

Sean wasn't exactly unpredictable, but I didn't know how to get myself out of this situation without accidentally making myself bleed out. I had to

trust Hud and Theo, trust that they'd do everything they could to prevent me from being taken. I just hoped that my trust wasn't misplaced.

EVIE

"Just let her go. You can't win against us." Hudson's voice was calm and deadly. The killer in him had come out to play. Yet I was still more scared of Sean than I was of Hud.

"I can if I have your boss tied up. I have somebody with a knife on his throat, so either you let me go and let me take Brittany with me, or your boss dies. Your choice."

"I assume that's the same bluff that you used on Evie?" Hud asked, stressing my name. "You had to tell her something to get her to follow you and comply with the orders you're giving her. I know she wouldn't be willingly standing there, otherwise."

"The problem is that your lie won't work on me because I just talked to my boss. I know that he's safe, and I know that there isn't a knife pressed to his throat. Even if there was, he's talented enough to get away by himself. You let Evie go, and I'll toss you the keys to whatever car you want in this place. You can drive out of here unharmed, but you'll be going without Evie...unless she is voluntarily going with you."

Hud looked at me at the end of his rant, and I shook my head, skin biting into the blade as I did so.

"The fact that you've touched her at all is disgusting. I won't let you keep her. She has a bigger destiny. She will be the Light Mother and bring a new generation of the Children of Radiance into being." Sean spat the words at Hud, making me flinch.

"Do you even hear yourself, man? You're fucking crazy." Hudson

sounded as though Sean was trying to convince him that aliens were real. To Sean, continuing with the metaphor, they were.

I was real. I was supposed to be the Light Mother as decreed by the Light Father.

In his world, I was going to have lots of babies by the Light Father and be used up. I wouldn't be a human being. I never had been in Sean's eyes.

Theo had slowly been edging forward, getting closer. Sean realized it but didn't seem to care—I knew that he was aware of it because every time Theo took a step, Sean flinched as though he was waiting for one of them to draw a gun on him and shoot him or something.

"You know if you don't let her go, we're going to put you in the ground, right?" Hudson said softly. In some ways, it almost sounded like he was talking to a good friend, but this voice was more terrifying than if he'd been yelling. Because I knew whatever he said in this voice, he truly meant.

"Teddy, you know I'm right. You know she belongs to us." Sean's voice sounded from behind my shoulder.

Teddy? Sean turned slightly toward Theo when he said the name. When I looked too, I saw that Theo's cheeks were bright red.

A vague memory surfaced—the scandal when one of the boys ran away a few years ago. His parents had grieved because he was so smart and had such a promising future, one that would be corrupted by modern society. Suddenly, I realized that I knew this man, or I was at least aware of him before I ever met Dylan and Hudson.

"Hudson's right. If you want to live, you have to let her go." Theo's voice was different, more formal—it sounded like the same way that a lot of the younger members of the Children of Radiance spoke to older ones. "Elder Brother, please. The Light Father can pick a new Light Mother, he just needs to make it official. Brittany clearly does not wish to be the Light Mother, so you should let her go." My stomach turned at his words.

Sean wouldn't hear it, though. "This is just a trial we're being put through. She has to be tested to prove that she will bear strong enough children to continue the Children of Radiance."

Theo, or Teddy, shook his head. When he ran a hand through his hair, pulling it back and letting me clearly see his face for the first time, my suspicions were confirmed. I really had known him as Teddy. As Theodore. "You don't stand a chance of getting out of here, Sean. Just let her go, and then we'll let you go. You at least live that way."

Part of me expected some big brawl, for a fight to break out between the three of them. I expected to be injured in the process. Hudson and Theo were trying their best to talk him down, though, which I hadn't expected. Plus, they were agreeing to let him go, which I also hadn't expected.

After a tense moment of silence, Sean backed down. "Toss the keys over. I'll walk to the car, and then I'll let her go." A rush of adrenaline coursed through me as I realized I might actually get out of this uninjured.

"Not a chance in hell," Hud barked as he took what seemed to be an involuntary step forward. "I give you the keys while you're still holding her? You'll just try to take her."

"I swear on the Light Father's name that I won't." That was a big thing for a member of the Children of Radiance to say since the Light Father was basically a living god to them, so I knew he wasn't messing around.

"He's serious." Theo's voice was muted, as though his words might give him away even more. It was obvious that he was a member of the cult at some point, and I definitely recognized him a little. There was no going back now.

Hud glanced at Theo before finally asking, "Okay, which car are you taking?"

We all stood there in a pregnant silence as Sean debated his exit strategy. "I'll take the big bastard over there." Sean pointed to a big, boxy looking SUV that was deep blue in color.

Hud reached behind himself and unclipped a giant key ring from what I assumed was his back belt loop before rifling through the keys to find the one that Sean needed.

"Walk with me," Sean growled softly as we edged toward Hudson and the car.

Hud threw some keys in Sean's direction, and they fell to the ground.

"Pick them up," Sean commanded.

As soon as the knife was gone from my throat, I felt it pressing against my back. I bent over and picked them up before handing them to him.

"You stand next to the driver's side door and wait until it shuts. I want to be sure I can get out of here, without your new boyfriend's opening fire on me."

The closer we got to the SUV, the jumpier Sean became, which was worrying. He wasn't the only one, though. I was more than a little nervous as I sensed the massive bulk of the SUV getting closer than it needed to be.

When we got even closer to the car, I realized that he seemed to be dragging me toward it. As we reached the driver's side door, he started to pull away from me a little bit, leaving just the knife pressed against my throat.

"You know, Teddy, it's not too late for you to come back. It would all be forgiven, especially if you brought her back with you." My eyes were glued to Theo, watching his reaction. For a second, I could swear that it looked like he was considering it. My stomach turned.

If Sean was fast enough, he could get me in the car and pull away before anyone could stop him. And that wasn't something I was okay with, whether he swore on the Light Father or not.

"You know the Light Father knows where you are," Sean's voice was quiet, so only I could hear it. Just loud enough that the guys would have no idea what he was saying, likely being irritated by the fact that they were being left out. "I already sent him a message. Once I get out of here, I'll be able to bring him here to take you back himself, or maybe this little display will have Teddy turning back to the Children of Radiance as well.

"If he did bring you with him, it would do a lot to smooth things over, though I can't say the elders are going to be very impressed with his hair or piercings. Then again, maybe it would be better if you were out of the picture completely."

"You know the only way the Light Father is going to let me go is if I'm dead," I snarled. "Especially now that you've held me in front of him like a carrot on a stick. Is this your grand plan? Just leave, Sean. Get the Light Father to come and take me. These men care about me, they'll put up a fight."

"Do they care about you enough to kill members of the Children of Radiance?"

"Yes," I bluffed. Honestly, I had no idea. I'd like to think that they cared about me enough to do that, but the reality was that they might not care about me enough at all. "Tell me something," I murmured, trying my best not to move my throat since every time I did, the blade bit further into my skin. "Was the heart in the locker a human heart?"

"Of course it was. I wouldn't give you an inferior product. You're the Light Mother."

"Whose life did you take just to scare me?"

"One of those other whores at that club. I'm sure they've probably found her body by now. Now, if you'll excuse me." Sean moved further away from me, the click of the driver's door opening was like a bell tolling decision time.

Either he took me or he didn't.

He slid the knife around my throat, pressing it into the side so he could get as much distance from me as possible. I thought for sure he was just going to slit my carotid artery and break his word about letting me go.

The whoosh of the car door sounded from behind me, and I knew that this whole ordeal was almost over, which only served to make me more tense than I had been before. In a strange moment of clarity, I knew Sean was either going to take me with him or he was going to kill me. There was no way he would just let me go, especially not after the stunt I pulled to get away from him at the auction house.

I'd done the most dangerous thing a woman could do. I wounded his male pride, dented his ego, and rejected him sexually all in one go. For a man like Sean, there was no way he wouldn't repay that debt.

He lunged for me at the last second, right when he could have gotten into the car and gotten away. "The Light Father doesn't need to dirty himself with a filthy whore like you, bitch. But since he's obsessed with you, I'll have to fix that problem myself. You don't deserve to live and feel his love, and your dirty body sure as hell doesn't deserve to bear his children."

The knife that had been at my throat disappeared, and suddenly an incredible, sharp pain bloomed in my back. The asshole stabbed me.

I was vaguely aware of letting out some kind of strangled cry before I crumpled to the floor, the pain debilitating enough that I couldn't support myself enough to stand anymore. The thump of the car door closing behind me and the screeching of tires were the only things that made me aware Sean had left.

Shouts sounded in the distance, but I wasn't sure who was making noise anymore. The last thing I saw as the darkness closed in around me was Theo reaching for me.

Terror flooded my veins. It was the same type of terror that I felt the first time I saw Sean at the auction house.

I had no doubt that Theo had changed his mind and was going to go back to the cult and take me with him, whether I was alive or not.

SOMEWHERE IN THE DISTANCE...

I felt the orgasm pulse through the base of my cock as I spilled myself inside the girl underneath me. She writhed in fake pleasure, as though I'd done anything to please her. Once I was finished, I pulled out and wiped myself off. I didn't want to stink like her cunt for the rest of the day.

"You better pray that you conceive a child this time, or this will be the last time you ever grace my bed." I turned away from her, not wanting to have to look at her any longer than necessary.

"Please, Light Father, please make me the new Light Mother. I'll have as many children as you want. You can use me whenever, wherever. My body and soul are yours. You can be rough, you can f-fuck me, you can do whatever you want to me. Just let me make you happy."

I spun toward her and slapped her across the face. "What kind of language is that for a lady to use?"

"I'll do anything, Light Father, just make me the Light Mother. Any command you give, I will follow. Any request you have, I'll fulfill." The desperation on her face made me want to vomit, but it gave me a sense of satisfaction. She was completely under my control, whether she conceived a child or not, I could do whatever I wanted with her, and she would gladly obey.

A flicker of my distaste for her must have shown on my face because she added, "If you want to beat me, you can. Take out your frustrations on me,

Light Father, and I will bear it as your Light Mother."

I wanted to laugh. Like she knew what a beating was. I had barely even touched her. That slap was nothing, and still she was offering herself up like that? I was half tempted to show her what exactly she was offering, but I'd never make her Light Mother. She would take the beating thinking that her new position would be the reward, and that was something I couldn't allow.

"I know I can give you what you want, just give me a chance, Light Father. Please." She reached up, clinging to my sleeve.

"You are too impure to ever be the Light Mother." I wrenched her hands from my shirt and shoved her back down on the bed. "Get those hips up, get yourself pregnant, and be done with it. We are each in control of our own bodies. I'm tired of you choosing not to have my child. Either have my child or get out of my bed, so somebody else can take your place." That was the last thing I wanted to say to her. So even as she begged, I walked out of the room.

Elijah was waiting outside like the good little soldier he was. "Light Father," he greeted me with a dip of his head.

"What is it? I'm not in the mood." Nothing ruined a post-orgasm high like a needy little bitch. Next thing I knew, she'd be asking to fucking cuddle.

"There's a message from Sean."

"Oh?" Maybe my day was starting to look up.

"He said that he found Brittnay."

"Did he now?" A flurry of excitement ran through my blood. I could finally get her back. "She's still in Ascendance Bay—apparently she's been going to school there. He said that although he hasn't been able to capture her yet, he's sure that he'll be able to and he'll bring her home."

"Like I'm going to wait for somebody like him to bring the Light Mother home. She's out there all alone, being taken advantage of by who knows what and probably consuming this media filth that they put out all the time. Her poor brain will be corrupted. She'll be manipulated and used.

"I want as many free men as we have to get out on the streets looking for her in Ascendance Bay. Use any information that Sean gave us. Finding her is our top priority. The only men who are excused are those whose women need them, and I don't just mean because they're complaining about the fucking dishes. Draw a line. Elijah, get our Light Mother back, or you'll be the next one to face my wrath."

Elijah visibly gulped. His skin paled slightly as he tried to hide his

reaction from me, but they all knew what I was capable of. I hid it from the women because of their delicate sensibilities, but the men knew. They knew that I had a vicious streak.

The only woman who really knew was Brittany, yet she had never blabbed. She kept it to herself and just ran away. She could have tried to bring the Children of Radiance to their knees, corrupting us from within, but she didn't.

Brittany looked out for number one, and that was something I could respect. It also affirmed the decision that I made long ago to make her my Light Mother, which was part of the reason I wanted her back so badly. She could handle violence. She didn't have the same delicate sensibilities as the other women, and fucking somebody who was afraid of you was so much sweeter than fucking somebody who was desperate.

With the other women, I always had to hold back. I couldn't be too rough or else they might complain and sow seeds of doubt within my precious community. No one would believe her, though. Not a runaway who had been corrupted by modern society and all of its temptations.

It made me wonder how exactly to stage her return...because I'd get her back. I had no doubt about that. What I needed was for everyone to see how depraved the outside world was. Maybe some drugs were in order. Get her high and walk her through the front gates, make her a spectacle for everyone to learn from.

Once I had her safely back in the main house, I'd show her that what she had seen that night was just a small glimpse into my personality, into how vicious and bloodthirsty I could be. I'd make her the one on the receiving end for most of it. By the time I was done with her, the only thing she would be able to do would be to bear my children and be a hole for me to fill.

If she died in the process, I'd just move on to our newest addition. After all, the family that donated her had money, and I could bleed them dry in the process. It didn't hurt that she was a pretty little thing. Shy and weak, already mostly broken by her father.

She was the exact opposite of Brittany, and I'd enjoy breaking her almost as much as I enjoyed breaking Brittany when she was the same age. I turned around and went back into my room, my cock hard all over again.

“Spread your legs, Wendy.”

The woman I had just finished with barely even reacted as she did as I asked. For now, I'd take it out on her. When she failed to get pregnant by me,

the Light would choose what to do with her. Just as it once chose what to do with Brittany.

It was a good thing. I had so many toys to play with while I waited for her.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Helen Scott spends her time alternating between fantasy and reality. She likes to think she'd be sorted into Hufflepuff and would have been a Physical Kid from Brakebills. Her days are fueled by tea and cuddles from her four-legged kids and amazing husband in their home in the Chicago suburbs.

When not reading or writing, Helen can be found baking, enjoying a walk in the woods, crafting, or playing video games. She's a lover of sushi and K-Dramas and is convinced there is magic in the world if you know where to look.

Whether paranormal or contemporary, Helen loves writing sassy, kick-butt heroines and drool-worthy love interests. She's the author of the House of Wolves and Magic series, the Cerberus series, and the Of Demons and Dragons series.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoey Shelby lives in the shadows with her wild imagination and characters that won't be quiet. She is terrified of snakes and ghosts. She loves llamas. She's a chai tea addict and really hopes you enjoy the adventure her stories take you on.

Thank you for reading!

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