



Filthy
CHRISTMAS

A SPICY HOLIDAY COLLECTION

Darcy Rose

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FILTHY CHRISTMAS

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DARCY ROSE

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CHRISTMAS OBSESSION

For months Vincent has watched his innocent, young, next-door neighbor.

He knows it's wrong, but he can't get enough.

She's his obsession. Shy, sweet, and incredibly naive. A true temptation.

As a hitman for the mob, his job is something he doesn't ever want to touch her, so he keeps his distance, forcing himself to ignore the primal need to take her.

All that changes on Christmas Eve when he comes face to face with Faith.

Unable to forget her sweet scent and soft smile, he knows he can't stay away any longer.

He's going to get the ultimate Christmas gift this year... his obsession.

FAITH

I'M AT MY DESK, STARING OUT THE WINDOW OF MY SECOND-story townhouse. It's Christmas Eve, and the trees outside are covered with white snow. The sky is full of clouds, and though it's barely into the evening, the streetlights have come on. Golden circles of light fall on the glimmering snow, and I see the lights on at almost every house in view—all except Vincent's.

Vincent. Just the thought of him sends a shiver down my spine. Our neighbor, Vincent, is an enigma. A handsome, broody, and unfortunately way too old for me enigma. Simply thinking about him feels wrong and forbidden, so I try not to.

Instead, I'm fantasizing about the day I get out of here, the day I can finally get away. I tap my finger gently against my lips as I daydream about a strong stranger, some man carrying me over the threshold of a new home. A new life, a new future...

I imagine my lover as tall, with close-cropped dark hair. His veins throbbing through his forearms as he touches me, the sharp angle of his jaw as he presses his forehead to mine, the feeling of his fingers pressing into the grooves of my spine.

I wrap a tendril of my brown hair around a finger as my fantasy turns a little darker. Ignoring the novel still open on my desk, waiting to be read, I close my eyes and focus on my daydream. My stranger starts to look more and more familiar, as I realize who I really wish was touching me...

“FAITH!” my mother’s shrill voice rings up the stairwell, making me jump half a foot in the air. My heart rate triples, and I shove the dirty thoughts out of my head.

As if she could read my mind. I know she can’t, but sometimes she gives me a look so judgmental and condescending that I fear she might hear my innermost thoughts. Which are, to be fair, pretty resentful. We don’t exactly get along.

“What is it, Mom?” I call back, turning in my seat but not getting up.

The seam of my jeans is pressing just slightly against my now swollen clit. I cross one leg over the other, trying to ignore the throbbing as my mom appears in the doorway to my bedroom.

Her hair is in curlers, and she has an almost frantic look on her face. She’s pouting slightly, and suddenly, I am reminded of her beauty pageant days. Sometimes, she still has the beauty queen affectations, namely, the megawatt smile on command and perfect graceful wave. It used to embarrass me so much when she would pick me up from middle school and wave at me from the car like she was on a parade float or something.

She tried to get me to do beauty pageants when I was a kid. After I burst into tears onstage three pageants in a row, she gave it up. Even as a child, I preferred to stay home, held up in my room, with my nose stuck in a book. It has always been our biggest point of contention.

“I invited Vincent over for Christmas cookies,” Mom says, sashaying slightly into my room. She’s still wearing her big fluffy leopard-print robe, with the sash tied tight around her middle.

“What?” I retort, my jaw dropping open. “Why would you do that?”

Vincent moved in three months ago, and my mom immediately tried to sink her shellacked claws into him. He drives a Porsche 911, and I swear I could see dollar signs in my mom’s eyes.

I can't blame her, though. Vincent is mesmerizing. Tall, with broad shoulders and dark eyes. His stare is intense, even from afar. Some mornings, when I leave for community college, I feel his eyes on me, tracking me like a hunter tracks his prey. And I like it. Even though I've never been with a man before, all I can think about is what it would be like to touch him. To feel his mouth on mine, to have him hold me with his bulky arms...

Yeah, yeah, I had a silly teenage crush on him. It is stupid. There is no chance he'd ever notice me. Who's interested in a nineteen-year-old girl who still lives with her overbearing mother? After all, Vincent is an adult; he appears to be in his late thirties at least.

He probably wants to date adult women who already have their life together, not the college student who fantasizes about him instead of doing her homework. Now I would have to watch my mom try and seduce him in my own home. My stomach is in knots, but I bite my tongue, keeping my opinion to myself.

My mom rolls her eyes—hard.

“You think I'm gonna blow the chance to marry a guy with a Porsche?” Her tone is sharp, and I feel a pang in my gut. It's five-thirty, and my mom never bakes. I already know what's coming next, but I ask her anyway.

“When did you make cookies, Mom?”

She pauses, pursing her lips at me. She crosses her arms and glares. Even with her blonde hair in curlers, she looks good for her age. Between three divorces, raising me, and kicking a nicotine addiction—twice, she always made time for her skincare routine.

“Don't talk to me like that. You know what we do, Faith. I'm not even dressed yet!”

I sigh deeply, holding back the urge to roll my eyes. She always does this. Invites someone over, without warning me, and then forces me to cook an impressive meal in less than an hour.

God, I can't wait to move out.

I close the novel and rub my temple with one hand as I rise from the chair. I cross my room and push past my mother, who is still standing in the doorway.

“Thank you, Faithie. I know I can always depend on you.”

“Shouldn't it be the other way around?” I mutter as I walk down the hall.

“What was that?” my mother calls after me, but I descend the stairs without answering.

Our home is modest and completely decked out in Christmas decorations. Mom dropped out of interior design school when she got pregnant with me, but she took pride in keeping a clean, showroom-worthy home.

We have a huge Christmas tree, covered in baubles and beads and tinsel, but everything is soulless. It's as if someone took a Pinterest post and brought it to real life. There are no happy memories, no soul to this home. All the tinsel in the world couldn't make up for a wino mom who only wants to marry rich—for the fourth time.

I tie my hair back in a ponytail as I enter the kitchen. I've been growing it out for a few years now, and the light-brown locks are nearly to my waist. I grab the butter, eggs, baking soda, flour, and sugar and arrange them all on the kitchen counter before washing my hands.

Even though I'm pissed that Mom is making me do this on such short notice, I do love to bake. When I was younger, my grandma taught me her secret sugar cookie recipe, and I no longer have to look at a written recipe to make it. This recipe is in my muscle memory, and I lose myself in the meditation of baking cookies.

I hum to myself as I cream the butter and sugar together. Christmas is my favorite time of year. I love the snow, the decorations, the feelings of love and goodwill that surround me. It's easy to lose myself in Christmas, to devote myself to feeling jolly and finding the perfect presents for my loved ones.

Before I know it, the cookie dough is ready. I roll the dough out on the counter and lean down to get the cookie cutters out when suddenly, I feel as if I'm being watched.

I turn around, noticing the window that faces Vincent's home. His blinds are shut, and why would he even be looking at me? Watching me through the window...such a stupid thought. He doesn't even know I exist.

I shake the thought out of my head and resume baking. Before long, the tree and star-shaped cookies are in the oven. I set a timer on my phone and look down at myself. My green Christmas sweater, patterned with little prancing reindeers, and black sweatpants are covered in flour.

Of course, they are.

Quickly, I pull the sweater off and over my head. I walk down the hallway in just my sweatpants and sports bra, taking a moment to hang the green sweater over the coat rack. I'll grab it and toss it in the laundry before Vincent arrives. I take the stairs two at a time, heading into my room to change into clean clothes.

I shimmy into a clean pair of black leggings. I could put on jeans, but some part of me wants Vincent to stare. To see how tight these pants are against my ass.

Maybe it'll get him away from my mother...

In only a bra and leggings, I look at myself in the mirror. I try to imagine myself from Vincent's point of view. Blue eyes, small breasts, long legs. But with my long hair and a trim figure, he probably sees me as a little girl instead of a woman.

Suddenly, I have an idea. Before I can stop myself, I lift my practical sports bra over my head and run to my dresser. I reach way, way back into my underwear drawer and feel around for the soft fabric. I feel the cool air on my breasts as I grab it and pull it out: the lacy black push-up bra that I bought on an impulse on my eighteenth birthday. I don't know why I did; it isn't like I have anyone to wear it for.

At least, not until now.

I slip on the bra and marvel at myself in the mirror for another moment. This bra makes me look like I actually have something to show off up here, and I feel sexy. I run a hand over each breast, admiring the small curve of cleavage. I wonder if Vincent will notice or even care.

The timer on my phone begins to beep. Crap, the cookies are ready! I pull on a red sweater patterned with tiny elves and give myself one last glance in the mirror, letting my hair out of its ponytail. As I exit my bedroom and speed-walk down the hall, trying to get to the kitchen before Vincent arrives, my mom squeals from the living room.

“Honey! Vincent’s on his way over. I just saw him through the window,” she calls as I jog down the stairs and quickly head into the kitchen.

My mother is wearing a fitted satin dress in emerald green, and though she’s showing far too much cleavage for my taste, the dress suits her. She has on a velvet Santa hat and bright red lipstick, with false eyelashes an inch and a half long. If it weren’t for the ugly snarl on her face when she sees my outfit, she would almost look beautiful.

“You couldn’t dress up a little?” she hisses, grabbing my forearm.

“Let go, Mom!” I say, pulling away. She pinches the fabric of my sweater between two fingers and grimaces.

“Polyester. I raised you better than polyester Christmas sweaters. Where did you even find this?” She’s speaking to me as if the sweater is an affront to her entire way of life. Which is typical for her.

“Mom, the cookies are going to burn,” I growl right as Vincent knocks at the door.

She whips around, letting out an excited squeal. As if she were a little girl seeing Santa. I roll my eyes and rush to the oven, where I pull the cookies out just in time. Removing them from the pan, I see that they’re a little golden on the bottom, but I got to them just in time. Even a minute more, and they would have been ruined.

I let out a breath as I set up the cooling racks on our kitchen island. I can hear my mother opening the front door and putting on the sickly sweet voice she only uses when she's trying to sleep with someone. Unfortunately, I know it well.

“Viiiiinceeeeeent!” she drawls, dragging out each vowel impossibly long. “You’re just in time. I just finished making my mother’s famous Christmas cookies. You’ve *got* to come and try them.”

Anger and jealousy rise in my chest. Not that I expect anything better from my mother, but it still pisses me off. She makes me bake cookies with no notice at all and then passes the work off as her own, all so she can get laid.

My hands are shaking with rage as I arrange the cookies on the cooling racks. I can’t hear what Vincent says in response, but my anger turns to panic as I realize he’s coming inside. My heart races behind my lace bra, and I freeze in place, staring wide-eyed as my mother and my secret crush enter the kitchen.

VINCENT

WALKING INTO THE KITCHEN, I ALLOW MYSELF A GLANCE AT my obsession. I catch her eyeing me curiously; something about the look in her eyes is strong but wary. The years with her selfish mother have not broken her spirit, but her soul is battered. She is innocent but wise, and she occupies my every thought.

I wish I could make her understand how special, how strong and brave she is. I wish I could do so much for her, have her by my side and give her anything she could ever want or need, but I can't. I can't have her.

I had to suppress a scoff when I enter the house to Margaret's boasting about her Christmas cookies as I hung my leather jacket on a coat rack. Instead of seeking out the girl I am really here for, I concentrated on holding back from calling Margaret out on her lies—that woman doesn't know how to bake a frozen pizza, let alone make cookies from scratch—and followed her into the kitchen.

Even if I hadn't already seen Faith making those cookies, I would've known Margaret is a liar. No one with hair that perfectly coiffed "just finished" making Christmas cookies. Margaret's desperation is nearly palpable, and perhaps in a past life, I would've humored her. Taken her to bed, then unceremoniously disappeared.

Ghosted, as my boss would say. But not anymore. I see through her lies, and it takes every ounce of control in my body to not scowl at her advances. But I play nice because this is my one chance.

The truth of the matter is that I'm not here for her. I'm here for Faith. Ever since I moved into the house next door, I've been watching her. It began with curiosity and ended in knowing every part of her life. I'm obsessed with knowing every little detail about her.

She attends the community college just down the road. She leaves for class at nine every morning and returns at five. Her favorite color is blue; she likes to read romance books and eat cookie dough ice cream. She listens to 70s rock albums in her car, on CD because she drives a fifteen-year-old sedan.

Meanwhile, her mother, Margaret, drives a Lexus and spends all her money on booze and clothes. She has enough money to send Faith to a nice college but chooses to waste her money on material, selfish things. It disgusts me. I want nothing more than to whisk Faith away from this small life and give her everything she deserves.

The more I learn about Faith, the more I know I have to protect her. Watch her, take care of her in any way I can. She is so small and fragile, she needs someone to look out for her, and her mother is doing a shit job.

Tonight is my only chance to see her up close. Then I'll go back to watching from afar. Back to yearning for the one woman, I can never have.

I live a life that she can never be a part of. Hitmen don't get to fall in love—especially not ones who work for the mafia. If I let her into my life, she would become collateral, a target, a weakness my enemies would use against me. If I drag her into my darkness, soil her lightness somehow, I would never forgive myself.

Besides, she would probably never go for me anyway. I am much older than her. I'm weathered, body and soul. She is young, full of light, and utterly innocent. We're the complete opposite, and there is no way she could ever see me for anything other than her neighbor.

I snap back to the moment, my eyes locking on Faith, standing there with a swipe of flour on her cheek. Her eyes are wide as if we've caught her in an indecent act.

Oh, if only...

“I just had to ask Faith to get the cookies out of the oven for me. She’s such a great helper, aren’t you, Faith?”

Margaret’s tone is dripping with sugar. To me, it sounds like nails on a chalkboard. She never uses this tone for her daughter, only condescending whispers and harsh snarls.

I know because I haven’t only watched them from my window. One day, while Faith and Margaret were out, I snuck into their house to plant two cameras in Faith’s room. One points at her bed. One overlooks the rest of her room. Every night since then, I’ve watched her.

Yes, I’m a fucking stalker. Yes, it’s wrong and perverted. It’s completely immoral and devious, but I don’t care. I’m going to hell anyway, might as well make it count.

Most of the time, she just reads, does homework, or sleeps. I watch the live feed obsessively, poring over her every movement. But I also watch when she touches herself. Those are my favorite parts.

She doesn’t have any toys, no vibrators or massagers. She even masturbates innocently, with two fingers furiously rubbing at her swollen clit until she’s gasping for air. It’s almost primal. I shouldn’t watch, but nothing else satisfies me. I must see her—all of her. She is my one and only obsession.

I set the cameras to record every time I leave the house, so I can come home and catch up with everything Faith has done that day. She spends most of her time at home in her room, but the windows in my home allow me to see into their living room and kitchen as well. That’s how I’d seen Faith making these cookies before I came over.

I watch everything she does. *Everything.*

It’s wrong. I know it is. But I’m addicted. She’s a drug I cannot kick. I need her in every way, even though I know I cannot truly have her.

That’s what makes it so surreal to be standing in the same room as her. To smell the cookies, she’d made just for me. To know what she looks like naked, what she sounds like when

she comes on her hand, but to have to introduce myself as if are strangers. Which, to her, we are. She has no idea how much I know about her. How much I want to unravel her, to strip her bare and taste her sweetness, to feel her beneath my body, my cock sliding into her, bringing her to the brink of orgasm again and again.

“Hello, Faith,” I greet, my voice low as I fight to keep my heartbeat even.

Oh, sure, I could assassinate enemies of the mob without a second thought, but saying hello to her makes me nervous? Of course, it fucking does. I don’t want her to know about the darkness that lives inside of me. The joy I get from killing people, the warmth of their blood on my hands, listening to their screams, and pleas.

Faith turns to face me, and I watch a blush creep across her cheeks. So fucking beautiful. I want to kiss her, to spread her out right here on the counter, and claim her as mine.

“Hi, Vincent. Merry Christmas,” she replies shyly, her blue eyes flicking away from me almost nervously. It takes everything in me not to step closer.

You aren’t good enough for her. Too dark. Too dangerous.

Luckily, I don’t have to stop myself because Margaret forces herself between us. She clings to my arm for a moment as she snaps at her daughter.

“Christmas *Eve*, Faith. It’s not Christmas yet.” She’s trying to sound like she’s playfully teasing, but I hear the edge in her voice.

Margaret turns back to me with a winning smile, pushing up her chest in hopes that I’ll get lost in her vast cleavage. I don’t fall for it, not when the only woman in the room who has my attention is Faith.

“Does it really matter, Mom?” Faith shoots back.

I hate watching the expression of hurt appear on her face and nearly throw Margaret off of me. But instead, I gently lift her hands from my arms and move her to the side. Margaret

stands dumbly, unsure how to react to me rejecting her advances, as I step forward.

“Pardon me for wanting to be accurate,” Margaret huffs.

She turns on her black stiletto heels—I wonder what type of woman willingly wears them in her own home—to open up a cabinet on the other side of the room. “Let me grab a serving tray, and we’ll have these cookies.”

While Margaret busies herself, I move closer to Faith. From here, I can smell her, the sugar cookies, and vanilla, all things sweet, wafting from her body. My mouth waters, and all I want to do is take a bite out of her. Her scent is intoxicating, enough to bring me to my knees.

She’s wearing a sweet sweater and tight black leggings. I can see the gentle curve of her ass, and almost stop breathing when she stands on her tiptoes and leans over the counter, giving me a perfect view of her sculpted legs. All I want is to hoist her over my shoulder and take her back to my house, where I can finally make her mine.

Stop! I can’t...

“You’ve made some wonderful cookies,” I whisper under my breath as I grab a sweater-shaped cookie. Faith straightens and looks at me in shock, like she can’t believe I’m complimenting her on the cookies I know she made.

Her blue eyes go as wide as saucers, and being this close to her, I notice that there’s a smattering of freckles across her nose. My stomach tenses, and I feel like an animal. I lock eyes with her as I bite into the cookie, letting the sweetness dance across my tongue.

Damn. It tastes amazing. Faith is an incredible baker, and just when I thought she couldn’t be any more perfect.

“Oh, I uh. No, it’s okay. My mom did—” she stammers.

I understand why she lies for her mom, but it pains me.

“I know the truth, Faith. Don’t worry.” I wink. It’s the only advance I’ll allow myself to make at her. I’ll behave the rest of the night, not because I want to, but because I have to.

Margaret pops between us with a garish plastic serving dish patterned with holly leaves. She pretends to be shocked when she sees that I've taken a bite already. It's overdone, as if she's an actress on stage, playing to the back row. In close quarters, it's annoying and insincere.

"Vincent! Tut, tut," she says, playfully slapping me on the hand. "You just couldn't wait to help yourself to my baking, could you? Well, I surely don't blame you. But let's go start up the fireplace, hmm?"

Margaret struts off toward the living room, and I motion for Faith to go ahead of me.

"After you," I say with a small wave.

She smiles at me from beneath a strand of hair on her face, and before I can stop myself, I wipe that stripe of flour off of her cheek. She lets out a soft gasp when my thumb makes contact with her face but maintains eye contact while her face turns red-hot.

She smiles again but quickly turns away, following her mother. I keep pace close behind, keeping my eyes on the back of her head. Wouldn't want Margaret to catch me staring at her daughter's ass. I must keep some semblance of decorum.

Margaret sits on the couch with one leg crossed over the other. Her green dress has ridden up enough that I can see the lace garter of her pantyhose. Faith must notice too because she gives a hefty eyeroll as she flops into the easy chair facing the couch. Margaret is patting the cushion beside her, but I decline and sit on the opposite arm of the couch, leaving one seat between us.

A friendly evening between neighbors. That's all this is.

FAITH

I CAN'T BELIEVE HE'S HERE. IN OUR LIVING ROOM, ON OUR couch. His large frame makes the space feel smaller. His body is so muscular, it should have the couch crumbling beneath his weight. I wonder what it would be like to feel that weight against me.

My cheeks heat at the thought, and I force myself to think about something else... anything else.

I could pinch myself. His top lip curls slightly in disgust when he looks at my mother. I can't believe he sees right through her. No one ever believes me, or maybe no one cared enough to.

Vincent is different in every way. I've never met anyone like him, and I don't think I ever will. He seems so in control of his every move like his body and mind are well trained, but every time he looks at my mom, I can see his disgust. The more I watch him, I realize that he must *really* dislike her to show so much disdain on his face.

The question is, why did he come over then? Surely, not because of me.

Just thinking about that possibility makes me fall so much harder for him. It makes me believe I might even have a chance.

Up close, he is the most handsome man I've ever seen. There is just a slight amount of stubble on his face, just enough to shade his cheeks and jaw. His hair is slightly messy but in an artful way. I've never known anyone like him before.

It still feels insane that he is inside my house right now, that he touched my face, complimented my baking. I keep pinching myself in the same spot on my palm until I realize it's gone numb.

"So, Vincent," Mom says, still using the saccharine tone that sends shivers down my spine. "How do you afford that Porsche out front?"

"Mom!" I protest. "That's so rude." But so typical of her. All she cares about are nice cars, flashy watches, and rich guys who treat her like shit.

"I'm making conversation," she snaps. Her megawatt smile turns to bared teeth in a flash, but her mask is back on once she faces Vincent.

"It's no mind," he says gently, raising a hand to me. He gives me a lopsided grin, and my stomach does a somersault. "My family and I own a chain of dry cleaners, and I manage the eastern branches."

"Which cleaners?" I ask.

He seemed too sophisticated to just manage dry cleaners. His gray sweater is lush and tailored perfectly, and he wears jeans that hug his legs, showing off his body. I guess it tracked, but who knew dry cleaners were so lucrative? Something doesn't add up.

"Fontanas," he replies, a slight Italian accent creeping into his voice.

Fontanas? That name seems familiar, but I can't think of where I know it from. I can't really think of much when Vincent is distracting me with his talking.

His voice is supple, smooth, like worn leather. I want to talk with him all night. I want to fall asleep listening to his voice.

"How is school, Faith?" he asks. My name catapults me back to reality.

His stare is intense as if he wants to devour me. I don't know why, but it makes me feel really warm inside. I probably

should be scared of it, but instead, I simply feel wanted.

“It’s going well. Next semester I’m taking a life drawing class.”

His eyes light up for a moment. “Drawing. Are you very artistic?”

“I used to draw a bit in high school,” my mom interjects. Leaning forward, she puts a hand on Vincent’s knee to bring his attention back to her.

She shoots me a glare, and I know what it means, *go away. Mommy’s getting laid.*

I purposely ignore her stare. She made me bake cookies; I’m at least spending a few minutes talking to the object of my stupid hormone-fueled crush.

“I am asking Faith,” Vincent says pointedly, removing my mom’s hand from his leg.

Is it wrong that I feel a jolt of happiness in seeing him do that?

“Well, yeah, I think so,” I say in a quiet tone. I love to draw, but I don’t usually show anyone, not that there is anyone to show my stuff to anyway. “I’ve been drawing on my own for a while, and I’m excited to get better at it.”

“I’m sure you’re already wonderful. What else are you studying?” He sounds genuinely interested. It’s as if he actually wants to get to know me more.

He’s leaning toward me and hasn’t taken his eyes off of mine. I’m not even sure he’s blinked. The guy’s more intense than I expected, but it doesn’t scare me. In fact, it only piques my interest. It makes me want to run away with him.

“Literature, mostly,” I reply.

He hums an approval, then takes another bite of his cookie. He finally looks away from me, turning to admire the Christmas tree. I let out a breath I didn’t even know I was holding. God, this man has my mind reeling.

I take the few seconds he is looking away to gather my thoughts. It's a nice, quiet moment, so of course, my mother has to ruin it.

“Faith, sweetie, I think it's about time you go upstairs and let us have some grown-up time,” she sneers, speaking slowly as if I'm a toddler.

I open my mouth to protest, but something about the ice in my mother's stare makes me back down. It's not worth it to fight her tonight. It's Christmas Eve, so I might as well just go to my room and try not to hear the sounds of my mom screwing Vincent on the couch. I push to stand up, hanging my head while trying to avoid looking at them.

Ugh, of course, they are sending me away. He was only being nice to me because he wants to be with my mom. I'm an idiot for thinking otherwise. I'm nothing more than a teenager to Vincent, the child of a woman he wants to screw.

“No,” Vincent snaps to attention, his voice demanding and firm. He whirls around on my mom, glaring at her, and for a split second, I see something in his eyes I didn't expect. Something feral, dark, and possessive. As fast as it appears, it's gone, and I wonder if it was there at all. “I don't want Faith to leave. I'm enjoying her company.”

“Vincent, she is a teenager. She would just be bored by the adult conversation.”

I ball my fists at my sides, grinding my teeth to keep from yelling at my mother. Christ, I'm smarter than she'll ever be.

“Faith is a grown woman, and I do not want her to leave, Margaret.”

His tone is firm, leaving no room for my mother to protest. My stomach flips again, and I feel almost dizzy from the emotional whiplash. What I would give for stable ground.

My mom looks angry and confused, processing what Vincent is saying. The sides of her mouth curl up in a sneer, and she stands up, patting down her dress angrily.

She wobbles a little bit on her heels as she marches forward but is fueled by anger at this point. Nothing will stop

her now.

“Well, fine,” she huffs, standing up and shoulder-checking me as she shoves past.

I stand firm against her, refusing to give under her weight, but it sets her off-balance. She tries to catch herself as she loses her footing, but the four-inch-tall spikes on the bottom of her shoes betray her. She throws her arms into the air and gasps, falling onto her back with a shriek. The sound of her body hitting the floor is a dull thud.

All is quiet for a moment. A giggle escapes my lips before I can stop myself.

“Goddammit!” she yells, grimacing on the floor for a moment.

Vincent is half-standing, staring at my mother on the floor in disbelief. His hands are slightly up as if he went to go catch her.

Suddenly, a laugh bubbles out of him, from a deep place in his chest. The laugh builds in him until he’s chuckling with his whole body. My laugh builds, too, blending in with his in the most beautiful way.

Mom tries to roll over on the floor but loses her balance, falling back down again. Vincent and I really start to lose it then, laughing uproariously until we start gasping for air.

“Faith!” my mother screams from the floor. “It’s—you have to take me to the hospital, Faith! I really hurt my back. I think it’s broken. Owwww.”

If I didn’t know that she was faking, I would feel heartless to continue laughing at her. I simply know her too well, and she is most definitely faking.

“You’re fine, Margaret,” Vincent says between chuckles. “Get up. Don’t make such a fool of yourself.”

In a moment, I brush against Vincent’s arm and feel the entire side of my arm become electrified. Vincent stops laughing and freezes in place, caught off-guard by the sudden wild-eyed stare he gives me.

His nostrils are flared, and for a moment, I think he might pick me up and carry me away.

Just like my fantasy...

He breathes in slightly, and even my mother stops moaning and groaning on the floor, her eyes fully on us now. The tension in the air is so thick, I can barely breathe.

He's staring at my lips as he takes a shaky breath, and I think he might swoop in to kiss me—like in the movies. That imaginary bubble pops almost instantly when Vincent straightens up and suddenly turns, heading for the door.

He pauses at the entrance to our living room, breathing hard. My mom gives up on the *broken back* act and pushes herself into a sitting position.

“Vincent? Are you all right?” Her voice cracking slightly at the end.

“I have to go,” he says in a strained voice, and I'm too shocked to say anything.

Did I do something wrong? Did he feel electrified too?

A moment before he turns away, my mom begins moaning on the floor again. I go to help her up, and Vincent leaves.

When my mom grabs my hand, I hear the front door slam. Shame, regret, and shock wash over me all at once. My mom seems about as surprised and embarrassed as I am.

I pull her to her feet, and she wobbles a moment before staying steady. I cross my arms and fight the urge to pout like a kid.

“Well, this calls for some cabernet,” she announces, turning on her stilettos and heading to the kitchen. I roll my eyes and leave for my room, where I can try and figure out what the heck just happened.

VINCENT

THOUGH IT PAINED ME TO LEAVE FAITH SO SUDDENLY, I couldn't stay a moment longer. The sound of her laughter, the sight of her smile, the feeling of her slender arm against mine, it made me into a beast. The sound of my heart beating reverberated in my ears, and every nerve in my body screamed, *grab her, take her, she's yours!* Blood rushed to my cock, and I feared that Faith or Margaret would notice the hard-on raging beneath my zipper.

Though I would have been okay with Faith seeing how much I wanted her...

Instead, I left. I ran away like a fucking coward—not before taking a little...souvenir, though—I'll never go into her home again, just watch from not-so-afar.

When I reached to grab the leather jacket from the coat rack, I spotted a green and white sweater hanging half beneath it. I checked over my shoulder, making sure Margaret and Faith were not looking at me and pulled the sweater from the rack.

Before I could second-guess myself, I left. Nearly sprinting down their driveway, checking back and forth to make sure that nobody is out on the street. My breath billows into the air in a white cloud, making it clear that I am panting like a dog. I force myself to slow down as I walk the short distance between houses, clutching sweet Faith's sweater to my chest like a talisman. My cock is still rock-hard, and my pace picks up again the closer I get to my front door.

I fumble for the keys in my pants pocket, my hand brushing against my erection as I pull the keys free. I've never unlocked a door faster than I do right now, with the soft, cookie-scented contraband against my chest.

Quickly, I open the front door and close it again behind me. Without even taking off my jacket, I unzip my pants and free my throbbing cock. The tip is swollen and purple, and my balls ache, begging for a release.

I should wait, do this in private, but part of me hopes Faith looks out her window and sees me fucking my hand. I want her to know what she means to me and how badly I want her.

Taking my cock into one hand, I stroke it from tip to base, at first slowly, before furiously pumping the organ, wishing it was Faith's tight pussy wrapped around it.

With my other hand, I hold the sweater to my face. It smells of cookies, and there are clear stains of flour and butter on it. It makes it all the more perfect. There's a slight smell of sweat and perfume; I can tell Faith wore this right against her skin.

The thought makes me shiver.

My cock jumps in my hand as I stroke harder, faster. I imagine this cloth against her pert breasts. Her hard nipples rubbing against the fabric. *Fuck*. I take a piece of the sweater and bite it, wishing I could taste her, too. Wishing my tongue was inside her tight hole. I'd devour her, eating her out until she begged me to stop.

My mind fills with visions of Faith's slender, naked body, a sight I am already incredibly familiar with. I have seen her naked plenty of times on camera but never been close enough to feel or smell her. Visions of her body, her face, her wide, open smile haunt me.

I bite down on my bottom lip as I grip my erection and pump just a few more times, watching the purple-tinted tip quiver. My heart is thrumming through the muscles of my cock, and I know I'm going to come soon.

Imagining the slight bounce of Faith's breasts, I wonder what it would be like to put those small, tender nipples inside my mouth. My thoughts swirl, and I think of her hot wet mouth, her ass, and her virgin pussy, how tight it would be around my cock.

Fuck, I want her so badly, want to unwrap her like a gift. I want to take that innocent girl and dirty her up, fuck her holes, make her scream my name and beg for my cock.

With my face buried in the sweater, my knees buckle, and my balls tighten as I release thick webs of cum onto the tile floor. A pleasure I would never, ever know.

As soon as I finish coming, a deep wave of shame overcomes me. I just stole a girl's sweater and used it to masturbate. What if she asks for it back? What if she tries to insert herself into my life now? Did I just self-sabotage completely to hold a sweater for a few minutes?

Never again, I promise myself and make peace with the fact that what's done is done.

As I zip up my pants and go to clean up the mess, I think about how my skills as a hitman have, in a way, prepared me for a love like this.

I am adept at making peace with my past sins; I only promise to do better tomorrow. If *doing better* means sniping a guy who tried to kill Tony Fontana, then so be it.

Once the mess is clean, I pause at the bottom of the staircase and take a breath. Technically, this is a safe house that belongs to the Fontanas'. After I carried out a hit against the head of the Polacks' uptown, I had to hide away for a bit. It was routine; that is, at least, for hitmen. You got used to the impermanence of everything, including human life.

It is a modern suburban home, more suited for a family of three or four. I can hear my footsteps echo most nights. The kitchen is large and modern and completely wasted on me. Most nights, I order takeout. Too tired to cook.

The house is nicely decorated, in green and brown tones. Very earthy. I'm indifferent to my surroundings, though. I've

had to stay in much worse places to stay safe.

And hey, this one came with a French press.

I climb the stairs, heading for my bedroom.

Though I could have taken the master bedroom at the other end of the hall, I chose to sleep in the guest room. It's smaller, and there's no attached bathroom, but it has a window that looks almost directly into Faith's bedroom.

If I keep the lights off, my window is far enough away that she won't see me watching her. Faith is usually pretty good about closing her curtains; most of the moments I see are through the camera. But every now and again, she decides to play or prance around with the shades open.

Maybe Santa Claus came down and gave me a wink. Maybe I'm just a lucky guy. But the moment I step into the guest room, I'm treated with a delicious sight, Faith, with her shades wide open, in the middle of taking off her sweater.

Despite the savage wank I just had downstairs, my cock immediately begins to get hard again. I can see her pale stomach, the gentle curves leading into the hem of her tight pants. But my heart stops when the sweater comes off, and I see the little black lace number she's wearing.

My god. I never would have dreamed my innocent Faith would own such a thing. But it does the job and makes my blood run hot. She looks so fucking sexy in it. Her breasts are round and nearly spill over the edge of the cups—my obsession.

Faith stands in front of her mirror, admiring herself in the bra. My heart is pounding fast, coursing through my veins with the excitement of watching her. She pinches the waistband of her leggings with both hands and begins to fold them down.

I almost worry she can see me due to how agonizingly slow she peels off the pants. I can just barely see the upper hem of her red underwear when I unbutton my pants and pull them to the floor, standing in the middle of my guest room

wearing nothing but a sweater with my throbbing erection hanging loose.

Faith is still oblivious to her open blinds, and though I will lose nothing when she decides to close them—thank you, cameras—I hope with all my being she stands there just a little longer.

She pulls her pants down to her knees, and I appreciate the gentle curve of her ass as she bends over. Her skin looks so smooth, untouched, unmarred.

Her hands are nearly on the ground as she steps out of her leggings, and she is positioned perfectly for me to get a view of her entire ass. I can just barely make out her pussy from here, the one thing I have not yet seen up close, but she straightens up before I can squint harder.

My hand is on my cock as Faith looks herself over in the mirror for another moment, bouncing slightly on her toes. She smiles and puts her hands below her breasts, laughing and bouncing again. I can see the ripple in the mirror.

This is the best Christmas present I've ever received.

Suddenly, Faith stops and gasps, turning around to face her window. I step back quietly, sneaking away instinctively as if she could hear me. Realization settles over her face as she turns and crosses her room in a few strides. She has to lean over her desk to close her curtains, and I am treated with a heart-stopping top-down view of her cleavage. My cock jumps in my hand, electrified by the perfect view. I watch her chest heave one last time before she pulls the curtains shut, and I am denied the pleasure of further peeping.

My heart is still rebounding in my chest. I am still feeling some residual shame at my depraved wank session in the foyer, and combined with the fear that she might have caught me, it's enough to make me dizzy. Taking one more step back, I lean against the doorframe. The painted wood is cool, and I take a series of deep breaths. The effect that Faith has on me is unnatural. No woman has ever occupied my thoughts the way she does. Many have tried. But not have succeeded like sweet, innocent Faith has.

Worst yet, she has no idea, and hopefully, she never will.

Confident that my heart rate is back in a normal zone, I step forward and tug my boxers out of the puddle of my pants. My cock has gone soft now, and I tuck it behind the underwear. It won't be long until I'm looking at her again, anyway.

I head to my bed and click the spacebar on my laptop a couple times. There's a nightstand exactly level with my bed, and at night, I set the laptop on it. It helps me to sleep, to look up and see my obsession, almost as if she were sleeping across from me.

Like in an old TV show, the screen glows to life, and I enter a series of passwords that only I know. You can never be too secure. After I type the codes, the live feed of Faith's room fills the screen. Bliss fills my veins when she enters the frame. She's wearing a big, baggy T-shirt with those same red panties from earlier. I can see the black bra on the floor, and I feel a pang of regret that I didn't get to the laptop sooner. I've seen Faith naked many times at this point, but to watch her take off that slutty lace number would have been divine.

My stomach twinges slightly with both guilt and hunger. Quickly, I take out my phone and place an order for egg drop soup and General Tso's online. Some enterprising Millennial gig worker was probably trying to earn a few bucks on Christmas Eve, anyway. It only takes a few taps to complete the payment, then I'm back to watching Faith. The guilt is still there, but I reason that I must simply learn to live with it. I'm not giving up this obsession. If I can't have her physically, then I'll have her any way I can.

She's sitting at the edge of her bed, thumbing through some battered paperback. I can't make out the title from here, but I can see her quietly mouthing the words to herself as she reads. More than ever, I wish that I could reach out and hold her, comb my fingers through her hair as she reads to herself.

Maybe she would read to me, run her fingers over my skin, wrap her arms around me.

Only in the dark, voyeuristic space of this bedroom can I admit it to myself, I want Faith to take care of *me* just as much as I want to take care of her.

FAITH

I DON'T KNOW HOW OR WHY, BUT LAST NIGHT, I HAD THAT weird feeling again. Like somebody was watching me. It was just like when I was in the kitchen; there I was, lost in my thoughts when suddenly, I could feel someone's eyes on my back. It was like my whole spine was on pins and needles. What made it worse was that I had left my curtains open.

When I went to shut them, I noticed that all the windows in Vincent's house were dark. He wasn't there. My window faces partway into his backyard and the backyard of the house behind us. Maybe the guy behind us had been watching me? Or maybe...

No, no way. I am just being paranoid. Even though Vincent had seemed so kind at the beginning of his visit, when he ran away, it hurt. He didn't want to be around me. So why would he be peeping on me? Please.

I told myself as I took off the black lace bra and slipped on an old camp T-shirt. *The simplest explanation is most likely the right one. I'm just on-edge and paranoid. No one's watching me.*

Before falling asleep, I read more of the novel I'd been working on earlier today.

It's a fantasy romance about an Elf King who whisks a peasant fairy girl away to his castle and treats her to splendors she never could have imagined. All she has to do is agree to be, in essence, his sex slave. It's a filthy read, but books like that are my guilty pleasure. I can experience all sorts of things

—things that I would never have the courage to ask for in real life—from the comfort of my bed.

After I read about the way the Elf King dressed the peasant girl in nothing but solid gold chains and paraded her around the town square, I tuck my bookmark back between the pages and put myself to bed. Part of me wants to touch myself before falling asleep, but I nod off before making a decision. After all, it has been a long, exhausting day.

I dream of Vincent all night. Most of the dreams are fuzzy and incomprehensible: shots of his face, his smile, his intense stare. Memories of the way I lit up when we brushed against each other. Fantasies of his strong arms lifting me, pinning me against a wall, dressing me in nothing but gold chains while looking at me as if I were a meal...

When I wake up, I can feel the throbbing between my legs before I even open my eyes. Fantasies of Vincent still dance behind my closed lids, and I want to hold on to them as long as possible. Without rolling over or opening my eyes, I use one hand to slide my white cotton panties all the way off. I'm lying on my side, so I kick both feet over the side of the bed to drop my panties onto the floor. Then I swing my legs wide open, feeling the cool morning air on my already-wet slit.

My room has always been the coldest in the house, and when I look down, I can see my nipples poking through the fabric of my T-shirt. Something about it makes me even hornier, knowing that my body is just as obsessed with the thought of Vincent touching me as my brain is. Every nerve in my body is on edge as I sit up, tossing my T-shirt over my head.

Slowly, I slide my hand down from my neck and over each breast. Bringing both hands to my breasts, I gently pinch my nipples, rolling the tips between my fingers.

I close my eyes and imagine Vincent's strong hands on me, touching me where I touch myself. In my mind, he takes my breasts into his mouth, pursing his soft lips around me, still gazing at my face while he sucks my hard nipple into his

mouth. He nips and bites at them, leaving me panting, gyrating my hips.

I can feel my pussy growing warmer and wetter and can no longer resist the urge to rub my throbbing slit. But, still imagining Vincent, I run my hands down my stomach. I nearly torture myself with the slowness, but the image of Vincent, naked and breathless, taking in every inch of me is exquisite. Even hotter than the idea of sleeping with him is the idea of making him obsess over me. To know that I enchant him as much as he intrigues me.

Once my hands finally reach the wetness between my legs, I lose control. My clit is swollen and overly sensitive, ready to make me come at a moment's notice. I want to go slow, truly I do, but my fingers move in fast circles. Pressing back into the mattress, I raise my hips to meet my fingers, slowly moving back and forth. The sounds of my wet sex fill the room, and it only heightens my pleasure.

In my mind, Vincent is gripping my hips, pulling me closer and closer to him, burying his cock deep inside me, taking my virginity. I gasp for air, furiously rubbing at my clit as my back arches and my toes curl. I wish the moment would last forever, that I could hold off my orgasm, but I can't. Racing toward the cliff's edge, I fly over it. Between heaving gasps, I whisper-yell out into the cold morning air.

“Vincent!”

The crest of my orgasm crashes and washes away, and I feel the muscles of my core clench and tense to their own rhythm. My fingertips move in a few more lazy circles, feeling the wetness being pushed out of me.

My mound is smooth against the palm of my hand; I shaved just yesterday morning. I open my eyes and can see the pink labia just barely peeking out from between my lips. Impulsively, I stick both fingers in my mouth. I've never tasted myself before, but my wet fingers against my tongue are sweet and sticky at the same time. It's not an unpleasant taste, almost like lemons and cream, with a little bit of salt.

Embarrassment washes over me when I sit up and notice the small wet mark I've left on the bedsheets. *Slut*, I think to myself. That's what my mother would say if she knew I was lusting after the neighbor. What a way to begin my Christmas Day.

I'm sure my mother is still downstairs; I never heard her come up to her room last night. She is probably passed out drunk on the couch, again.

Shaking my head, I strip the sheets from my bed before getting dressed, tugging at each corner in turn. I have to bend over my mattress to free the far half of the sheet and can feel my breasts bounce slightly when I jerk my arms back and forth.

After putting my sheet in the hamper, I gather up the black lace bra and a pair of plain black comfortable underwear and place them on the bare mattress. I head into the bathroom attached to my room and take a hot shower, wanting to wash the shame and confusion off of me. The hot water scalds my skin, and I sing quietly to myself as I wash up.

Once I'm done, I dry off and wrap my hair in a towel and plop it on top of my head. When I go back into my bedroom, I step into the black pair of underwear and fasten the black bra over myself. From my closet, I pick out a red plaid flannel shirt and a pair of fleece-lined yoga pants. Mom probably won't be lucid for another few hours, so I may as well get cozy. Another Christmas alone with my mother.

I can't wait to move out.

Once I have my degree, I'll move far away from here. I'll write and draw in my spare time and have my own apartment all to myself. I could decorate it and make it my own little space, instead of feeling like I live in a soulless magazine spread.

All dressed, I unleash my wet hair from the towel and quickly arrange it into two French braids on either side of my scalp. The plaits hang to just below my shoulder blades. Taking a breath to prepare for the mess Mom has likely left me downstairs, I open my door and go down the hallway.

I pause when I reach the living room. It seems Mom kicked off her heels at some point last night; they're laying haphazardly by the tree. She's snoring on the couch, a mess of hair covering her face. Two empty bottles of wine lay at the bottom of the couch. Scratch that—one empty bottle of wine and one half-empty bottle of wine. I roll my eyes and go into the kitchen.

“Merry Christmas to me,” I mutter as I pour myself a bowl of cereal.

I sit at the kitchen table, looking out the window that peers into the backyard. I'd kept a small garden in the spring, but now the entire yard is covered with untouched snow.

I smile slightly to myself as I eat my cereal. The crotch of my underwear is wet, and I shift in my seat. I'm still a little swollen. My stomach tightens when I remember the way I furiously rubbed myself earlier. I shudder at the dirty, depraved thoughts that have occupied my mind. Was I a bad person for spending my Christmas morning thinking about getting fucked—not having sex, but *getting fucked*—by my much older neighbor?

I shake the thoughts out of my head. Even though I know it's normal for a girl my age to touch herself and have sex, I'm still so freaked out by the idea of sleeping with a man.

It's not like I've never done anything with a guy. On the last day of eleventh grade, I agreed to give my then-boyfriend a blowjob in the back of his car. It lasted about five minutes before he finished in my mouth, and I swallowed it because I didn't know what else to do. It wasn't necessarily a bad experience, but it didn't turn me on either.

That guy and I broke up two weeks later, and I haven't so much as kissed anyone since. Just threw myself into school, graduated valedictorian in hope of a full-ride scholarship. Unfortunately, that didn't happen, so I go to the community college down the road to save money.

It's not that I don't *want* to lose my virginity, but all the guys my age seem so...shallow. Erotic novels and my fingers

are all I need right now. If the right person comes along, I would love to have sex with them. But no one has yet.

My mom stirs in the living room. I hear her groan and the sound of wine bottles clinking against each other. She is the exact opposite of me; Mom has been a party girl all her life. She likes men, expensive clothes, and alcohol, in that order.

I think she really did try her best to be a housewife and good mom when I was born, but then my dad left, and she lost all control. I grew up with a carousel of seedy men coming to see her, and I vowed to myself that I'd never be like that.

I can hear her stepping out of the living room and listen to see whether she'll head upstairs or toward the kitchen. When I hear the creak of her stepping onto the staircase, I call out, "Merry Christmas, Mom!"

"Don't yell," she snaps back at me before heading to her bedroom.

I shrug. Shouldn't have expected anything better. *That's the thing, Faith, if you keep your expectations dead-low, she'll never disappoint you.*

Thoughtfully, I finish eating my cereal. My mind is elsewhere, thinking about the classes I'll be taking next semester and looking forward to getting to spend most of the day away from my mother again. Winter break is a godsend to most students, but I wish I had some homework to keep my mind occupied or at least a job.

After I've finished eating and placed my bowl in the sink, the doorbell rings. Puzzled, I head toward the front door, unsure who could be visiting us at nine a.m. on Christmas Day. Unless my mom had invited someone over...ugh. I steel myself before opening the door, half-expecting one of my mom's creepy gentleman callers to be on the other side. But when I swing the door open, the guest standing on our front porch is someone I already know.

"David?" I ask in a confused tone. He's smiling widely, if a little nervously, and holding a box wrapped in bright green wrapping paper.

David and I have known each other since the seventh grade and have always been competitive. He was the salutatorian of our graduating class, with a GPA only a point below mine. We had some things in common: bookish, impetuous, motivated. But he was a natural extrovert and Prom King while I ate my lunches in the library. Still, he hadn't left me alone like I'd expected him to—especially after becoming captain of the football team.

He only lived a few blocks away, and we'd study together at least once a week. We were good influences on each other back then; having someone to compete against made me care more about my grades. It wasn't like Mom cared. I'd always had the sense that David had a slight crush on me, but I never reciprocated or flirted with him beyond light teasing about grades.

But we hadn't seen each other in almost two years. He'd gone to college out of state, on a football scholarship, and didn't often come home for breaks. Yet here he is, dark brown hair tucked away in a red knit hat, cheeks pink from the cold.

“Hi, Faith,” he says nervously, flashing me a winning smile. He'd had braces for most of high school but now had the blinding grin of an actor or model.

“What are you doing here?” I ask cautiously. David is nice but has always been...intense. I saw how he treated some of his girlfriends in high school; he could become very pushy, and I know he cheated at least once. It was partly why I didn't ever consider him romantically. I stood with the door only partially open, barely wide enough to poke my face through.

“It's Christmas, and I wanted to come celebrate with you. Just for a few minutes,” he says, flashing that wide grin again. He's stepping from foot to foot, breath puffing slightly into the air. “Can I come in?”

The last thing—the *very* last thing—I want is for him to come inside and see my hungover mom. She'd probably try to hit on him anyway. This Christmas was already disappointing; I didn't want it to become full-on depressing.

“Uh—” I lean back to grab my gray wool coat from the coat rack. “Hang on, um, my mom is still asleep. I’ll come outside.”

I shut the door again before David can respond and slip on a pair of slippers I keep by the door. Buttoning up my coat and pushing my hair back off of my head, I open the door again and step out to see David. My feet crunch in the snow as we face each other, and David holds out the wrapped box. He’s smiling with all the excitement and innocence of a Golden Retriever, and his brown eyes are barely blinking.

“Merry Christmas, Faith,” he says, giving the box a little shake. It isn’t large, probably six inches long and three inches deep. It looks like a box for a necklace, or a bracelet, or something. Over David’s shoulder, I can see the window into Vincent’s living room. Am I imagining it, or do I see his curtain open then suddenly close?

“What is this?” I gingerly take the present in my hands. It’s very light, and there’s a small white sticker with “TO FAITH :)” written on it in blue ink.

“A present,” he quips, voice dripping with sarcasm. He jams his hands back into the pockets of his leather jacket, emblazoned with his college’s mascot on the chest. “Open it!”

“David, we’ve barely talked since graduation—” I say, trying to give the present back to him. “Whatever this is, it’s really too much.”

He pushes the present away, shaking his head without breaking eye contact. David is a good six inches taller than me, and I feel like I can’t really say no.

“I insist, Faith. Plus, I’ve been keeping up with you online. It’s not like we’re strangers.”

I don’t like the cajoling tone of his voice, but I figure I may as well see what’s inside. I undo the ribbon tied around the box, a nice touch, I must admit, and slip my finger gently under the seam of the wrapping paper. David is breathing a little too hard, and I see the plumes of vapor going down.

Under the wrapping paper is a small cardboard box. I lift the top off of it, and lying inside is a delicate silver necklace and two plane tickets. My jaw drops when I look closer; it's a first-class trip to the Bahamas this May.

"What the...?" I say softly. David doesn't hear me, and he leans forward excitedly.

"My buddies and I are going to the Bahamas for spring break. A bunch of the guys are bringing their girlfriends, and I'm perpetually single, so I figured I'd take a chance on the girl who always captured my heart. You!"

It almost sounds as if he scripted this or read it off a hallmark card. Like he's giving me a sales pitch. It's not sweet or romantic; it's...*slimy*.

Something turns in my stomach. I don't want to go on a long trip with someone I barely know and a bunch of strangers. We haven't so much as Snapchatted in years. What if he's just trying to harvest my organs? This is incredibly suspicious.

"David, no," I say, looking at him with a pleading expression. "I'm really uncomfortable with this."

"Why? Don't you think I'll keep you safe?" He crosses his arms over his chest, and I step back, rotating, so my back is to my front door.

"It's not that, David, but this is way too extravagant, and I barely know you anymore."

"Come on, Faith, if you think you don't know me well, then this is the perfect opportunity to get to know each other." He steps closer to me while he speaks, glowering slightly. He's barely blinking, and the effect is eerie.

"David, please, take this back."

"No." He takes another step toward me, towering over me at this point, arms crossed. I'm pinned against my front door. My heart is pounding in my chest; David is bigger and stronger than me, and my front door is unlocked. I have no idea what he might do.

“You’re scaring me. Stop it!”

With my pulse ringing in my ears, I think I hear a door slam, but I can’t be sure. He’s got me pinned in the small alcove of my door, where I’m trapped on two sides by brick columns. David puts his arm on either column, leaning forward until his breath visibly pants into my face. He’s almost spitting now, mouth curling into an ugly frown.

“Christ, Faith, I’ve wanted you since I was twelve! I’ve spent years being nice to you. Trying to get in your pants, and you can’t swing me one favor?”

“I’ll do you a favor, buddy,” a voice says behind David.

He jumps and turns around, only to be greeted by a left hook to the face. I yelp as David reels to the side, jumping back before laying eyes on the assailant.

It’s Vincent, in nothing but jeans and a white T-shirt, with a wild look in his eyes. A look that makes me think he might just kill David.

VINCENT

IT WAS PURE LUCK THAT I CAUGHT THE COLLEGE BOY HEADING up Faith's driveway. I had been sitting at my living room window, admiring the snowfall, nursing my first cup of coffee of the day. Getting ready to head out for my next assignment. Then I saw him.

He couldn't have looked more like a John Hughes movie character if he tried. Slicked-back hair, expensive jeans, school-colors letterman jacket, for Christ's sake. When I saw Faith step onto the porch, I left the window and made a beeline to the front door, opening it just enough to listen in on their conversation.

I simply wanted to listen, not intervene, but the moment I heard Faith say she was scared, I saw red. I wasn't human in that moment, merely a tower of rage and jealousy. My mind turns to its animal instincts as the blood courses white-hot in my veins. I push the front door open and slam it behind me without a thought, almost grunting as I sprint from my door to hers.

I cut across my front lawn, hopping over the low fence that separates our driveways. The boy—that *asshole*—is yelling at her. Yelling that he deserves her. That she owes him. That my obsession, my woman, my Faith owes him something just because he whacked off thinking about her in high school.

“...you can't swing me one favor?” he yells, and I take the last few strides to get behind him. The guy's around my height and looming over Faith in her doorway. I don't know who the

fuck he thinks he is crowding her and raising his voice, but he's about to be in a world of hurt.

"I'll do you a favor, buddy." The words come out in a hoarse growl, scratching my throat. He jumps at the sound of my voice, and I waste no time in winding up my left fist.

There's a satisfying *thwack* as skin meets skin.

The moment moves in slow motion—fist meets face, his face registers shock, surprise, then pain. He reels backward, clutching his nose. I draw my arm back to my side and see my lovely Faith, mouth open in a tight *O*. Her hair is in braided pigtails, and her face is fresh and dewy. But even the sight of my love could not pull me out of this fitful rage I'm in.

"The hell, bro?" the college boy says, kneeling half-over on the porch.

I'm breathing hard and can feel my chest rising up and down.

"I'm not your *bro*," I snarl as I take a step closer. The boy tries to step back but stumbles on his feet. I grab the collar of his jacket and pull him toward me. He loses his balance stepping off of the small porch and stumbles even closer to me. With the fabric of his cliché jacket wrapped around my hand, I bring my face level to his.

"Hey, c'mon, this is just a misunderstanding," he pleads, his face burning red. He's scared shitless. I can smell it on him. This isn't my first time shaking somebody down.

"I don't think so. She told you to back off. You didn't listen. What is it that I'm misunderstanding?" I keep my tone even, but the rage bubbles beneath.

The boy gulps, realizing what deep shit he's in. This guy better be glad we're out in the open because if we were alone, he'd already be dead.

"You're going to leave," I say in a low voice, hoping Faith will not hear, "and you are not going to come back. If you do, I'll deal with you, and not so gently next time. She wants you to leave her alone. Are you going to listen? Or do I need to teach you another lesson?"

“I’ll go. I’ll go.” His voice is laced with panic, almost like he knows what I am thinking. Because in my mind, I’m already killing him. I’m going to make him suffer for touching her.

His eyes are wide, and he tries to raise his hands to surrender. Our faces are close enough that I can feel his breath, but I stare into his eyes, unblinking, for a long moment before letting go of his collar and turning away. The boy stumbles again, trying to regain his balance.

Once he’s back on his feet, I cross my arms over my chest and stare him down. Faith is still standing silently on the porch, one hand clapped over her mouth in shock. The boy adjusts his jacket, trying to save face in front of his high school crush.

It’s funny, in a way. He thinks he’s so smooth and grown-up, but I turned him back into a sniveling schoolboy in seconds. I resist the urge to puff out my chest as I turn to watch him walk down the snowy driveway.

It’s not until he is back behind the wheel of his car that I realize how cold the skin feels on my arms. My blood has begun to cool, and I no longer wear a warm coat of rage.

I turn back to Faith. Her hand is no longer clapped over her mouth, but she looks at me with a mystified expression. I can read her eyes like a book: she’s scared, thankful, nervous, and happy all at the same time.

God, she has no idea how to mask her feelings. It makes my heart ache, the way every emotion plays clearly across her face. I watch worry overtake all the other feelings. Oh, no. She doesn’t see me as a protector; she sees me as a beast. I have to show her that there’s nothing to be scared of when it comes to us.

“Um... thank you,” she whispers. I notice she’s in slippers and pajama pants and want nothing more than to take her inside, warm her up by the fire, electrify every inch of her skin...

“Don’t mention it,” I say in a blasé tone, trying not to betray how wild I still feel on the inside. “You deserve to be treated with respect.”

Faith smiles shyly at that, looking down at her feet. My brain is screaming at me to go to her, to take her in my arms, pinch her dimpled chin between a thumb and forefinger and turn her up to face me. Look deeply into her eyes and reassure her everything will be okay, to kiss away her fears, but no. That would be too much. I jumped into her lawn to protect her from a sociopathic teenager, not to take her as my own.

“Let me see your cell phone.” I step closer, extending my hand out to her. I don’t give her the room to say no. She meets my eyes again and pulls the phone from her coat pocket, unlocking it quickly before handing it to me. There isn’t fear in her eyes anymore, which makes me feel a little better.

I quickly tap over to her contacts, enter my name, and type in my number. I tap the little green ‘save’ button and hand it back to her. She’s still breathing with shuttered breaths, trying to process what’s going on. But I also notice a deep pink flush creeping up her neck and know that she is open to my advances.

“You call me if you need anything, Faith. And I do mean *anything*,” I say, staring into her eyes deeply for a moment.

“Will do, Vincent. Thank you again.” She sounds so timid, but I still melt, hearing my name on her lips. It’s smoother and sweeter than honey. “Merry Christmas, too.”

“Merry Christmas,” I say with a nod, abruptly turning on my heel in the snow. I measure my paces as I walk down her driveway, giving her one last wave before I turn to head down the sidewalk that leads to my yard—no sense in jumping fences again. Don’t want to scare her away.

Faith waves back, and I feel such a pull to her. As if there is an invisible rope between us, one that has always been there, just waiting for us to finally tie ourselves together.

She turns around and opens the door to her house, shooting me a shy smile over her shoulder before going back inside.

The door closes behind her, and I watch the plastic wreath swing back and forth for a moment before heading back to my home.

Once inside, I check my watch. Dammit. If I was going to do this hit right, I needed to leave right now. The target lives in the next town over, and I will have to hop on the interstate to get there. I can't afford to bet on low traffic, even on Christmas Day. Luckily, I keep all of my equipment in my car already—hidden in the hollow backseat as to never arouse suspicion.

I take a deep breath, leaning against the staircase railing, trying to get my head screwed back on straight for the job. If this doesn't go through, Tony will never forgive me. The guy I am supposed to snipe today, Dave Sobaski, had cheated Tony out of a lot of money in a shady business deal. He isn't affiliated with any other mob or gang, just an enterprising scam artist that fell in with the wrong men. Single, lives alone, it will be an easy hit.

Without moving, I think about the job—and Faith. I really don't want to leave her, but I have my phone and can watch the cameras in her room. All I needed now was to bundle up.

In a rush, I pull on my leather jacket and wrap a scarf around my neck. It will help to hide my face as I stake out the guy.

My mind is on Faith as I drive downtown, listening to oldies music on the radio. Carole King sings about standing by your man as I think about what it would be like to taste my teenage neighbor. I'm so lost in thought that I almost drive past the building I'm supposed to go to.

Shit, I'm never this distracted.

I park on the top floor of a parking garage, close to a ladder leading onto the roof, and across from Dave's studio apartment. Deciding that I won't need to use my camo jacket to stay concealed on a roof, I lean into the backseat and pack all of my equipment into an unassuming duffel bag. After locking my car and wrapping my scarf over my mouth and nose, I start up the ladder leading to a simple trap door onto

the roof. There's a thick layer of snow, and the wind whips fiercely around my face. I tuck the ends of my scarf into the jacket to keep them from blowing about.

Luckily, there's a small radiator right along the wall that gives me a view of Dave's apartment. He'll be in unit 406, fourth floor, second window from the left. I settle myself on the radiator and unzip my bag, thankful for the sound of wind and traffic to cover up the clatter of a gun and tripod being put together. This process is muscle memory for me now; after all, this is what I've been doing for the last twelve years of my life.

Once my sniper and scope are set up with a dead shot into Dave's window, I relax into my seat and let my mind wander. As I often do, I remember how I found work as an assassin in the first place.

It's a tragic story, really. But I suppose I'm living the happy ending.

When I was sixteen, my parents died in a car crash. They were heading home after grabbing some takeout for the family. Tony's nephew, Frederico, was cruising around town with a couple hookers and a head full of blow. He ran a red light, crashed head-on into my parents, killing them on impact. He and his hookers survived with less than a scratch.

The next day, Tony arrived at my door. He was a squat, intimidating man, wearing a pinstriped suit even though it was August at the time. I had been up all night, fretting about where my parents could be. I'd called the police several times, but they were no help. Tony informed me that my parents were dead, but he would make me a deal. If I never went public with who killed them and agreed not to sue, he would make sure I was protected and provided for the rest of my life.

"It's my nephew, you see," he had said, waving his hands as if to dismiss the fact. "He is a good kid who makes some bad choices. But the Fontanas protect their family, no matter what. We'll protect you too, Vincent."

He told me to sleep on it and handed me a full bottle of Ambiens.

“I survived off those when my ma passed away,” he had said with a sympathetic glint in his eye. Even at sixteen, I had no illusions about what Tony was asking me to do. He was giving me a lifetime of financial security to forgive and forget his nephew killed my parents.

I ended up taking the deal, but I never forgave nor forgot. Frederico still died at my hand. Sometimes, I think Tony knows, even though I made it look like an accident.

For the first four years, until I turned twenty, Tony had me working small jobs. It didn't make the big bucks, but it was enough to get by and allowed me to prove my loyalty and trustworthiness.

One day, he told me he had something fun for me to do. He took me to the shooting range the same day. That short hour at the shooting range changed my life entirely. I hit every target perfectly.

The next day, I carried out my first hit.

Twelve years have gone by since then, and I couldn't imagine myself doing anything else. Yes, I've had men and women try to kill me. I've had near scrapes with death and moments I wasn't sure I could pull through. But I did, every time. Lately, I've been thinking that maybe the reason I stayed alive was to find Faith. To save her.

I shake the thoughts out of my head and snap back to the present. Dave Sobaski has apparently returned home as a warm light glows from behind his curtains. I can see the shadow of him moving inside his apartment, but it's not nearly enough to get a clear shot. I'll have to wait for him to open his curtains. Goddammit.

Without taking my eyes off of the window of his apartment, I pull my phone from my coat pocket. I position the screen so I can still see Dave's window and pull up the feed of Faith in her bedroom.

She's asleep on her bed. Facing me—well, the camera I installed in a picture frame facing her bed. Her hair falls

slightly into her face. I watch her breathe up and down and wish I could curl my body around her.

Suddenly, the screen freezes as a call comes through.

It's Tony.

Confident that no one below will hear me, I answer the call, putting the phone to my ear. The wind is still howling around me, so I cup my hand over my mouth and the speaker to block the sound.

"Well, Merry Christmas, Tony."

"You, too. Now, Vincent. Is it done yet?" he growls, getting straight to the point.

"Not yet," I respond, gritting my teeth. Tony gets in moods like this lately, where he believes that everything could be done better, even if you're already the best at the job.

Suddenly, Dave opens his window curtains.

"Hang on, Tony. Clear shot," I say into the phone before setting it on the ground and resuming my position with the rifle. Dave Sobaski is shirtless, leaning against his window, one cheek pressed right to the glass. Admiring the snow, no doubt.

Dumb motherfucker.

Trigger. Pull. *Pssssh*. A small crack.

"Happy goddamned holiday," I mutter under my breath as the bullet whizzes through the window.

With a newfound hole in his forehead, Dave falls backward onto the floor of his rented room. I pick my phone back up.

"All right, Tony. Done."

"Good. I need to talk to you about something."

I stop, not even asking what. I know Tony will continue on with or without my acknowledgment.

"You've been distracted lately, Vincent. Not yourself. Is there something wrong?" He's not asking me out of concern.

The edge to his voice belays a threat. He doesn't mean, *tell me your troubles*; he means *stay in line*.

"I'm fine. I got the job done, didn't I?"

"You sure did. Just trying to watch out for you. Make sure there is no problem, you know."

"There is no problem," I assure him, getting really pissed by how personal he is getting with me.

"Good." He hangs up without saying goodbye.

An uneasy feeling is gnawing on me. Tony is acting off, and my mind immediately goes to Faith. If someone finds out about my obsession with her, she will be in danger, and that includes my boss. He would see her as my weakness, and that would be a weakness to him by default.

Before I begin to pack up my rifle, I decide to delete the live feed app from my phone. On the drive home, I vow that I will delete it from my computer as soon as I arrive home.

It pains me to give that up, but I will not put her in any danger.

Time to quit. For Faith's sake.

FAITH

AFTER THAT DISASTER WITH DAVID AND VINCENT, I'M TOO exhausted to function, so I go upstairs and into my room, where I flop down onto the bed. I lie looking up at my ceiling for a few minutes, reliving the bizarre front porch showdown again and again. It was shameful, but watching Vincent breathing hard, veins popping out of his neck, glaring at David like he wanted to kill him...well, it was terrifying. But it was also really, really hot. Part of me hoped that he would lose control, lift me over his shoulder, and take me across the street and into his house.

I don't know how he got into my yard so fast.

Was he listening? Was he paying attention to me? No way. There's no way he's been looking at me just like I've been looking at him.

Unless...he has been. Between how friendly he was last night and the way he spurned my mother...oh my god, those times I swore somebody was watching me.

Was that him? Was I possibly not crazy?

The thoughts swirl around in my head until they melt together, and I eventually nod off. I dream of the way Vincent glared at David, speaking to him as if he were no more than a bug on the bottom of his shoe. Vincent swooped in to protect me.

No one's ever protected me like that before.

When I wake up, the house is empty, and Mom's car is gone. I roll my eyes, figuring she's gone out to find her own

Santa Claus to get drunk with. Maybe this will be one of her longer benders, and I can have the house to myself for a while. A girl can dream, right?

Sitting up in my bed and stretching, I remember that I have Vincent's phone number now. Anytime I want to, I could call or text him. Just to hear his voice. Not that I would, though. That would make me look like a clingy girlfriend. God, we're not even dating.

I shake the last bits of sleep out of my head before standing up, grabbing my romance novel, and heading downstairs. I put on a pair of fuzzy snowman socks, pad down the stairs, and curl up on the couch in front of the Christmas tree.

With the snow outside, the setting sun, and warm glow of Christmas lights, I feel cozy for once. This, honestly, is my ideal Christmas. Reading on the couch, no one to bother me, a beautiful tree to look at. I take a deep breath and relax, reading voraciously. Before I know it, I'm losing myself in the story.

I'm nearly done with the Elf King novel but read slowly to take in every bit of depravity the king puts his peasant princess through. In the scene I begin with, he treats her to a full day of rejuvenating magical spa treatments, but she is forced to make love with every servant and Mage that applies the treatments on her. All while the Elf King watches.

Even though the Elf King is described as wiry and blonde, I imagine Vincent's bulging shoulders and dark eyes as I read. I imagine myself as the peasant girl, unmoored in a new world and discovering her blossoming sexuality. All for the viewing pleasure of a mighty, all-powerful king. Knowing that if she refuses, he will send her and her family back into poverty. Knowing that in order to survive, she must give in to his every whim.

The idea of being submissive appeals to me. Maybe for no other reason than I would have no idea what to do in bed once I got there, but I think it is more than that. All my life, I've had to take care of myself.

When I find a man to deflower me, I want to be taken care of. Maybe it's weird, but I just really want a man to take control, to tell me what to do and when to do it. It seems so... freeing. Not to have to worry about anything because someone is taking care of you in every way.

I slam the book shut and hide the cover under my thigh when I hear a key in the door. Ugh, Mom's home. I can hear her drunken giggles as soon as she swings the door open, letting a beam of weak light into the hallway.

"Fa-aa-ith!" she calls in a drunken singsong voice.

I roll my eyes, confident that she can't see me until she stumbles into view with a strange man on her arm. She's still wearing the emerald green dress from last night, but now it's so wrinkled and stained that it looks like she found it in the gutter. Or maybe laid in the gutter herself. The guy on her arm has his eyes half-open.

I don't know what it is about the guy. But the moment he walks in the room, my blood runs cold. He's squat, with a good amount of bloating around his jaw. He leers at me drunkenly, but his eyes are too sharp—dark and cold. I don't think he's as drunk as Mom is. He might not be drunk at all.

"Faithie, honey," my mother slurs, one eye drooping half shut. She pats the guy's face, but he doesn't take his eyes off of me. "This is Franco. He's Italian."

"Rico," he says to me, lightly flipping the R sound.

"Faith, this is Rico," she says, stumbling to one side. "Rico, I'm gonna go get us some more wine, be riiiiight back."

Mom pats his face and chest again before stumbling off. Rico stays standing in the entrance to the living room, leering at me with those cold eyes. With my mom out of sight, he apparently drops the drunkard act.

"You're very beautiful, Faith," he says, and something about the cool tone in his voice sends a shiver down my spine. Every nerve ending screams *get out of here, NOW!*

I stand quickly and decide to make a break for it, trying to walk as far around him as possible. He watches me the whole

time, and I try to duck my head, but the moment I'm within his reach, he lunges forward and grabs me by the wrist. I yelp, but he puts another finger to his lips.

"Wouldn't want to alarm Margaret now, would you?" he croons, spittle flying onto my face. I try to jerk away from his grip, but he holds me tighter. Suddenly, his eyes land on my novel.

"Please, let go of me," I say, pulling away. He grabs my novel with one hand, and he inspects the cover, a painting of the half-naked peasant girl clinging to her king. His bushy eyebrows rise halfway up his face as he takes in the sultry cover.

"*The Making of a Princess*," he reads sarcastically. "You're very naughty."

"Just let me leave, okay? You and my mom can do whatever you want. Just leave me out of it."

"No, no, no, sweetheart," Rico purrs, tutting slightly. He brushes the book against my cheek, and I startle away, but he still has that grip on my wrist.

"You see, sweetheart, your mother owes me a lot of money. I mean a *lot*. She will do anything to pay me back. Give me anything."

The way he's growling sends shivers down my spine. His lips are shiny with spit, and though he's no longer acting drunk, his breath is heavy with whiskey. Every possible warning bell is going off in my head as I realize I'm in serious trouble. My stomach twists into knots, and my pulse begins to race in my ears.

"Okay, sure, great, please, let go of me," I whimper. I want to gather up all my inner strength, but I'm just scared. There's no strength to pull from. The past twenty-four hours have been such a rollercoaster, and I'm too exhausted to feel anything but fear. But I am shaking in my fuzzy socks, trying to get away from this man.

"I'm afraid you don't understand," he says in an almost jovial tone, tilting his head forward to glare at me from

beneath his brow. He's not much taller than me but significantly stronger. He's older, maybe in his mid-forties. The wrinkles on his face hint at heavy drug use. Or a hard life. Either way, I *need* to get away from him right now. But he doesn't let go and continues lecturing me while my mom putters around in the kitchen.

"You see, *cara mia*, I have a rather large appetite. So your mom made a deal with me. Once she and I have finished, I am going to make my way to you, and if you want to keep your home, you *will* satisfy me."

My blood runs cold when I realize what's happening. My mom, possibly intentionally, has whored me out.

"If you lock your door, *princesa*, I will ruin your mother's life. And yours. I am very well connected. Understand?"

"Yoohoo, Rico!" my mother calls from the kitchen. He does not let go or stop staring at me.

"Be right there, *cara mia!*" he calls back, bringing the drunken tone back into his voice. At long last, he releases his grip on my wrist, and I run instinctively to the stairs. It was fight or flight, and I had chosen flight. Hot tears stream down my face as I take the stairs two at a time, only wanting to get away from that bloated creep.

Once in my room, I slam the door behind me and sink to the ground, back against the door. Could he be bluffing? Maybe he only wanted to scare me, all bark and no bite.

But as much as I tried to convince myself, I knew that wasn't true. When I looked into his eyes, there was no empathy. No humanity. He had the blank, soulless stare of a shark. In my soul, I knew he wasn't bluffing.

A full-on sob racks my body as I realize just how awful this situation is. My mother pimped me out to pay her debts. At best, she's brought home somebody incredibly dangerous. If I don't let this man take me like a piece of meat, we'll lose everything. Everything! I'm crying into my hands, trying to stay quiet and unnoticed. I can hear my mom and Rico laughing drunkenly downstairs, and it chills me to the bone.

How he's fooled her. Or she sees through him and doesn't care. What did I do to deserve such a loveless life?

But what do I do?

I feel trapped. I could leave the house while Rico is distracted with my mother. Run down the hall, out the door, drive far, far away. But where would I go? How would I pay my way? My only job experience was a semester of work-study in the dining hall.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no," I mutter under my breath, feeling panic rise and take over. I've never been good with fear. I can't keep my head. Thoughts race through my mind too fast for me to even understand, and the sound of Franco's laughter downstairs.

Suddenly, I remember something. Something I have now.

A protector.

I pull out my phone and dial.

VINCENT

MY COCK HAS BEEN HARD FOR HOURS, AND EVEN THOUGH I keep jerking off, it doesn't seem to go down. I keep replaying this morning in my mind; when I watched Faith make herself come. Hearing her sweet voice moaning my name when she climaxed has the same effect on me as half a bottle of *Viagra*. Only there is no hotline for me to call for the erection that lasts more than four hours.

I'm about half an hour away from home when my phone rings, interrupting my train of thought. I'm thankful for the distraction, as I had been mired in self-pity at having to give up on Faith.

Tony's voice reverberates through my skull, telling me over and over that I've been acting distracted. Not doing my work as well. Not hiding my obsession. Christ, it probably meant that Faith had already seen through me, too. She wasn't stupid. All our interactions so far had only seemed good because I was wearing rose-colored glasses. She knew. She knew I was a creep.

I don't recognize the number flashing on my car's LCD display, but the area code is local. My cell line is incredibly secure, so this person must know me. I reach out and tap my phone screen to answer the call. As soon as it connects, the sound of heavy, panicked breathing plays from my car speakers.

"Hello?" I ask, turning the volume knob down slightly.

"Vincent?"

My heart leaps into my throat, and I almost brake in the middle of the highway. It's Faith. She sounds terrified. Panic has taken over her whole voice, her breath, her mind. Immediately, I put more pressure on the gas, pushing seventy.

Just when I swore off her for good...

"Faith?" I say in a low voice, not sure that my phone even picks it up.

"Vincent, I need your help," she whimpers. "You said to call you if I need anything, and I didn't know who else to call."

"Of course. Tell me what's wrong."

"There's a man here. My mom—" she chokes on the words, letting out a hushed sob. My whole chest lights with fire as I realize she's in danger. That whore Margaret has put her in danger.

"I'm scared..." Her words hit me like a semi-truck leaving behind a deep ache in my chest.

All I want to do is wrap her in my arms and keep her sheltered from everything that could ever scare her. I have to save her. Then I'll let go. This is the last time, I swear. Faith lets out another keening cry, and my jaw clamps shut.

"I'm on my way, Faith. I promise. It'll be okay."

She snuffles, taking in a sharp breath. I can hear raucous laughter behind her, and my blood boils. How dare Margaret laugh when her own daughter is scared out of her mind. How dare she. I nearly stomp on the brakes as my speedometer passes seventy-five, eighty, eighty-two...

"My mom owes him a lot of money, and he said he's going to...he's gonna come into my room—" her voice breaks, and she sobs again, then shushes me. "They're upstairs, don't talk," she whispers.

I can hear a knock at her door, and Faith takes a breath to steady herself. She hiccups slightly. Every single muscle in my body is as tight as a stretched rubber band. I have tunnel vision now, I only see enough to know that I don't hit anyone, and no

cops chase me. As I listen in, I am overcome with primal, beastly rage. Only God knows how fast I'm driving.

"Faith," Margaret's voice calls, faint on the call. But rage has made my hearing supernatural, and every syllable is clear to me. "Are there any more cookies?"

She's slurring. Drunk as hell. My inner narrative alights.

Whore bitch cunt asshole deviant washed-up prom queen slut.

"I don't know, Mom," Faith calls back, just barely holding her voice level. I'm almost to the exit. I'm almost there. I flash my eyes down to the speedometer and realize I'm nearly at a hundred MPH. I take a deep breath and release the gas, letting myself fall back to seventy. Thankfully, the roads are mostly clear today. *Most* people are staying home.

Margaret mutters something indistinct, then there's a few moments of silence. I hear rustling as I make it back into town, and Faith picks the phone up.

"Please, help me, Vincent. He's going to hurt me."

"Don't worry, Faith. I'll keep you safe. I'll be there in a few minutes."

She sniffles again, and through the rage, I feel a soft tendrill of love. The instinct to protect and nurture. Maybe the best way to protect Faith is by keeping her with me.

"Thank you, Vincent," she says. "Are you almost here?"

"Five minutes, darling. Then I'll take you somewhere safe. Pack anything you desperately need right now. I'll buy you everything else."

"Do you mean it?" Her voice sounds so hopeful, almost like this is exactly what she wanted, me taking her away.

"Of course, I mean it, just stay in your room until I get there, okay?"

"Okay. I—I can do that."

Faith lets out a steady exhale, and I smile. I blast through a red light, knowing I'll be with my love in mere seconds.

Almost home. Almost there.

“I’m going to hang up now,” she says in a steadier voice. Her breath sounds less panicked. I smile softly as I pull into our neighborhood, dropping to a slower speed to make it through the snow.

“I’ll be there in sixty seconds,” I say softly. Then she hangs up.

In forty seconds, I make it into my driveway, park, turn off the car, and run to Faith’s home. The front door isn’t even latched. That wino bitch couldn’t even close her own front door.

I kick it in. I’m greeted with the sight of an obliterated Margaret’s jaw dropping open. She screams wordlessly, falling back into the arms of her lover.

Who I recognize immediately.

You gotta be fucking kidding me?

Rico. My boss’s brother. Frederico’s father. Fuck. I got away with killing his son, but will I get away with this one? Tony was never fond of his nephew, which is probably why he never looked into his death, but Rico is a different matter. This is worse than I expected.

“Vincent!” he says in a false-jovial tone.

“Rico,” I growl. My fists are curled at my side. His smug, bloated face is especially worn today. He’s in his forties, but the years of partying and no consequences have taken a toll. He doesn’t sound drunk, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t. “What a delightful surprise. Would you like to share?”

“Huh...?” Margaret says, looking between the two of us. She stumbles again to the side and looks me up and down. “Well, I wouldn’t mind.”

“You shut your mouth,” I snap, jabbing a finger toward her. “I’m not here for you.”

Rico’s mouth falls open with realization. He’s a mean bastard, but he’s far from stupid.

“I thought that house next door looked familiar.” He grins, tapping a finger against his flabby face. “You have a thing for that little vixen upstairs, don’t you?”

I don’t say a word. Margaret sways in place, trying desperately to make sense of things, but gives up after a moment and turns, walking into the living room. With a sigh, she flops onto the couch and promptly begins to snore.

Mother of the goddamned year.

“Well, we seem to be here for the same thing, Vincent. Since you saw her first, I’ll let you have a go at her.” No amount of drugs, alcohol, or money could ease that cruel look behind his eyes. A look that I want to snuff out.

I lunge forward and clamp a hand around Rico’s fat neck. I’m younger, taller, and stronger than him, and he barely puts up a fight. Cheap whiskey is on his breath, and I resist the urge to gag. I slam him against a wall and tighten my grip. He starts to spit and gasp, and I watch a red flush creep up his face.

“If you touch her, you die. I don’t care who your brother is. Nobody harms her.”

Rico coughs again, tries to mouth the words at me. I respond with a squeeze. Red begins to turn purple, and his eyes start to bulge.

“If I find you downstairs after I get her, your life is over.”

I let go. He slumps to the floor, taking a deep wheezing breath, and I head to the stairwell.

“You’ll...regret...this...” he says through gasps. I ignore him and leap up the stairs, heading to my love.

Even if I hadn’t already known which door is hers, my soul would have found her. I knock in a rush.

“Faith. It’s me. I’m here,” I call out, desperation creeping into my voice. From downstairs, I hear the front door slam. He’s gone.

The door swings open, and Faith leaps into my arms. I shudder, overstimulated by the sudden onslaught of *her*. I smell her. I feel her. Her face is buried in my chest. It’s like a

dream. She has a small backpack on, and her hair is starting to come out of its braids.

She looks up at me, tears in her eyes. I can tell she's been crying for a long time, but the red rims around her eyes make them look even bluer. I wipe a tear from beneath her eye and smile gently.

"Please, take me away," she whispers, her bottom lip trembling.

I swoop down, lifting her by her legs. I carry her like my bride, heading down the stairs on steady feet. She wraps her arms around my neck, burying her forehead against me.

"As you wish, *princesa*," I whisper as I carry out of her former home and over to mine.

FAITH

WHEN VINCENT CARRIES ME OVER THE THRESHOLD OF HIS home, I pinch the palm of my hand to make sure that this is real. Was it only yesterday that he was in my home, speaking to me for the first time? That I watched him taste my cookies and heard him compliment me?

I cannot believe that he saved me. Two minutes ago, I zipped on my old puffy coat, packed a bag, and Vincent saved me from my mother's evil lover. I don't know what happened to Rico, but he was gone by the time he carried me downstairs. My mother was sleeping off the alcohol, but I don't care. I'm ready to leave her behind for good.

Vincent lifted me like I weighed no more than a feather and didn't stumble or misstep once on the walk from my room to his home. But I could hear his heartbeat thumping in his chest. It was wild, fast. Despite his cool, steady demeanor, he was nervous. Excited, even.

Once we are safe indoors, Vincent sets me down gently. He flicks on the lights, and I stand in place, taking everything in. For the first time all day, I feel like I can take a steady breath.

"Your shoes, darling," he says, nodding toward my feet.

"Oh." I quickly kick them off, shrug off my backpack, and set it next to them. When I stand up, I bump into Vincent. He's close behind me and places a hand gently on my shoulder. I can feel his breath on the back of my neck, and I ease my spine into him.

“Are you okay?” he asks, whispering into my ear. I can barely feel the movement of his mouth against my skin, and I shudder. It feels too good, and I can’t stop and think about whether or not I *should* be doing this. All I know is that it feels right.

All at once, blood rushes between my legs, and I feel my pussy pulse and swell. Is it just me, or do I feel something stiff against my lower back? No...surely, he only sees me as a child, the girl next door.

“Yes,” I whisper back. Vincent’s right hand moves slowly on my shoulder, along my collarbone, until he pinches the zipper of my coat between his fingers. He puts his other hand just on the top of my hip, barely touching me with his fingertips. Agonizingly slowly, he pulls the zipper down, one tooth at a time, until my coat is completely open.

I’m breathing shallow, shuddering breaths already. He moves his hands to the top of my coat and slides it off in one smooth motion. Even though I’m still fully clothed, I feel completely naked in front of him. I shiver in my fuzzy socks.

“I’m going to take you away from this place. Far away where we’ll be safe, and you’ll be happy, but first—”

Without thinking, I turn around, tipping my face up toward his. Vincent’s eyes are wide, and he’s half-biting his bottom lip. I wrap my arms around his neck, and he doesn’t hesitate to pull me close to him. His eyes dart back and forth as if he cannot decide which part of my face to look at. I feel safe in his arms. Protected. Away from any danger, even though I hardly know this man. It shouldn’t make sense, it shouldn’t feel right, but it does. I feel right.

I don’t know who leans in first, him or me. All I know is that our lips meet and instinctively move together and that he tastes of cold air and peppermint. I can feel every part of my body in hyper-reality; it’s as if I could feel each individual blood cell coursing through my veins. My hips are against his, and I rise slightly on my toes to get closer to him. Vincent’s kiss sets me alight from head to toe, and I wouldn’t be surprised to pull away and find my hair standing up on end.

His tongue pokes against mine, warm and wet on my lips. One hand raises to cup the back of my head, pulling me impossibly closer. Pushing ourselves closer together.

But suddenly, he freezes, his arms tensing. Pulling his face away from mine, he lets go of me, trying to turn away.

“Faith, I—”

I cannot stand to hear what he has to say next. I lunge toward him, taking his face between my hands. Apparently, I caught him by surprise because he freezes at my touch. He stops speaking, staring at me with a slightly open mouth and wide eyes.

“Vincent, I have something to tell you,” I say, voice still shaking. I’m turned on, electrified, and I’m not about to let him say no to me. I’m a grown woman. I know what I want. I take a deep breath and continue on.

“I’ve been...watching you ever since you moved in. I think about you all the time. For months, I’ve fantasized about you. About...” I look away, blinking rapidly.

I hesitate to admit something more to him for fear that he’ll reject me outright. What if it’s too much for him? If he’s creeped out by this? But I steel myself, look into his eyes, and find the confidence I never knew I had.

“I want you, and I want to share my first time with you, Vincent. I mean, if you would want that,” I say in a hoarse whisper, leaving my mouth slightly open. Acting like the women I’ve read about—the submissive princesses and desperate peasant girls. His face is still between my hands, but he’s staring at my lips with an almost crazed look in his eyes. As if he is mad with lust.

“Oh, Faith,” he growls, reaching out and gripping me by the hips with surprising force. “It would be my highest honor.”

I smile, but before I can fully process that he’s agreed, Vincent reaches below my ass and lifts me up. He hoists me up over his hips with ease, and I wrap my legs around his waist, crossing at the ankles. Though Vincent’s shoulders and arms

are bulky, his waist is trim and slender, the perfect size to wrap around.

I move my hands to the back of his head and pull his face to mine as he takes three swift steps forward and pins me against the front door. I yelp as the back of my head hits the door but take a deep sigh when Vincent breaks the kiss and moves his mouth to my neck.

“*Princesa,*” he moans against me before biting the skin behind my ear. Instinctively, I arch my back, pressing my hips against his solid abs. Both his hands are on my ass, fingers sinking in so hard it almost hurts. Gently, slowly, he sucks and nibbles on the side of my neck, occasionally taking shuddering breaths.

“You have no idea how I’ve dreamt of this,” he whispers, pressing his cheek to mine. “Of course, I will be gentle.”

“I don’t want you to be gentle,” I whisper back, shocked that I’m saying it. But the moment the words leave my lips, I know they are true. I don’t want him to go easy on me. I want to see his power. I want to be his.

Vincent pulls back, one eyebrow raised.

“Oh, is that so? I don’t know if you can handle that yet.”

“Why don’t we find out?” I reply, biting my lip and grinning.

Vincent grins in return with a wild-eyed look on his face. Pressing his hips into mine to keep me pressed into the wall, he takes a hand to my neck and forces my jaw upward. He starts to increase pressure on the sides of my neck, watching my eyes begin to flutter. I can still mostly breathe, but I’m starting to get lightheaded, and a few black spots swim before my eyes before he releases all the pressure.

I gasp for breath but grin at him, licking my lips to show I liked it. He smirks back, apparently satisfied with my reaction. He then steps back, setting me gently on the floor. Vincent grabs my wrist, yanking me slightly toward the stairs.

“Come on. Follow me,” he says, giving me a wink before walking ahead. I stumble to keep up but love the feeling of

being taken.

Vincent leads me up to the stairs and all the way down the hallway to what is presumably the master bedroom. It's decorated lushly, with a four-post king bed in the center of a dark green carpet. The sheets are brown with gold embroidery, and I marvel at Vincent's good taste.

He drops my wrist and wraps his arms around me, immediately tugging the hem of my sweater upward. Wordlessly, he lifts the top over my head and throws it behind me, shamelessly gazing at my breasts. I am so glad I chose to wear the lacy black bra today.

Vincent moves his hands to either side of my breasts and caresses me softly, bringing his face to my cleavage. I arch my back slightly to bring my breasts to his face, wanting to feel his skin against mine. A deep moan comes from his chest as he kisses the tops of my breasts in turn, then moves his hands to the waistband of my pants. In one movement, Vincent pulls my pants to the floor, and I am standing in front of him in nothing but my bra and panties.

"Get on the bed," he says, and I know I could never disobey him. Quickly, feeling my breasts bounce inside the racy bra, I walk to the bed and climb atop. Scooting back on the bed, I turn to face Vincent, and I'm greeted with the sight of him peeling off his sweater and shirt in one go. He bends down and untangles the white T-shirt from the sweater, twisting it between each hand until it's like a rope.

He puts two hands on the bed and leans forward, kissing me softly. It's no more than a peck before he pulls away and brings the rolled-up T-shirt to my mouth.

"Open," he commands, and I comply. Staring deeply into my eyes, he places the T-shirt in my mouth, then puts a thumb and forefinger on my chin to make me bite down. "Don't let this fall out, or I'll have to punish you, Faith."

I nod, humming behind the gag. My mind immediately conjures up all kinds of things he could do to *punish* me, and for a moment I, think about letting the gag slip, simply so I can find out what he would do.

“Put your hands above your head and leave them there.” He has barely spoken his order before my arms fly up, and I obey.

“Good girl,” he says with a smirk reaching behind my back and undoing the clasp of my bra. I gasp as my breasts fall free, bouncing slightly. My nipples turn pert as they feel the cold air, and Vincent immediately closes his mouth around my left breast. He takes the opposite nipple in his fingers, and I arch my back while moaning into the T-shirt. His tongue swirls roughly around my nipple, sucking and biting in turn. He switches to the other side, and his hands press roughly into my spine.

Feeling the cold air against my wet nipples was torture as Vincent pulled away and slid his hands down to my hips.

“Lie back.” He fingers my black cotton panties, and I do as he says, interlacing my fingers above my head to show how obedient I can be. He smirks back and yanks off my underwear in a single pull.

I taste sweat on his T-shirt, and it turns me on even more. I tilt my head down and watch Vincent step back off the bed and unbutton his pants. His fingers move slowly. He knows how badly I want him; after all, he was staring directly at the throbbing opening between my legs.

But then he pushes off his pants and boxers all at once, and I’m greeted with the sight of his massive erection springing free.

My eyes go wide as I take in the length and girth of it. For a moment, I genuinely don’t know if I’ll be able to take it. It’s not just long, but *wide*, and he’s going to stretch me to my limits. Vincent chuckles when he sees my expression and steps forward. He runs one finger up the length of my slit, prying the lips apart. When he feels the wetness at my opening, he slides his finger in as far as it will go without so much as a warning.

I yelp as he hooks it inside me, hitting a pleasure spot I didn’t know existed. Warmth emanates from his finger inside me as my hips buck to meet his hand. He fucks me with his

finger, adding a second digit as I grow wetter, and my moans louder.

I'm teetering on the edge of insanity, ready to explode when he pulls out all at once and steps back, bringing the two fingers to his lips before sucking my juices off of them.

"Don't worry," he says as he climbs onto the bed, his body blanketing mine. I lift my legs to wrap them around his hips, showing him right where I need him. "Your pussy can take it."

I'm wet and so needy. I could beg him to fuck me right now. He kisses my forehead and strokes the tip of his cock against my entrance, sliding from my opening to my clit and back again. I moan behind the gag and close my eyes, invigorated by the feeling of being touched by him, finally.

"I'd ask if you want me to use a condom, but I don't give a fuck. I want you pregnant, swollen with my kids," he growls. His possessive tone and need to make me his only adds fuel to the raging inferno building between my legs. I need him to fuck me now, or I might die.

My eyes roll back into my head as he begins to slowly slide himself into me, his hands on either side of my head, his body doing a balancing act that causes his muscles to strain.

I spread my legs further apart, giving him ample room while digging my heels into his ass to urge him to go faster as he slowly sinks himself deep inside of me.

When I'm sure I don't think I can take another inch, the walls and muscles of my pussy stretch to accommodate him. He's so big, and I'm so tiny. I'm sure it wouldn't take much for him to break me in two.

In no time, his hips are flush with mine, and I look down to see myself stretched tight around his cock. Staring down at me, he pulls all the way out and then slams back into me, letting out a strained groan as his hips press against me.

"Your cunt is so tight, so fucking perfect. I want to cum in you right now," he grits through his teeth, "but I'm going to give you the fuck of a lifetime first."

Without warning, he pulls out completely.

“Get on your hands and knees,” he commands, and I do, raising my ass in the air.

With no hesitation, he slides himself inside me, pushing his full length into me faster than before. His member pulses and throbs inside me, and I arch my back to take even more of him. He begins to thrust in a steady rhythm, moving faster and faster in time with me. I’m panting, my hands fist the sheets, and a scream builds in my throat.

It doesn’t take long before he’s slamming into me and sending shockwaves of pleasure through my body. He’s so warm and big inside me, I feel full and stretched. It’s amazing. I could get addicted to the feeling of getting fucked like this.

Out of nowhere, he slaps my ass with a firm hand. A sting ripples across my cheek but is replaced by a searing heat that works its way through my pussy. I yelp but follow it immediately with a moan to show him I want more.

Still rapidly thrusting into me, he slaps the other cheek with even more strength. I moan louder, feeling the skin burn where he’s spanked me. Vincent grabs a handful of my hair and pulls, forcing my head back. I arch, and he hits deeper, so deep there is a bit of pain mixed with the pleasure.

Then he lets go and smashes my face back into the mattress with his hand.

As if to reward me, Vincent reaches one hand around my hips, burying his erection fully inside me. He ceases thrusting and fucking, instead making me feel the full might of his cock inside of me. With two fingers, he begins to stroke small circles around my swollen clit.

I lean forward, clenching my ass to bring my hips closer to his fingertips. He presses harder against me, and between the fullness inside me and the pressure on my clit, I moan loudly into the fabric of his shirt. I feel the walls of my womb tighten and release in rapid succession as my hips move and my toes curl.

I scream into the gag as the orgasm races through me, filling me with pleasure. Vincent doesn’t let up on my clit,

rubbing me until I think I can't take it anymore.

I come for longer than I've ever come before and feel Vincent's cock jump and throb inside me. My pussy fills with his hot cum, and I feel his semen escape my opening and drip down my clit. Vincent moans in a low voice and starts to let up the pressure on my clit, giving it a few little rubs before pulling out and collapsing beside me.

"Let me get you a towel," he says in a low voice and rolls off the bed before plodding to the bathroom. I fall to one side, feeling his hot cum leaking between my legs and spreading onto my thighs. I'm sweating and breathing hard.

Holy shit, did that really just happen?

I'm not a virgin anymore. I just lost my virginity to my hot as sin, much older neighbor. And it was fucking *amazing*.

Vincent returns from the bathroom, his erection still bobbing hard in front of him. I'm sure he's going to just hand me the towel and walk away, but he doesn't. He pushes my legs apart and gently cleans my thighs and sensitive pussy.

"Vincent, I really—" I begin but am interrupted by the sound of glass breaking downstairs.

I scramble off the bed and to my feet. We both turn toward the door. Vincent's gaze darts between me and the door, his eyes brim with worry, and I know something's very wrong.

He drops the towel and turns to me. He cups my cheek, gently stroking it with his thumb, and then his mouth is over mine. His firm lips are warm and consume me. Fire spreads across every nerve ending on my body.

The moment is over before it even gets the chance to start, then he breaks the kiss, and I'm left with nothing but my heart thundering in my chest.

"Get dressed, stay quiet, and let me take care of them," he says before pulling away.

The moment his hands leave my face, his whole demeanor changes. His eyes turn from molted chocolate to the darkest

black. A shiver runs down my spine, and fear has a grip on my throat as I watch him get dressed in a hurry.

He runs to the dresser across from the bed and pulls out two handguns, a gasp bubbles in my throat. He pushes one into his belt and holds the other in his right hand.

“Get dressed,” he orders in a voice I don’t recognize.

In a daze, I go to pull on my underwear, still feeling his cum inside me.

Who the hell did I just sleep with?

VINCENT

FUCK! THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT I WANTED TO PROTECT HER from. How dare they? It's too soon. They couldn't even give me a few minutes of joy. A few minutes with my obsession. How quickly I've gone from the greatest moment of my life to the worst.

Faith was terrified when she saw me pull out the guns. My heart sinks. It's over now. We fucked once, that's it. I can't hide my life from her any longer.

I step from foot to foot as Faith gets dressed, silent as she pulls her sweater over her head.

"I have to tell you something, Faith," I say once she's fully dressed.

I stuff my second gun into my waistband and grab her hands. "When I open that door, you need to stay behind me. That guy your mom brought home is my boss's brother. He's a bad, bad man. I don't want to frighten you, but he will kill us if he gets the chance. I'm only telling you this so you'll listen to me. No one will ever, ever hurt you. I will protect you. Do you hear me, Faith?"

She gulps, then nods. Her eyes are still wary, and I'm sure she doesn't know what to think, but her doubt has to be put on hold. All I need her to do right now is listen.

Steeled and certain that this may work yet, I open the door.

Two of Rico's cronies are already in the hall, advancing on me, they reach for their guns at the same time as me, but I'm faster. I have my gun drawn in the time it takes me to take two

steps forward. Lifting the barrel, I fire twice, hitting both men square in the forehead.

Blood explodes against the wall behind them, and they fall to the ground. I glance back at Faith and wince when I see the expression on her face—pure terror.

Swallowing that guilt, I tell Faith to wait here. I step around the two dead bodies, and I don't dare to look up at her face again, too worried about what I might see.

I'm nearly at the end of the hall when Rico crosses in front of me. I grip my gun a little harder.

"Well, Vincent," he sneers, a smug expression on his face. "I told you you'd regret crossing me."

"I haven't and won't. It's just us now. Your other men are dead, as you can see." I motion behind me to the floor.

"Did you bring the girl here, Vincent? If you give her to me now, I might let you live."

My blood runs cold at the thought of him getting his hands on Faith.

"Take me," Faith interludes like a meek mouse. "Just, please... don't hurt him."

"Shut up, Faith. You're not going anywhere with him," I snarl.

"Aww, your first lovers quarrel? Too bad you won't have a chance for angry makeup sex," he chuckles, "don't worry, Vincent. I'll make sure to give her a good fuck after I put a bullet in your skull. I'll bet she's tight as fuck."

I take a deep, shuddering breath. My mind has no more thoughts. I'm fueled by rage and rage alone.

I leap forward with a primal yell, right hand poised to clock Rico square in the nose. I pin him against the wall and punch him repeatedly. He tries weakly to raise his hands against me but is too fat and weak to actually make a hit.

I wrap one hand around the back of Rico's head and twist his neck. He never stood a chance, not against me. In one swift

motion, I break his spine and toss him down the stairwell. A few blood spatters are left behind as he rolls down the stairs.

Standing at the top of the staircase, I steady my breathing. The fog in my mind begins to clear as I realize that I have just subjected my love to this sort of violence. I've already failed.

I look back down the hall. Faith is illuminated in the doorway to the master bedroom, and the distance between us seems like miles. The bodies of Rico's cronies lie between us.

"Y-you killed them." Her bottom lip trembles, and something like confusion flickers in her blue eyes.

I sigh and let my shoulders sag.

"Yes, Faith. I killed them, and I would do it again. That's what they deserve for trying to hurt you.

"You look like you've done this before. Almost like you do this all the time."

"Yes, I've killed a lot of people. It's my job," I explain, not wanting to hold anything back. There is no point in hiding who I am now. "There is more..."

"More than you being a hitman? What else could there be?"

"Let me show you." I walk back into my bedroom and grab the laptop from the dresser. I open it and type in all the codes to get to the live feed of her room.

I hear her gasp behind me, and all I can do is hang my head in defeat. She is never going to forgive me for this. She is going to hate me.

"I have been...obsessed with you ever since I moved in. I never wanted you to be exposed to any of this. So...I watched you from afar. I was never planning to do anything. I swore off you for good."

I silently beg her to forgive me. She is quiet for a long moment, and I still don't have the courage to look at her.

"I understand if you hate me now. If you want me to leave you alone. I'll carry you out of this house and leave you alone

forever. I promise you that if that's what you want, I'll do it. It might be impossibly hard, but I'll do it for you—"

"Did you...hear me call out your name this morning?" Her question catches me off guard.

I turn around so I can see her face. I expect to find fear, disgust, and maybe even hate there. Instead, she looks...relieved.

"You're not mad at me?"

"I know I should be, but for some reason, I'm not." At her words, I feel like a thousand-pound boulder has been lifted off my chest. "You didn't answer my question."

"Yes." I grin slightly. "I loved when you called out for me while you were rubbing your little clit furiously."

We stare at each other for a long moment, and for the first time, I let my mind run wild. I imagine a future with the tiny woman in front of me. She just saw me, the real me, all the dark and dirty corners, and she is still here. Still looking at me with her fuck me eyes.

"I want you so bad it hurts."

I barely get the words out before she throws her arms around my neck and buries her face in my chest. I wrap my arms around her in return, burying my face in her brown locks. The smell of her. Cookies, lavender, and happiness.

My god. She doesn't think I'm a monster.

She pulls back and tilts her face up to look at me, and I gaze into her wide blue eyes with love. I fucking love her. *I love her.*

"I never want you to leave me alone, Vincent. I love you."

She stands on her tiptoes and presses her pert mouth to mine, and I kiss my obsession back.

At long last, she is mine.

EPILOGUE

VINCENT

One Year Later

AFTER THAT NIGHT A YEAR AGO, I TOOK FAITH AND GOT OUT of the city.

I had enough money saved up to sustain us for a long time. Now she was going to a school she wanted to go to, and we were living the best life. To protect her, I thought I would have to stop working as a hitman. I didn't want anyone from my past to interfere with our future, but I hooked up with the local mob here, and I've been working for the Valentinos for the past six months, and my worries have lessened with each week. The family is led by Ace Valentino, who is the oldest out of six brothers but still younger than me. Their father died right before I moved here.

Unlike Tony, they believe in family values. They might be ruthless on the streets, killing their enemies without mercy, but they respect women. They don't see them as a weakness. Instead of using Faith against me, Ace assured me that she will be protected, and I believe him.

With that knowledge on my mind, I'm ready to make Faith mine forever. The ring feels like a thousand pounds in my pocket. I sit on the couch in our living room, my stomach a nervous knot.

Looking up at the Christmas tree we had just put up the night before, I smile. Christmas is Faith's favorite holiday and now mine as well. The sound of a key in the door pulls me from my thoughts. She's home. The soft glow of the Christmas tree is the only light in the room.

The door opens, and she walks in. I swear I can smell her across the room, her sweet intoxicating scent that makes my mouth water. My cock stiffens in my jeans, wanting to be inside of her.

"Why are you sitting in the dark all alone?" she says, flipping the light switch on.

The bright light forces me to squint. "Come here. I want to talk to you." My voice is thick and rougher due to the nervousness I'm feeling.

Placing her purse on the table, she kicks off her shoes and sashays over to me, her hips sway in a way that draws my attention. Forget the ring. I need to be inside of her right now.

Standing, I shove off the couch and meet her halfway. Like every time she sees me, she jumps into my arms, and I haul her against my chest, burying my nose in her hair. She is everything to me.

When she pulls back and looks up at me, I press my lips to hers. Her hands fist at my shirt, and I can feel her breasts rubbing at my chest. Fuck, my cock is so hard I'm worried I might blow my load. Her lips part on a soft little gasp when I land a slap against her jean-clad ass. I slip my tongue into her mouth and swallow up her moans of pleasure as I guide us back toward the couch.

Reaching the sectional, I separate our bodies and ease her back against the cushion. Her big blue eyes swim with love and adoration as she peers up at me. I undo the button on my jeans and shove them down my legs, my cock springing free and standing at attention.

Faith's gaze drops down to my cock, and her pink tongue darts out over her bottom lip. She's hungry, and so am I.

Reaching for the waistband of her yoga pants, I pull them down her legs and toss them over my shoulder.

“Did you miss me?” Her tone is sultry; she already knows the answer.

“What do you think?” I growl, pinching one of her hardened nipples through the fabric of her shirt. “Take this off,” I order, unable to hold myself back any longer.

It didn’t take long for us to realize Faith liked being submissive and having me in control of her pleasure. In fact, it turned her on more.

“Are you going to fuck me?” she purrs, reaching for my cock.

“I’m not just going to fuck you. I’m going to show you how much I love you. Now, up on your hands and knees.”

At my order, she moves into place. Her hands grip the back of the couch, and she peers at me over her shoulder while her brown hair falls in soft waves down her back.

“I thought you wanted to talk,” she taunts, shaking her ass at me. Her creamy white cheeks bounce, and I slap each of them, enjoying the soft sigh Faith makes.

“Oh, I want to talk... to your pussy. Now, let me do what I’ve wanted to do all day.” Trailing a hand down her spine, I massage her ass cheeks before moving lower until I reach her tight pussy. Sinking two fingers into her hole, I find her soaking wet.

“Already fucking wet.” I chuckle. “I’m not even surprised. You used to be so naive, virginal. What happened?”

“You. You happened.” She pushes back against my fingers, and I let her fuck herself on my hand for a while until her arousal starts to coat my palm.

Withdrawing my fingers, I take my cock into my hand, guiding the head to her entrance before sinking into her with one swift thrust.

“Fuck.” Euphoric pleasure ripples down my spine, and I take her by the hips and start to fuck her, hard and fast. The

sound of our skin slapping against each other fills my ears.

“Oh, god! Vincent.” Faith starts to pant almost immediately.

I grin and slap one of her ass cheeks while continuing to thrust. “You want my cum inside your tight little hole?”

“Yes! Fill my tight hole,” Faith screams and tips her head back.

Her entire body shudders when I stop thrusting, and press my hips to her ass and grind my cock inside her just like I know she loves. Snaking a hand between our bodies, I find her swollen clit, and start rubbing the nub faster and faster until I feel her clenching around me, squeezing my cock so hard I feel faint.

My name falls from her lips on a scream, “Vincent!”

I pull out and push back into her a couple times, enjoying the way her womb continues to convulse around me.

“Tell me you want it,” I grit out, feeling my orgasm on the horizon.

“I want it. I want you to come inside of me. Please... please, Vincent.” Her soft little pleas push me over the edge, and with a roar, I explode. Sticky jets of my warm cum fill her tight channel. There is so much cum it starts to drip out of her and down my cock.

Fuck, there is no sight quite like the one right before my eyes. After a few moments, I ease out of her and take her into my arms and collapse on the couch. She lies with her head against my chest, my fingers running through her soft locks for what seems like an eternity before she interrupts the silence.

“What did you want to talk to me about earlier?” she whispers, her blue eyes twinkling with joy.

The nervous knots from earlier returns. Shit. “Oh, yeah...” I trail off and sit up, forcing her to move. Her brows pucker, and she seems confused now.

I reach for my jeans and pull out the velvet box inside the pocket. I’m partially naked, and Faith is completely naked, but

the moment for this has never felt righter.

Taking her hand in mine, I say, “Faith, when we got together a year ago, I thought it was a dream. I thought you would forever remain my obsession, the one thing I wanted most but could never have.”

“Oh, Vincent... I love you.” Tears fill her eyes, and my heartbeat rings in my ears.

“You’re the best thing to happen to me, and I want you to be mine forever. Be my wife, Faith.” I open the box and hand it to her.

Her eyes go real wide, and her mouth pops open. For a long second, the longest in the world, she says nothing. She just stares at the three-carat princess cut diamond ring like it’s a trap.

“Is this... is this real?” she whispers, her eyes darting between the ring and me.

I nod. “It’s real, baby. Be my wife. Make me the happiest fucking man in the world.”

It must finally hit her because she starts to nod her head, yes. Her hands tremble as I take the ring from the box and place it on her finger.

I take her by the cheeks and drag her face toward mine. “I need your words. Will you be my wife?”

“Yes, yes, I will be your wife. I love you so much.” She starts to cry, and I know I’m the luckiest man in the world. I got the best gift, not one year, but two years in a row.

Her lips find mine, and we fall back onto the couch, our bodies becoming tangled all over again. There’s no one I would rather spend the rest of my life with.

THE CHRISTMAS MISTAKE

It was just supposed to be another hit. An easy pay day right before Christmas. My brother and I have done this a hundred times. A quick in and out that left someone dead and our pockets full of cash.

Only this time everything goes wrong, and this Christmas mistake might be the last we'll ever make.

MASON

FRANKIE BARRYMORE. 20.

101 15th Street, apartment 8.

Twenty thousand dollars.

“Hey. This should be an easy one.” I hand the burner phone I use to access the job posting board to my brother, Evan. My partner in our little business. “Twenty-year-old kid? Against the two of us? We’d make it to the bar in time for last call.”

Not that we go to the bar after completing a job. It’s as much of a joke as my brother and I have—there isn’t a ton of laughter in our world unless one of us is laughing at the other. The first time we pulled a job, we made sure to get out of there early enough to get to the corner bar in time for last call. The idea was to be seen by the regulars there, people who recognized us. An alibi, in other words.

We were so fucking green back then.

We were also pulling robberies. Small-time shit we don’t even bother with anymore. We’ve moved up in the world—or down, depending on how you look at it.

Evan frowns, scanning the screen. “Twenty years old. Somebody’s kid, and we’re taking him out a few days before Christmas? That’s cold.”

That makes me snort. “It’s gonna be Christmas for us with a fat paycheck under the tree. Besides, how many jobs did you pull by that age?”

“Good point.” He scrubs a hand over his short black hair. Like nearly everything else about us, mine is the same. We could be twins if it wasn’t for the two years between us and the thin scar running from Evan’s temple to his jaw. “But that’s us. Not everybody had to do the shit we did when we were that age.”

“He must have done something to piss someone off enough to call a hit for twenty grand. I doubt this guy is a saint. It doesn’t matter, either way. Are we in or not?” I take the phone back, brows lifted as I wait for an answer. “Twenty thousand for a quick in-and-out job. We’ve done a lot worse.”

“Yeah, sure.” He shrugs it off. I click the button indicating we’ll take the job. It’s as easy as that. The job will be easy, too. Killing a twenty-year-old kid. Maybe he had a future ahead of him, maybe not. All I know is, somebody with money wants him dead.

Usually, we get people involved with the wrong crowd—owing someone money, losing a bet, even the occasional revenge kill. Also hot on the hit list are disgruntled business partners, who usually live in nicer houses or apartments. Sometimes it’s a cheating husband whose wife got sick of his bullshit. Sometimes it’s the husband who wants the wife dead—or a girlfriend who refuses to keep her mouth shut.

That part, we usually find out while doing reconnaissance before going in for the hit. But there aren’t any bells and whistles to this one. Nothing to indicate this is somebody important, with ties to the underworld or in a house with a complex security system. No warnings whatsoever. I wish they were all this easy.

101 15th Street. Shitty neighborhood. No chance of a security system there. What could they have to protect? This is looking better all the time. Good thing I happened to check the new job listings when I did, or somebody else could be getting ready to take advantage.

On the way into town, I can’t help but wonder about Frankie Barrymore. Who is he? Who’d he piss off? Living in a dump like the one now coming into view, either he’s a lowlife

wannabe criminal or a dumb kid who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I shouldn't think about him at all, really—no sense humanizing somebody who's only going to breathe air for the next twenty minutes or so—but a part of me always wonders. What does a person have to do to get his name listed on those boards? Does he have any idea we're coming for him?

I hope he's sleeping well and having good dreams. Maybe he'll get lucky, and we'll embed a couple of bullets in his brain while he's dreaming. Maybe he'll stay wherever he is and never know he's dead.

My brain's all fucked tonight. Evan notices, too, grunting in my general direction as he turns onto 15th. "What's with you? You'd think we were on our way to a funeral."

I only roll my eyes, focusing my attention on the corner apartment building. It's amazing the thing's still standing. I guess rat turds are stronger than they look since the foundation must be built on them.

Evan parks half a block down. No worries about whether we'll be noticed since the streetlights are broken. The city must not see fit to come out and replace them. Works for me. A handful of random people lurk in those shadows, hanging out in doorways and sleeping in alleys. We're night people, like they are. They know better than to pay attention to what happens out here, and so do we. There's no threat from them.

The night air is cold as my brother and I walk quickly from the car, a beat-up old rust bucket we use for jobs like this, to the corner building. One of the apartment windows holds blinking Christmas lights, reminding me the holiday is tomorrow. Something about those lights strikes me as sad. Like whoever put them up has hope even though they live here.

The apartment is on the third floor. The hall smells just as much like piss and despair as I figured. Evan's nose wrinkles in disgust when we come to a stop at the door, where he looks over his shoulder before checking his Glock. I do the same while listening for sounds of life coming from inside the

apartment. There's no light visible under the door. No sound, either.

And the lock's a joke. If I lived somewhere like this, you'd better believe I'd have more than a doorknob lock. All it takes is a credit card, and I'm inside the dark, silent shoebox of a home.

In and out. That's all we need. And if he's not home yet, we can stick around until he shows up. I hope he doesn't take long since I don't love being here. A baby wails from a couple of doors down, and somewhere else, a woman weeps. I drown both sounds out. It reminds me too much of my childhood.

Evan leads the way down a narrow hall, past a tiny living room and a kitchen that looks like it hasn't been updated in a few decades. A faint light shines from inside the room at the end of the hall, where the door's partly open.

No need to check in with each other before moving forward. We've been through this too many times before. Evan takes the lead with me right behind him. It strikes me that Frankie may not be alone—well, that's a shame for whoever she is, hooking up with a guy who has a price on his head.

The door opens silently when Evan lifts it slightly on its hinges. I don't know what I expected to find in the bedroom. A kid lying on a bare mattress, alone or otherwise? Something as bleak as the rest of the apartment, the rest of the building?

Instead, the bed is draped in pink. Pillows, duvet, the whole nine yards. The light I saw coming from under the door is courtesy of the blinking Christmas lights in the window behind a gauzy curtain.

Son of a bitch.

It's a little girl's bedroom.

Only the person in the bed is no little girl. She's a full-grown woman with shiny dark hair spread over the pillow like a fan. She sleeps with a hand on the pillow next to her face. What a face, too. Gorgeous, peaceful, glowing.

Fuck, we're in the wrong apartment. One look at Evan shows me he's just as stunned as me. This never happens.

People don't give us the wrong address when they want someone dead. This is not a pizza delivery. It's a death sentence.

"Maybe this is his sister or girlfriend," I whisper more to myself, but in the quiet room, my brother hears me just fine.

"There." He points at something in the corner of the room. "Check her purse."

Looking at where Evan is pointing, I find a purse propped up on a chair. I silently cross the room and fish her wallet out of her worn purse. Flipping it open, I search for her ID.

"Motherfucker," I curse when I see the name next to the girl's picture. "Frances Barrymore. It's her; she is Frankie."

"Well, fuck."

Frankie. That's a guy's name. Nobody would think they were going to a girl's apartment when they read that name. But the person in bed is most definitely a girl, and she looks awfully at home. This is her bedroom, her bed. Her apartment.

I nod to the door, and Evan takes the hint. Once we're out in the hall, we turn to each other. "What the fuck?" he whispers while staring at the bed.

"How should I know?" He's talking to me like I did this on purpose. "I'm lost here, too."

One thing I don't think either of us is lost on: we took the job. There's no getting out of it. No returns policy. The girl has to die. "It'll be better to get it over with fast," Evan points out. "Before she wakes up."

He's right. I know he's right. That doesn't mean I have to like it.

I don't even know why I don't like it. We've killed women before. It's not my favorite, but a job's a job. Money's money. We're providing a service. There's nothing different about this.

So why can't I go the fuck in there and pull the trigger? He's right. It'll be better to get it done fast. A mercy. There are sick fucks out there—sicker than us—who would get off on

finding a girl in bed instead of a guy. They'd put it in her ass first, then kill her. Sort of a bonus.

Why isn't this making me feel any better?

"Come on." Evan nudges me. "We gotta do it."

"I know." I nudge him back. Pretty soon, nudges are going to turn into something worse, and the girl will wake up because we're beating the hell out of each other outside her bedroom door.

"So?"

"So if you're in such a hurry, go in there and do it yourself." I shrug. "Go ahead."

His eyes narrow in a dangerous way. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was considering putting a bullet in my head instead of the girl in the other room. Sleeping in that girlie bed. "Don't pull that reverse psychology shit with me."

"Who says I am?" I should go in there. I know I should, but I can't make my feet move. Not when she's sleeping so peacefully. When she's tempting me with all those curves under that pink blanket. Not where my head should be right now, not even close, but nothing about any of this makes sense.

"We have to do this. She won't even know. Look around this place. It's not like she has a great life, and she must have done something to end up on that list. We're probably doing her a favor taking her out in her sleep." Right, and wasn't I just thinking that back in the car? She'll get lucky and end up staying in the dream she's in now. Judging by the way she's sleeping—like a rock—it's not a nightmare. Good for her.

He's right. I know he's right. That's why I take a deep breath and go back in there, back to the bed. I stand beside it, staring down at her. *Sorry, Frankie. You pissed off the wrong person.* Though I can't imagine how an angel like this could piss anybody off. Not to the point where they'd pay twenty grand to have her killed.

Evan stands on the other side of the bed, across from me. We exchange one last look. A nod. We're ready to do what has

to be done. Maybe.

And that's when she wakes up. Her eyes fly open and connect with mine like two magnets drawn to each other. There is a small moment before her fear takes over, where she just looks at me. Not quite awake but not asleep. Her big baby-blue eyes just stare at me, and I'm not sure what's happening. It's like the world around us stands still. My chest feels funny, warm, and fuzzy. I've never experienced anything like it, but I already know I won't kill her, and neither will Evan.

Because not only won't I hurt her but no one else will. They'll have to go through me first.

FRANKIE

WHAT THE—?

For a second, it's like I'm still sleeping. There's no way these two guys are actually standing at my bedside. The only place in the world where I feel safe and whole. Yes, I'm still sleeping in the same bed and bedding I had when I was a little girl. It's the only thing I have left. I've never even let anyone in my bedroom before.

But they are. I'm awake, and the two of them are clear as day with multicolored lights blinking, shining on their faces. It's like a surreal nightmare.

I suck in a breath, ready to scream—what else am I supposed to do?—but one of them clamps a hand over my mouth before I can do anything. I claw at his wrist, kicking when the other one tries to grab my legs. It doesn't make a difference how hard I fight. They're both too strong.

Too strong for me to defend myself. Two of them against one of me. Terror turns my blood to ice while a hundred ugly, painful images race through my brain all at once.

“Stop fighting,” one of them growls over my muffled screams. “I said fucking stop.” I don't even know which of them is speaking. I don't know anything but fear. The hand over my mouth tightens, no matter how I claw at it. Instead of that, I punch the inside of his elbow to make his arm go weak long enough to twist my head and get my mouth free.

“What are you doing here?” It's a stupid question. It's obvious what they're doing here. I'm about to scream again,

but the one I punched covers my mouth again, and this time, his fingers press into my face hard enough to bring tears to my eyes.

“Stop, Frankie. You’re only going to hurt yourself.” The one holding my body still sits on the edge of the bed. He has a gun. They both do. They’re here to kill me. “You’re wasting your time.”

“Who sent you here? Why are you here?” I try to wiggle away because, honestly, what else am I going to do? Lie here and take it? How do they know my name?

They ignore me, looking at each other instead. They have to be brothers. They look too much alike to be anything else. And they’re having a silent conversation. Finally, it’s too much, and I start fighting again. I’m kicking and punching harder this time, and it’s almost enough to get me out of bed.

Until one of them grabs me by the waist. “Fine. This is how it’s going to have to be.” He throws me back onto the bed, my face pressed against the mattress while the other one leaves the bedroom. He’s back in what feels like seconds later, and I hear the sound of tape being ripped from a roll.

No matter how I struggle, they manage to tape my wrists together behind me. My ankles come next. Tears are running down my face when they roll me onto my back.

One of them reaches out for me, and I flinch away, but all he does is wipe a tear from my cheek with his thumb. If he hadn’t bound me thirty seconds ago, the gesture would almost be sweet.

“Please, don’t—” The rest of my plea is lost when a big piece of tape covers my mouth.

They’re arguing with each other, the two of them muttering in low voices. One of them walks out of the room while the other one carries me over his shoulder. “Don’t even think about kicking me,” he warns. “We’re not always nice guys. Don’t push us too far.” I get the feeling he’s telling the truth. But what are they doing to me? Where are we going? All I can do is mumble my questions behind the tape.

Before long, we're outside in the cold. I'm placed into the back seat of a car that the other guy must have pulled up in front of my building so they wouldn't have to carry me too far. Have they done this before? They must have since it seems like they have this down to a science.

Though I don't think I was part of their plan. They're too flustered and arguing with each other. The question is, if they didn't come to kidnap me, what did they come here to do?

They mutter to each other almost nonstop as we roll away from my building and head down the street. What was it I heard once? If a victim is moved to another location, it's pretty much guaranteed they're going to die. That's robberies, though. Does that count now? What the hell am I even thinking? I need to get my head together. If I'm panicking, I can't get away.

They didn't give me any room to wiggle my arms or legs. I remember seeing a video once, instructions on how to get out of duct tape. But my hands are behind me, so I can't use that. What else do I know? Think, think, I have to think. Even if it seems pointless and useless because there are two of them and only one of me. They're so much bigger and stronger.

And they have guns. I've never had a gun pointed at me before. Guess I can cross that off my bucket list.

There's no reason to laugh right now, but one tries to work its way out of my chest anyway. The sound doesn't get far, thanks to the tape over my mouth. My tears have seeped into it, enough that it's starting to come loose at one corner. I rub my face against the seat and try to pull more of it back. If I can talk, maybe I can get through to them.

I know it's pointless, but I have to do something. I'm not going to die without at least trying to save myself.

The tape's maybe a quarter of the way loose when we come to a sudden stop, the driver hitting the brakes hard enough that I almost roll off the seat. For one second, I think maybe there's a cop out there on the street, and we almost ran a light. Maybe that's why. Maybe I can scream and get their attention.

No such luck. My heart sinks when both men open their doors and continue their tense conversation outside the car. Before I can calm my racing heart enough to hear what they're saying, the back door near my feet opens, and a pair of hands close around my ankles, yanking me out of the car.

We've arrived.

All I manage to get a glimpse of is a house. A nice house, too, the kind of place I used to dream about living in when I was a kid. Before I knew better, back when I thought anything was possible. I turn my head as much as I can, trying to get a feel of the surroundings, but all I see are trees and more trees. We're in the middle of nowhere.

They've brought me out to the middle of nowhere. Nobody will hear me screaming. Panic floods me again, fresh and new, and I can't help but wiggle and thrash in the arms of the man carrying me.

"Knock it the fuck off." It's a growl, low and threatening. "You're already more trouble than you're worth."

"Shut up, Evan," the other one says. Evan, at least I know one of their names. The other guy opens the door, looking around like he wants to make sure we're alone while his brother carries me into the house.

It's nice inside, too. The living room is off the entry, and that's where my kidnapper drops me, right onto a sectional sofa set up across from a widescreen TV mounted on the wall. I almost bounce onto the floor, he drops me so hard. "This is fucking ridiculous." He glares down at me, and I notice a scar running down the left side of his face. It's not big or even ugly, but it makes him look scarier than ever.

The way he looms over me isn't helping things.

His brother joins him after flipping on a lamp. This one doesn't have a scar, but he's wearing the same hard, angry look. "We're in it now," he grunts. "No going back."

I want to tell them they can go back. They absolutely can. All that comes out is muffled groans, though.

The one without the scar grimaces. “If you promise not to scream, I’ll take the tape off your mouth.”

“Not that screaming will help anything,” his brother warns. “There’s nobody around for a mile in any direction. At least.”

“All it’ll do is piss us off, and you don’t want to do that.” He leans down, takes hold of the tape, and pulls it away. I can’t help whimpering in pain, but at least I can breathe better now.

“Why?” It’s the biggest question looming in my mind. “Why are you doing this? Why me?”

“You really don’t know?” They exchange a look.

“No.” There are tears in my eyes, in my voice. I can’t help it. I don’t want to be weak, to let them think it’ll be easy to do whatever they want to me, but what else am I supposed to do? My whole life is flashing in front of me.

“We’ve gotta do something with her.” Evan scrubs a hand over his black hair. “Right?”

“Obviously.”

“Don’t hurt me. Please.” I know it sounds pitiful, and it’s what people in this position probably always say, but it’s the only thing that comes to mind. “Whatever this is about, we can figure it out. I know we can.”

I try to move my legs, but they’re starting to cramp. My groan isn’t for show. “Can you get rid of the tape, please? It’s hurting me.”

They have another one of those silent conversations, staring at each other. Evan snorts like he’s not a fan of the idea, but his brother sits on the edge of the couch anyway and pulls something out of his back pocket.

“Relax.” He rolls his eyes when I gasp. “How else do you want me to get it off?” He opens the knife and works it under the tape on my ankles until he can peel it free. Only his hand rests on my ankles longer than it needs to, then starts inching up my calf.

I pull it away, and he only snickers before giving the same treatment to the tape around my wrists. My muscles ache enough to make me whimper again when the blood starts flowing, but it means I'm free. Free-ish, anyway.

Neither of them stops me when I work my way into a sitting position, then draw my knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around them. I'm only wearing a long T-shirt, but it covers most of me when I pull it over my legs, of all the nights to go to bed without at least shorts on.

The rest of the house is silent. It's just the three of us. "Why did you bring me here?" I ask in a whisper. I don't know whether I want the answer. "Who are you?"

"Who are we?" They exchange a look. "Right now, we're the reason you're still alive."

EVAN

THIS IS A FUCKING MISTAKE. ALL THE WAY AROUND. NO other way to describe it.

But the alternative is somehow worse.

I don't know what it is about her, but Mason feels it, too. Or else the girl would be dead in her bed right now, and we'd be... well, we'd be here, probably. Without her. Without guilt or remorse or any of that shit.

So why couldn't we go through with it?

And why do I want to touch her so badly? Goddamn, she's tempting. Now that I've gotten a feel of her smooth skin—like silk—I want more.

“My name's Evan.” I jerk my chin at my brother. “That's Mason. And I hate to be the one to break it to you, but we were sent to your apartment to kill you.”

She gasps, flinching like I hurt her. Mason groans. “Nice. Make sure you scare the shit out of her.”

“I think it's too late for that. What's the point of pretending? Somebody wants her dead, and we were sent there to make it happen.”

“Why would anybody want me dead?” She sounds like a little girl, which makes sense considering the sort of bed she sleeps in. If it hadn't been for that princess setup and the Christmas lights and all that, this might've turned out differently. Something about it was enough to make me think

twice. To hesitate. I never hesitate if I can help it. That's the sort of shit that can get a person killed.

But this time, there was no helping it. I couldn't make myself pull the trigger. Then she woke up, and it only took one look at those baby blue eyes to tuck away my gun.

"We don't know why. We just take the job. No questions asked," Mason explains, folding his arms. "You tell us. Who did you fuck over?"

"I have no idea. I mean it." Her eyes dart back and forth between us. Beautiful innocent eyes. The pale blue is offset by her dark hair and creamy skin, but right now, they're huge and full of fear. "It must've been some kind of mistake. You had the wrong apartment."

"So how come I know your name, Frankie Barrymore?"

She flinches, pulling her legs closer to her chest. It would take no effort at all to spread those thighs and see what's going on under that shirt she's wearing. It's thin enough that I'd be able to see her nipples through it if her legs weren't in the way.

Her eyes go round, widening until they practically bulge from her head. "But... why?"

"We're not the ones who can answer that question. And honestly, it doesn't matter right now."

"To you, maybe."

Mason breaks in before I can remind her that we're doing her a favor and don't want to hear her smart mouth. There's plenty I could do with that mouth. I doubt she'd like all of it—at least, not right away. She'd tell herself she didn't, of course. "What matters now is keeping you out of sight. So they think you're dead."

It takes her a second to catch on. I guess I'd be confused, too, if I woke up with two strangers pointing guns at me. All in all, she's handling it pretty well.

"So I'm supposed to hide for the rest of my life? I can't ever go home?" She gulps. "Not ever?"

“Why would you want to?” Mason shoots me a look for that, but I don’t much care. I’m genuinely surprised she would feel this way. “I mean, I was there. I saw what your life looked like. If anything, this is a second chance.”

“A second chance at what?” A disbelieving little giggle bubbles up from her chest. “With what? Using what? I don’t even have an ID now. It’s all at the apartment. I have to go back for it.”

“No. You can’t.”

“But I have to!”

I hate complaining more than just about anything else. “Okay, quit the whining.” I have to get up and put space between us, or else I don’t know what I’ll do. She might look like a woman, but she’s acting like a spoiled little brat. Maybe she just needs a spanking.

Mason’s always had more patience than me. “You just can’t. They’ll know you’re alive, whoever they are. Which means they’ll be even more determined to find you and get rid of you for real. Understand?”

She starts rocking back and forth, staring straight ahead with her chin on her knees. For a second, I think she might be in shock. I mean, I guess I would be, too. Mason and I look at each other. He lifts a shoulder.

“I have to use the bathroom. Now. I’m going to be sick.” She gets up, swaying a little. I reach out and catch her before she hits the floor, meaning she lands against me. It might’ve been better to let her drop since having her warm, soft body in my arms sets off all kinds of dark, nasty thoughts.

But the idea of having puke all over me isn’t a turn-on, so I steer her to the bathroom on this floor. “Just breathe,” I mutter, practically carrying her when her legs don’t work fast enough. “Don’t throw up on me.” She stumbles into the room, and I close the door before I have to see anything. Hearing her gagging is bad enough.

I can blow a guy’s brains out without flinching. But puke is too much.

Mason sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “This is a bad idea.”

“No shit.” I press in on my temples, trying to ward off a headache. “But what do you want to do about it? Take her back? This was your idea, remember?”

“Fuck you. You went along with it. It’s not like you were about to pull the trigger, either.”

He’s right. I could’ve ended this pretty easily. Squeeze the trigger, problem solved. Extra money to grab a few more Christmas gifts for Mom. She always did love Christmas—even more than we did when we were kids. At least it seemed that way.

Now? A girl is throwing up in my bathroom, and we have to make it look like we killed her. Add in how fucking tempting she is, and this is a recipe for disaster.

Thinking of her brings my attention back to the closed door. She’s not gagging anymore. “You okay in there? We’ve got things to discuss.” No answer.

Shit. I look at Mason, who’s staring at the door. “Frankie? Say something.”

“Are there razors or pills in there?” I turn the knob and find she locked the door at some point. When did that happen? How did I miss it? “Dammit, Frankie, don’t make me break this door down. You’ll be the one who ends up paying for it.”

When I don’t get an answer, there’s no choice but to kick the damn thing down. It doesn’t take much effort. The door swings open, wood splinters flying.

And there she is, with her ass hanging out of the window, the top half of her body outside. Trying to get away. “Are you fucking with me?” Before I know what I’m doing, I cross the room and slap her across the ass, good and hard. I don’t know what made me do it. The feeling of dealing with an ignorant little brat, maybe. Brats get spanked.

She jumps a little, kicking out with her feet. “Don’t hurt me, please! Don’t hurt me!”

“Nobody *was* going to hurt you.” Now, though? Now I want to teach her a lesson. First, I have to get her out of the window, where she got herself stuck. “We should leave you like this and let you freeze to death, you fucking idiot.” A couple of tugs, and she’s back in the room, sliding down the wall until she crouches on the floor with her arms crossed over her bent head.

“Please. Just let me go.” She’s shaking from head to toe, and I don’t think it’s from the cold. Something about the way she’s acting makes my blood boil. We saved her life tonight, and she’s acting like we’re the ones who ordered the hit on her.

Trying to get away only pisses me the fuck off. If she sent the cops our way, we would have to move again. I’m mad thinking about how her actions could have fucked us over. All it does is make me want to hurt her. To give her something to cry about.

“How far did you think you were going to get?” Mason demands, standing beside me and looking just as pissed as I feel. “You’re barefoot and practically naked. It’s like thirty degrees out there.”

“Let me go, please.” She repeats so quietly, I can barely hear her. “I’ll run away. I’ll make myself disappear.”

“Yeah, right.” Bending down, I take her by the waist, lifting her up and throwing her over my shoulder. She flops like a rag doll. “You have the money to make yourself disappear? Tell me another good one.”

“What are you doing?” She squirms when I start up the stairs, heading for my bedroom.

“I’m making sure you don’t get any other smart ideas about running away.”

“No. No!” Her fighting gets worse when she realizes where we’re going. Once we’re in the room, I flip on the lights before dumping her on the bed. She scrambles around, trying to get away, but the sight of Mason standing in the doorway stops her. She knows she’s trapped.

There are neckties in the closet. Gifts from a long time ago, gifts Mom thought I'd enjoy. Granted, she believed her sons worked in an office someplace, so it was only natural she would try to outfit us on our birthdays and at Christmas. They've never been used.

Until now. Until I tie Frankie's wrists to the headboard, pulling the silk tight enough to make her wince. Something about the sight and sound of that makes my cock twitch. Her arms are above her head, hands resting on the pillow. She's completely helpless now.

I lean over her, taking in the scent of the shampoo she uses and the faint perspiration she's managed to work up. "Wasn't it better when we didn't have to tie you up? You brought this on yourself." She tries to turn away from me, but it's no use. She's trapped. Her thin T-shirt shifts a little, riding up on her thighs and brushing over her taut nipples. Hunger unfurls deep in my core. "I'm not gonna lie, though. I like you tied up like this."

A shiver runs down her body. And she thought she had something to be scared of before.

One glance at my brother tells me he's thinking along the same lines—he's breathing harder, nostrils flared, gaze fixed on Frankie's delicious body. She's doing the same thing to him she's doing to me without meaning to. Enticing. Teasing.

"Please... don't do this," she begs so sweetly, not knowing the kind of pleasure we could bring her. She is afraid, in shock, but we could make it good for her. I could definitely convince her body.

My cock might be ready, but the rest of me needs sleep and time to think. I need to figure out what we're supposed to do with her now that she's here, so I kick off my shoes and stretch out next to Frankie on the king-sized bed. When she tries to squirm away again, she gets a surprise in the form of Mason, who's doing the same as I am. She's not just trapped. She's sandwiched between us.

"Relax," I mutter, closing my eyes. "If you didn't try to get away, this wouldn't be happening. We can't trust you now."

“I won’t ever try again. I swear.” Her head swings back and forth between us. “Please, don’t make me do this.”

“All you had to do was behave yourself.” Mason snickers when she whimpers at the touch of his fingers against her cheek. “Chill out. You might end up enjoying your time with us.”

“I doubt it. I’m scared,” she admits.

“You should be, but not of us. You should be scared of the guy who ordered the hit. And right now, we’re the only people standing in his way.”

Scrunching her eyebrows together, she looks conflicted, probably trying to figure out if she can trust anything we are saying. “If all of that is true, why are you protecting me?”

“Once we saw you in your princess bed, we couldn’t kill you. You were just too cute, too innocent, too tempting.”

“You want me for sex?” she asks directly.

“Yes,” I admit shamelessly.

“I bet you didn’t put this on your list to Santa,” Mason adds.

I’m still grinning at his joke as I settle my head onto my pillow. “Don’t worry, doll. Right now, we’re just sleeping. Try to catch some, too.”

I close my eyes, and it doesn’t take me long to fall asleep, and Frankie’s soft whimpers fade to silence.

FRANKIE

WHAT DO I DO NOW?

There's no getting away. Not with one of them on either side of me. I'm not even sure they're sleeping. What if this is a test to see how I'll handle things?

I can't move my hands, and my arms hurt from being over my head for hours. How am I supposed to sleep? Then again, I don't think I'd be sleeping anyway. There's too much to think about and be afraid of. What are they going to want once they're awake? I saw the way they both looked at me, especially when Evan tied me up. They want me, and I'm pretty sure they like knowing I can't do anything to stop them. As a matter of fact, I'm a little shocked they didn't act on it right away. Maybe a part of their game is leaving me to drown in my own thoughts and fears.

I try to shift a little without waking either of them. I wish I was wearing more clothes. My shirt's already up around my waist, and I'm chilly but more afraid of what'll happen if either of them wakes up and sees me like this. They didn't put a blanket over me, or themselves for that matter. Of course, they are fully dressed, unlike me.

Even with a few inches between us, I can feel their body heat radiating from them, and part of me wants them to slide just a little closer. I force myself to stay still and not give in to the temptation their warmth is giving me, but after another while, I give up. I'm so fucking tired and cold. I just want to be able to go to sleep for a little while.

Carefully, I wiggle toward Mason, who is closest to me. My side presses against his arm, and I sigh as his body heat seeps into my cold skin. I try to stay still, but my body is greedy, and I move even closer, wanting more.

It doesn't take long for that to happen. Mason snorts in his sleep, then yawns. *Shit, I woke him up.* I watch him out of the corner of my eye, afraid to breathe. It's almost a shame he's so gorgeous.

His dark eyes find mine when he opens them, and a smile tugs at the corners of his mouth when he takes in the sight of me pressed up against him. "Cold?" he whispers, draping an arm around me.

"I'm fine," I whisper, terrified of his brother waking up. I try to pull away, but his arm is holding me in place like an iron bar.

"You look cold. There are goose bumps all up and down your legs. You're shaking, and your skin is cold to the touch."

"You didn't give me a blanket," I say softly, wondering if he is going to take this as backtalk and get angry.

"We're here to keep you warm." He smiles and runs his hand over my arm, sending a shiver down my body.

"I don't want this," I say in a tight voice. "I'd rather have a blanket or some clothes."

"I don't remember asking what you want."

Of course, he didn't. No one ever asks me what I want. It's like I don't even matter.

He runs a hand down and over my legs, chuckling when I try to move away from his touch. "Relax. I've never gotten a complaint from a woman."

Is that supposed to make me feel better?

A whimper works its way out of me when his hand moves up, skimming my skin before closing over my mound. At least I'm wearing panties, but it doesn't matter. He presses his fingers against my slit, his breath coming faster. Shorter. "This

is nice and warm,” he murmurs before nuzzling my neck. I squeeze my eyes shut and order myself not to react.

There’s movement on my other side, and I know now I never had a chance. This was always going to happen. “Mm, what’s this?” Evan rolls onto his side, facing me. “Having fun without waking me up? That’s rude.” Like this is a big joke.

Evan grins at his brother before sliding a hand under my shirt and fondling my breasts. I wish his warm hand wouldn’t feel so good on my cold skin and that his touch didn’t make my nipples go hard. “Hmm. You sure you don’t want this? Your tits have other ideas.” He raises the shirt over my chest, then up over my head until it’s around my wrists. I’ve never been so humiliated, not even at work. Nothing Dimitri did was anything close to this.

Evan lowers his head, taking a nipple between his lips. I close my eyes and try to pretend I’m not here, but at the same time... it’s doing something to me, the way he swirls his tongue in a slow circle before sucking. What starts off as a broken whimper turns into more of a moan when he sucks harder.

Mason runs his tongue over my throat before nipping my earlobe. “Enjoy yourself,” he whispers, his breath hot and moist on my skin. “Don’t hold back.” His fingers move over my pussy, a thin strip of cotton in the way. When he presses harder, I want to ask for more even as I shake my head like I don’t want it. *What’s wrong with me?*

Evan releases my nipple and gets up. For a second, I want to believe that’s as far as things will go—but when he starts unbuckling his belt, I know we’re just getting started. The bulge jutting out in front of him makes my eyes go wide. “Like what you see?” He peels off his boxer briefs and reveals what has to be eight inches of thick, hard dick.

I pry my eyes away from it but can’t stop staring at the rest of his body. Well-defined muscles, abs I could do laundry on. Thick thighs. All of it together is enough to stir up hunger deep in my core, and that only confuses me worse than ever.

Mason gets up to take his clothes off, too, while Evan crawls onto the foot of the bed. He reaches for my panties, and I try to fight him off. All it does is make him growl and take my ankles in his hands, squeezing until it almost hurts. “Stop fighting, we’re not going to hurt you. We’ll make you come before we fuck you.”

“And after?” That’s what I’m really worried about. I can handle sex. I can even handle it rough, but what I can’t handle is being discarded after. “You’re just going to keep me tied up as your sex slave?”

“It didn’t have to be that way, but you showed us you can’t be trusted,” Mason answers.

Evan adds, “We saved your life. Consider this repayment.”

It’s not their words but rather the power in his hands that makes me stop fighting. He could hurt me. Badly.

“Good girl.” It’s a dark chuckle. I hate him for it. I hate him even more for pulling my panties off and spreading my thighs. Heat flushes my skin. Humiliation.

“You like this, don’t you? Being helpless.” Shaking my head, I try to tug on my restraints, but it does no good. He only chuckles as he parts my legs wider and stares down at my pussy. “Oh, yeah. You like it. Look how wet you are.” He dips his fingers into that wetness, raising them so I can see how they glisten. My heart almost stops beating when he lifts them to his lips so he can lick them clean.

He grins at Mason. “You need to get a taste of this.” But when Mason moves like he wants to take his brother’s place, Evan shakes his head. “When I’m finished.”

Before I know what’s happening, he plunges down and licks at my slit. My hips jump up as I cry out in surprise and something else. Something so, so good.

Evan presses my hips to the mattress, holding me down with one arm draped over my belly. His tongue never stops moving, lapping up and down from my ass to my clit and back again. My nerves are on fire, sizzling hotter with every pass.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous.” Mason strokes himself close to my face, watching his brother. “You like this?” he teases, strumming my nipple with his free hand. “Like being used like our slut? Like our little fuck doll?”

I open my mouth to say no, I don’t like it, but he’s too quick. He slides into my mouth, taking me by the back of the head when I try to turn my face away. He’s just as long and thick as Evan, and I don’t think I can take all of him.

“Don’t even think about fighting. Suck this cock, doll.” I have no choice but to take him in, to let him invade my mouth until he hits the back of my throat and makes me gag.

I can barely concentrate on Mason, not with Evan now spreading my lips with his fingers to expose my inner folds. He blows across them, and I shiver while Mason slides back before plunging in again. Evan’s tongue sweeps over my clit, and I moan around Mason’s cock without meaning to. It only makes them think I like it and want more when I don’t. Or at least that’s what I tell myself.

“Your mouth feels so fucking good.” Mason buries himself in me until my nose is smashed against him, and I can’t breathe. When I try to tell him I can’t, he only grunts and drives himself in again. Again. So fast I can barely suck in air between thrusts while he holds my head still and fucks my face. I’m not a person to him. I’m a hole to fuck... a *doll*.

Something must be wrong with me because when I think that, the delicious sensations already running through me intensify until they’re something I recognize. Pleasure. Strong enough to make me come, even. I don’t want to. I hate this. I hate them.

But I love it, too. I want it. The idea of being their slut...

Evan’s tongue flicks at my clit while two fingers work their way up into my tunnel. I moan, looking up at Mason, and the lust in his eyes almost sends me over the edge. Evan’s fingers curve, and he presses against me from inside, and then I do lose it, clamping my legs tight around his head and shaking from the force of my orgasm. It rolls on and on

through me, the sweetness stretching out until I don't think I can handle more. Am I broken? Is it ever going to stop?

It doesn't all at once. It happens slowly, easing up. Mason pulls out of my mouth, and I can finally breathe freely, sucking in huge gasps between whimpers as I recover from... whatever the hell just happened. I can't believe that happened.

"You're a squirter, huh?" Evan grins up at me, still between my legs, and now I feel the wetness he's talking about. It runs down my crack and soaks into the sheet.

"Out of my way." Mason just about pushes Evan off the bed so he can lick me clean. I don't know if I want to die of embarrassment or if I'm going to come again, watching him eagerly dive in and lick like he's starving for me.

"Fuck, you are perfect. Our perfect little doll." Evan watches my reaction, stroking himself. He's dripping onto his fist with excitement.

For me. They both want me. Oh, god, this is so hot.

Mason moves fast, getting on his knees, stroking himself before propping my thighs on his. The pressure from his head against my pussy makes me yelp in surprise and even fear. He's so big. They both are.

My reaction doesn't stop him. He plunges into me mercilessly, stretching and filling me up. My head falls back between my shoulders, the strain on my arms and wrists almost painful when he grips my hips and pulls me closer to him. "Too much!" I manage to gasp between thrusts, but he only pounds me harder.

"You can take it. I know you can. Take my fat cock and come while I fuck this tight cunt." His dirty words cause another zing of pleasure to course through my body.

Evan climbs up beside me, dripping precum on my chest. "Open your mouth, doll." He guides himself between my lips and sighs as he sinks deep, bottoming out with a satisfied groan.

"Tight..." Mason grunts. "So fucking tight."

“You like it when we stretch your tight little pussy?” Evan pulls my hair, and my eyes snap up to meet his. “Do you? I think you do, or else you wouldn’t have come like you did. The good little girl likes to be dirty. Likes to be a slut fucked by two guys. You like getting your cunt pounded while choking on another cock.”

No! No... Yes. Fuck! I think I’m going to come again. Why do I like it when he says things like that in his deep, dirty voice? It makes everything more intense, hotter. My insides pulse with every deep thrust into my mouth and pussy, and I can only imagine how filthy this looks. Two men using my sweaty, tied-up body. The image makes me moan.

“You wanna come on my brother’s cock before you come on mine, doll?” Evan’s balls slap against my cheek with every thrust as he continues muttering dirty things to me. “Get yourself nice and wet again so I can fuck you deep?” I nod slightly, ashamed and hotter than ever.

And close. So close. I would tell Mason, but I think he knows when my muscles start clenching around him. “Come for me,” he urges through gritted teeth, fucking me faster. Harder. Until I do what he asks, my insides tighten around him and hold him still before melting into sweet spasms that spread through my core and make me sob out my release.

Evan pulls back, leaving saliva dripping down my chin. He moves down my body as Mason pulls out. Taking my hips in his hands, Evan pulls me around until my ass is almost hanging off the side of the bed. Like the doll they think I am, I let him position me. My limbs are too tired to fight, and my arms are still tied to the headboard, the fabric sliding with the movement.

I’m about to ask them to untie me when I feel another cock at my entrance. My words get caught in my throat when he pushes inside me so deep, I can feel him in my belly.

Mason took me hard, but Evan? He punishes me, slamming like a jackhammer until I understand what it means when something hurts so good. His rhythm has me dancing on

the line between pain and pleasure, grinding my teeth against the screams threatening to tear their way out of me.

Mason stares at my tits, transfixed by the way they bounce every time Evan crashes into me. His fist is a blur, moving up and down over his cock in time with Evan's merciless thrusts. I don't know whether I'm going to come again or pass out. Maybe both.

Evan adds a thumb to his onslaught, circling my clit. My head bobs up and down in approval before I know what's happening. I should hate this. I should hate them. But all I want now is for this to never stop.

But it does, ending with me throwing my head back and howling. Evan pulls out fast, and for a second, it's just my cries and their heavy breathing. I open my eyes in time to see the first spurts of cum splashing across my stomach, my tits, and my thighs as both of them come at once.

I've never felt so used. But I've also never felt so satisfied. Only when the fog of my orgasmic high clears do I want to cry. This is it, the part where they discard me, leave me tied to the bed, and go somewhere else. Or maybe just lock me up in a basement. Either way, I'll be alone like always. Used, discarded, and left behind.

I close my eyes and pretend to be somewhere else. Pretend that someone actually cares about me enough not to leave me.

Turning my face away, I keep my eyes closed as the guys move off the bed. I hear the door open and them moving around. I hold in my tears, wanting them to leave before I let myself sob into the pillow.

Instead of them leaving, I feel one of them moving closer. I flinch when I feel something warm between my legs. My eyes fly open and connect with Evan's smug face.

I watch him in shock as he gently and deliberately cleans me up with a warm washcloth.

"Don't worry, we take care of what's ours." He smiles and finishes cleaning me up. The warm rag slides over my

sensitive skin, and he is actually careful not to hurt me as he cleans my sore pussy.

When he is satisfied with his work, he drops the washcloth next to the bed and moves me back into the center.

Mason appears at the other side of us, holding a thick comforter in his arms. “If you behave tomorrow, we’ll talk about leaving you untied, but right now, it’s safest for all of us to keep you like this.”

I simply nod, knowing that arguing won’t get me anywhere.

“Can I get some water?” I ask, looking at the bottle sitting on the nightstand.

“Sure.” Evan grabs the bottle and unscrews the cap while Mason covers me with the blanket.

Sliding his hand under my head, Evan lifts it slightly while holding the bottle to my lips. I take a few greedy gulps before shaking my head, signaling that I am done. He puts the water where it stood before and climbs back onto the bed.

Both guys spread out next to me, tucking the blanket up to my chin.

“Comfortable?” Mason asks, and all I can do is nod.

Even with my hands tied, I’ve never felt so taken care of.

They didn’t leave me. Even after they got what they wanted, they cared for me instead of leaving. How are my kidnappers better to me than my family ever was?

That’s the last thing on my mind before exhaustion finally makes me pass out.

MASON

ONE THING ABOUT EVAN AND ME: WE LEARN OUR LESSON THE first time. You don't grow up how and where we did without learning to avoid mistakes. No room for fucking off. No lapses in judgment.

Which is why I watch as Frankie uses the bathroom the morning after our three-way. "Do you need to be here for this?" She hangs her head in humiliation.

"Yeah, because otherwise, you might try to take a header out the window." I fold my arms, leaning against the wall near the door. Truthfully, I've never cared much for watching a woman piss, but this is how it has to be.

"I won't do that again."

"So you say." Once she's finished, I haul her out of the room by one arm and lead her downstairs to the kitchen. Evan's throwing a quick breakfast together. Cereal and coffee. Our go-to since neither of us knows much about cooking.

"Do you live here together?" It's the first question she's asked that doesn't have to do with herself or what brought us to her. I nod before pulling out a chair and guiding her to it. "Just the two of you in this big house?"

"What about it?"

She shrugs, cheeks darkening. "I don't know. I was just wondering. My whole apartment could fit in this kitchen." Her eyes are wide as she curiously looks around. I have to bite back an explanation while wondering why I want to explain myself at all. She doesn't need to know how we grew up, how

when we were kids, we promised each other that we'd never be without plenty of space when we were adults.

Evan slides a bowl of cereal in front of her. "Eat," he grunts. She grabs the spoon he'd already laid out and starts eating with her head down while the two of us drink our coffee. Neither of us needs to say it out loud, but I know we're both thinking it. We need to figure out why we were sent to her and who we're up against.

As usual, Evan plunges in the second she's finished. He pushes the bowl away from her, and his sudden change of demeanor makes her sit up straighter. "Who did you piss off enough to want you dead?"

She flinches and looks away, and I know we're on the same page. She can pretend all she wants to be innocent and sweet or whatever, but she wouldn't have ended up on a hit list if she didn't make the wrong move against the wrong person.

And as we learned overnight, she's not innocent. Not even a little bit.

Evan doesn't have my patience. "Well? Start talking." He shoves her chair a little like that'll jumpstart her memory. All it does is make her flinch.

"Calm down, Evan," I say in warning. "All you're doing is scaring her more. She is gonna tell us, aren't you, doll?"

She hangs her head even more, hair falling down like a waterfall on either side of her face. "I thought about it all night, and there's only one person I can think of, but it still doesn't make any sense. I mean, I knew he was an asshole, but why would he put a hit on me for something so stupid and small?"

"So you crossed somebody." I pull up another chair, turning it around and straddling it. Folding my arms over the back, I sigh. "What was it? Did you get a little greedy? Dip into the safe when you thought nobody was paying attention? Somebody's always watching, sweetheart."

I can't believe how disappointed I am that she would do something that stupid. It's one thing to work for a criminal—

we all have to make money and survive. It was obvious this girl lived alone. Even a shithole apartment requires rent payments.

But to cross somebody like that? It takes a special kind of stupidity.

Her head snaps up, eyes narrowed and blazing. “No. I didn’t steal anything. I’ve never stolen a thing in my life, so go to hell with that bullshit.”

“You sure about that?” Evan smirks at me from behind her.

“I’m sure. I earn what I make. I don’t steal it.” She tosses her head back, proud all of a sudden. “I don’t steal people, either. But I guess since you do, you can’t imagine being honest.”

“I’m honestly sick of your holier-than-thou bullshit,” Evan growls. “Just get to it. What did you do?”

Her shoulders sink a little, and some of the fire leaves her eyes. I place my hand on her shoulder and rub calming circles on her skin using my thumb. “Tell us.”

“The only thing I can think of is the fight I had with my boss two nights ago. My ex-boss, I guess. I sort of figured I’d lost my job.”

I exchange another look with my brother because her story is not adding up. Nobody puts a twenty-thousand-dollar hit on an employee because they had an argument. “What started the fight?”

She looks at the floor again, and before her hair covers her face, I catch sight of the way her cheeks flush. “He wanted me to do things I wouldn’t do. I told him I never would, no matter what he offered. But he kept trying.”

Instinct makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Now we’re getting somewhere.

“What did he want?” Evan asks, walking around the chair and coming to a stop next to me. He’s just as curious now as I am.

“It’s disgusting. I don’t even want to say.”

“You’d better tell us,” I warn. “Remember, we’re trying to help you.” All she does is snicker.

“Enough of this.” Evan goes to her, reaching out to take a handful of her hair. He yanks it back, and she gasps. “Talk. Now.”

“He wanted me to sleep with one of his customers.” Her eyes are wide and pained. “Before that, he spent the whole time I worked at his club trying to convince me to take my clothes off. I was only a waitress, but he wanted me to be a stripper.”

“I can see why.” I look her up and down, imagining her onstage. “A body like yours? With those tits and that ass? You could make a fortune.”

“I don’t want to make money that way. Don’t I get to say what I want to do with my own body?” She catches her bottom lip under her teeth, and I know she’s thinking about earlier this morning. About what we’ve done to that body of hers. She didn’t have a say in that even though it was obvious she liked it.

Evan lets go of her hair, grunting. “Fine. He wanted you to strip, and you kept saying no. Then he, what, approached you about fucking one of his customers?”

“Approached?” She snorts, rolling her eyes. “You’re making it sound a lot nicer than it was. He cornered me and told me I had to have sex with a customer or else I’d lose my job.”

“Did he at least offer you a lot of cash for it?” I ask. She shoots me a filthy look that shouldn’t make my cock stir, but it does. “It’s an honest question.”

“Yes. He offered money for it. The customer wanted to pay twenty-five thousand. I’d get ten.”

“Wow. Not bad for a night’s work.”

“Screw you,” she snarls at me. So that was all it took to get her to stop sniveling and trembling. “I’m not a whore. I’ll wait on customers at a sleazy strip joint, but I’m not having sex for money.”

“Okay, okay, fine. You’re too good for sex work.” Evan shrugs. “So for that, he wants you dead?”

She bites her lip again. “I hit him. That might have something to do with it.”

Oh. That changes things.

“He had me cornered in his office, backed up against his desk. He was leaning over me.” She gags a little. “His cologne was choking me, his breath was sour, and he was in my face, you know? Telling me I was going to have sex with this guy because it would mean a lot of money for him, and this was a guy who already spends a lot of money at the club. He’s there all the time. So I guess Dimitri didn’t want to lose that, either.”

“Wait. Dimitri?” Evan’s a little gentler this time, tipping her head back with a finger under her chin instead of a handful of hair. “That’s his name?”

“Yes. Dimitri Sokoloff.”

Fuck me. I don’t need to look at Evan to know we’re on the same page. “Shit. If we knew his name before now, we wouldn’t have needed to ask.”

She shrinks back a little. “It was a job. I needed the money. I didn’t have to like him.”

I can’t help but bristle when I think of Frankie being ogled in a place like that. The way the men there must’ve drooled over her body and her face. All the times they must’ve propositioned her. All the times she must’ve been groped and fondled and—

And he let it happen. He encouraged it.

I shoot up from the chair when it’s all too much to think about while sitting still. There’s something dark and murderous inside me, and now all I want is to walk into Dimitri’s club and gun down every single fucking customer there.

While he watches. While he knows the entire time that I’m coming for him once I’ve gotten everybody else out of the way. I want him to dread the final moment of his life, knowing

it's all about to come to an end. Nothing short of that will satisfy the hunger deep in my core.

“How did it end?” Evan’s teeth are clenched so tight I can barely make out what he’s saying. He’s feeling it, too. The need for vengeance. She is ours, and we’re the only ones who get to touch her.

“I slid past him somehow. I don’t even remember. I was so desperate, and it happened so fast. I was...” She lets out a little snuffle. “I was afraid he’d try to rape me. Or at least beat me. He was so, so angry, and I was sure he’d hurt me. So I picked up the first thing I touched. A chair.”

“A chair?” My jaw drops.

“It wasn’t a big, heavy chair. Just a wooden one.” Like that makes it better or less surprising. “He laughed right up until I swung it. I don’t think he thought I’d go through with it.”

“You hit him with a chair?” Evan sounds like he’s choking on something.

Her head bobs up and down. “I had to. I had to stop him. He fell on his knees, but I couldn’t have hurt him all that bad. I dropped the chair and ran out of there. I didn’t even get my last paycheck.”

A small thing to worry about, but then I guess that’s easy for me to say. One thought back to the shitty little apartment we took her from, and I know she had to be living hand to mouth. She must’ve been damn scared if she was willing to run out of there like the place was on fire.

“And that’s it?” I prompt. “You didn’t see him after that?”

“No. He was screaming at me when I ran out, but I haven’t seen him since. I never talked to anybody else from the club, like the girls who worked there. Nobody.” She looks back and forth between us. “Why?”

Why? Because this seems like a petty, childish reason to put a hit out on somebody. All because she told him she wouldn’t fuck a customer for money. Because she wouldn’t take her clothes off. Because she stood up to him and even hit him with a chair— as small as she is, I doubt it hurt him.

Falling to his knees because a girl swung a chair at him. What a fucking pussy.

Enough of a fucking pussy to want her out of the way, permanently, over something as stupid as this. She hurt his pride, that's all. Fragile asshole.

We have a lot to discuss, none of which we can talk about in front of her. I take her by the arm and haul her to her feet. "Come on. Back to bed."

"What? Can't I—?"

"No. You can't." I don't care what she was about to ask. It doesn't matter. We're harboring a girl with a price on her head, a price set by one of the most notorious assholes in town. Everybody knows the rumors of the girls who disappeared while working at his clubs. Looks like they're more than rumors.

"Please don't leave me here," she begs as I tie her to the headboard in my room, and it almost makes me stop. I don't particularly want to leave her; I'd rather slide into my bed with her and forget about everything. But I can't.

"We'll be downstairs. You can yell if you need something."

She looks away, clearly unhappy with my answer. Right now, this is the safest place for her.

Grinding my molars, I force myself to leave and ignore her soft sniffles.

She's the least of our problems right now. And whether she knows it or not, we're the least of hers.

FRANKIE

I THINK THE WORST PART IS NOT KNOWING WHAT'S GOING ON IN the house. I can hear them talking and moving stuff around downstairs, but I have no idea what they're up to.

At least it's a comfortable bed, but I'm still tied up. I can't exactly bring myself to be grateful.

Right now, I can't even be grateful I'm alive. Is that wrong? But who could blame me? I have no say in anything; I can't even pee in private. And I'm basically their sex slave—unless the stuff that happened overnight was a mistake or a one-off sort of thing.

Something tells me it wasn't. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that nothing comes for free. They could've killed me, but instead, they brought me here. So now I owe them. Yet, I still don't know what they're doing. What they have in mind other than sex.

Why did they accept a hit job in the first place? Is that what they do for a living? I'm in the home of two hitmen who, what? Grew a conscience at the last minute?

What if they decide I'm not worth the trouble? What if they kill me anyway? I'm not sure whether that would be a good or a bad thing. Because if this is the rest of my life, I don't want any part of it. I can't imagine being tied up all day just to be used at night.

Tears start forming in my eyes, and the only thing keeping them at bay is remembering how they treated me after they fucked me last night. They cleaned me up and tucked me in,

making sure I was somewhat comfortable as they slept beside me. Something about being sandwiched between them was comforting, like nothing could get to me. I know it's probably something my mind makes up. They only took me for selfish reasons, not because they would actually protect me.

Hours have passed since breakfast. I have no idea how many. There isn't much of anything besides furniture, nothing personal, nothing to tell me anything about who Mason is. Evan's room was the same, come to think of it. I might as well be in a furniture store, tied up to a display bed. Yet the house is so big, so nice, the appliances in the kitchen shining and new. But it doesn't look like they're ever used.

Who are these guys?

I'm so bored, so desperate for anything to take my mind off what's happened to me that even these two seem interesting and worth getting to know. I guess if I'm going to be here for a while, I might as well.

It's sleep I need more than anything, though, considering I spent most of the morning thinking and dreading instead of sleeping. I'm struggling not to cry because I can't use my hands to wipe away my tears or blow my stuffy nose.

I must doze off at some point because I wake with a start when the bedroom door opens.

Evan marches in, scowling the way he always does. "I made you a sandwich." He leaves a paper plate on the bed with what looks and smells like tuna salad on white bread. "I figured you would be hungry."

"Is it lunchtime?"

He looks around, still scowling. "Right. No clock. Yeah, it's past one." When I wiggle my hands around, he takes the hint and unties me. I have to shake my hands out to get the blood flowing again before picking up one half of the sandwich.

"So, what have you been doing today?" I ask before taking a bite.

To my surprise, he laughs. When all I do is look at him, chewing, he laughs again. “Are you honestly asking?”

“Yeah. I hear you guys moving around a lot downstairs. I can hear you talking, but I can’t hear what you’re saying. It sounds like you’ve been busy, and I’m... ahm, bored.”

“Yeah, we’re busy.” He ignores my last statement, and I can practically see a wall coming down between us. So he’s not going to share anything.

I take a different route. “Today is Christmas Eve, isn’t it?”

“All day long.”

My throat tightens as pain blooms in my chest. I do my best to push them both back while eating, keeping my eyes down so he can’t see the tears that sprang into them all of a sudden. “I have to admit, this isn’t where I figured I would be spending it.”

He snickers like it’s funny. “What were your plans?”

“I didn’t really have any.”

“No family or anything like that?” There’s interest in his voice, and it occurs to me that he would need to know. After all, there might be somebody looking for me. Somebody who isn’t Dimitri.

But there isn’t. “No. I’ve been on my own for a few years now.”

“Friends?”

“Not really. I was never any good at making friends... or keeping them. Maybe a couple of girls at the club, but we were more acquaintances than anything. I’m too awkward.” I can’t believe I just admitted that. Then again, the man has seen more of me than any man ever did before him, so why bother keeping anything to myself?

Silence spreads between us as I finish one half of the sandwich. It was nothing fancy, but I didn’t realize how hungry I was until I started eating. It doesn’t even bother me that he’s sitting on the edge of the bed, watching me like I’m an animal in a zoo. Maybe he wouldn’t if I hadn’t tried to get

out last night, but I couldn't help it. I had to try something. Now I wish I hadn't because, of course, I would've frozen to death before I got anywhere. I was too panicked to think straight.

Finally, he asks, "What were you going to do today if you didn't have family or friends to spend it with?"

"I was going to watch TV. Christmas shows, movies, whatever I could find. I was planning on getting some Chinese from a place a few blocks away. It's what I usually do on Christmas Eve."

He snorts, and I look up at him, ready to be pissed that he's making fun of me. Except he isn't. His forehead is creased, his brows drawing together. "That's depressing."

"Not compared to this." He almost cracks a smile, but not quite. Like there's a real person in there, somewhere.

Don't do that. Don't make him human.

Once I'm finished, he takes the plate and leaves it on the nightstand. "You need to get cleaned up. I'll draw you a bath. Come on." He doesn't open the matter up for discussion. Standing, he unties me and waits for me to join him. I do without thinking because what's the alternative? I might make mistakes, but I try not to make the same ones twice.

And if the way they're treating me right now is the result of my trying to get away, I don't even want to think about how much worse it could get if I make another attempt. That's why I sit on the closed toilet lid and watch as Evan turns the taps in the tub. He pulls out a couple of towels and leaves them for me, then turns my way with an expectant look on his face.

Oh. Right. He's not going to leave me alone.

I can't help but shiver a little as I turn away, taking the hem of my shirt in my hands. "No."

"What?" I look at him over my shoulder.

"Don't turn away from me." There's something different in his eyes now. Something I recognize. I've seen that look more

times than I can remember, only I've never been in this position—defenseless.

That's why I turn slowly back around, forcing myself not to look away or be embarrassed. *I didn't ask for any of this. None of this is my fault. I have nothing to be ashamed of.* Thinking this makes it easier for me to take the shirt off.

That, and the heat between my legs when our eyes meet. I can't help but remember what he and Mason did to me, how they made me feel. Is it going to happen again? I should want nothing less, but that's not the truth of what's going on in my head or elsewhere while I slide out of my panties.

He looks me up and down, breathing hard. "In the tub."

I do as I'm told because I know better, and the warm water is such a pleasure. I sink into it, only now realizing how sore my muscles are from being in the same position for hours.

When Evan kneels next to the tub, I can't help but go stiff. He ignores my reaction in favor of soaping up a washcloth. Without asking, he pushes aside the hair hanging down my back and starts washing my neck, my shoulders, and across my collarbone. He's not exactly rough, but he's not gentle, either.

"You know, we did this for you. Bringing you here was to save your life." I'm not looking at him, choosing to stare at the wall in front of me instead, but I hear the hesitation in his voice. He takes his time, the words coming out like a series of grunts. Like he's not used to talking this way to anybody. "It's not like we decided to keep you for ourselves if that's what you think."

His words sink in, and I know he's telling the truth. I feel it. "I guess I should thank you."

"You're right. You should." He washes my arm, and a brief glimpse of his profile tells me he's grinning. He's actually capable of humor.

Suddenly, something else occurs to me. "What about you? Did you two have any plans for Christmas Eve?"

He snickers, sarcastic again. “Did you notice any decorations around the house? We don’t exactly celebrate around here.”

“I’m sorry.”

The motion from the washcloth slows almost to a stop. “Why?”

Now I wish I hadn’t said it. But I can’t take it back, either. “I don’t know. I guess it just makes me feel sorry for you two. Do you at least get each other gifts?”

“Do we strike you as those types of people?” I see his point. Then he sighs, continuing to wash my other arm this time. “We visit our mother. We do the whole Christmas thing with her because it makes her happy.”

That’s the last thing I expected to hear. “Wow.”

“That so surprising?” He moves on to my legs, lifting one into the air and starting at my feet. “Of course, we have a mother. We weren’t just, like, hatched.”

“It’s nice that you get a chance to celebrate, anyway.” I bite my lip, staring at the wall, trying to disassociate from the situation. Not that there’s anything terribly wrong about this—in fact, being taken care of is sort of nice. Even if it’s a little strange. Even if I can’t stop expecting his touch to change, to become more intimate.

Even if I want it to.

At least he gets to celebrate the holiday. What will they do to me? Leave me tied up here, all alone on Christmas Day? None of this is my fault, but I’m the one who gets to suffer for it.

When the washcloth brushes over my breasts, everything else goes out the window. Heat blooms fresh in my core, making my pussy tingle with each brush over my nipples. He’s not washing anymore. He’s massaging, his eyes fixed on my body. He strums a thumb over my nipple, and I bite back a moan. This shouldn’t turn me on like it does. Everything about this is wrong.

But how does he know just what to do? The slightest touch and everything I thought I knew blows away. Instead of closing my legs when his hand slides over my belly, heading south, I open them. I invite him. It's so wrong, all of it, but nothing could stop me. Not when I know what happens when he touches me like this.

“When I think of what might've happened to you last night if it had been anybody but us...” He strokes my outer lips, his breathing picking up speed. “That I might never have gotten to touch this body...”

I close my eyes, my head falling back, but the sharpness in his voice snaps me out of it. “Look at me. Look in my eyes.” I do as he says, staring into the dark depths, afraid of what I might find but more afraid of him stopping. That's the last thing I want. If only he would never stop. When he dips into my seam, spreading my lips and touching the part of me that's hot and aching, I gasp, and he chuckles. “That's right. Look at me. Let me watch you.”

I have no idea what's going on. What kind of game is this? Am I losing? Do I even care? He works my clit, stroking it in tight little circles, and nothing matters as much as the tension that has me lifting my hips, silently begging for more.

“Nobody else has ever made you come the way we did. Right?”

I can only shake my head, whimpering when he increases the pressure, making fireworks explode in my head while my hips roll in slow circles. I'm breathing heavily, and so is he, our eyes locked. He's so close. Almost close enough to kiss.

He groans softly, staring at my mouth like he knows what I'm thinking. His eyes meet mine again. “Come for me now. Let me see you. Let me hear you. Don't hold back, doll.” When my eyes threaten to slide shut again—I can't help it—he uses his other hand to take a fistful of my hair. One little jerk is enough to open my eyes again.

It's happening. I welcome it, want it, work for it. My hips jerk up and down until water splashes both of us. “Oh... Oh, my god...”

“Let go.” He pulls my hair a little harder, and for some reason, the heat intensifies, my hips jerking faster. So close...

The sweetest explosion starts low in my belly and radiates outward, all through the rest of my body. Wave after wave of bliss. I let out a choked sob, my hands gripping the sides of the tub, my body trembling from the force.

Evan smiles. The first genuine smile I’ve seen so far. “Good girl.”

Before I know what’s happening, something catches in my chest. A twinge of pain, sadness—all of my emotions are so much stronger and more vivid in these first moments after coming so hard. It’s like a dam is breaking, and all of a sudden, everything wants to pour out.

Which is why I start crying. I can’t help it any more than I could help what Evan just made me do. It comes out in huge sobs. I feel like my heart is breaking.

And he’s still here, hovering over me now. Is he concerned or just freaked out? “What’s the matter?”

I almost don’t want to say. At first, I shake my head, ready to lie and say it’s nothing, but that only makes me cry harder. “Why did you let me live? What was the point?”

“What?” He stands, pissed off now. I can see it in the way his jaw tightens and the way his eyes narrow. I’m not crying hard enough to miss it, and I wish I was.

“Why didn’t you just kill me?” When all he does is stare at me, I pull my knees up to my chest and touch my forehead to them, trembling. “What’s the point of me being alive? No one is gonna miss me anyway.” I know I’m throwing myself a pity party, but I also feel like I have every right to. I didn’t pity myself when I spent the last three Christmases alone, and I wasn’t planning on doing so this year, not until I was almost killed and then kidnapped.

For a while, the only sounds in the room are my sniffing and his breathing. At this point, I don’t care anymore if he’s angry or if he wants to hurt me or kill me. The thought of spending Christmas tied to a bed, all alone, is too much to

handle. I might as well be dead if this is what the rest of my life will look like: a prisoner in their home, theirs to do whatever they want with. It doesn't matter that my body likes it. My heart never will.

He finally picks up a towel, holding it in front of me. "Get dried off. I'll wait outside in the hall. Don't get any ideas." Any warmth I heard in his voice earlier is gone now, but still, he is giving me a moment of privacy.

Baby steps.

MASON

“THIS IS A STUPID FUCKING IDEA.” EVAN SHAKES HIS HEAD, stepping back to take in everything I put together. We sort of worked together, but only up to a point. After lunch, he went to a dark place, and I knew better than to get on his case about it. I know that place, too. I’ve been there plenty of times.

“I don’t think it’s stupid. I think it’s brilliant... if it works.” I get up from where I’ve been kneeling and shrug. “How many years has Mom been bugging us to bring a girl home? Just imagine how happy she’ll be if we bring Frankie.”

“All I’m imagining is Frankie running to the police at the first chance she gets.”

“She won’t,” I quip, not even sure why. I have no evidence of it, but something tells me she wouldn’t rat us out. “If we want her to play along, we’re going to have to make her happy. At least for tonight.”

“I still vote for leaving her here. Taking her anywhere is too much of a risk.”

We’ve been through this at least ten times since breakfast. “And what if she gets out? We can’t leave her alone. Besides.” I lower my brow, shooting him a look. “What if there’s a problem? What if there’s a fire or something?”

“Stop making up shit.” He snickers, shaking his head. “What would be the chances of a random fire?”

I have to turn away from him because if I don’t, I might knock him flat. I can’t stand it when he’s in this mood any more than he can when the roles are reversed. Instead of

bickering, I admire my work. Considering I only had a few hours to put everything together, I don't think it turned out half bad. Especially since this is the first tree I've decorated in years. We didn't even have ornaments or lights, and it's not easy to find them on Christmas Eve.

I managed. There isn't an overworked clerk who won't check the stockroom if you flash the right amount of cash.

I even went so far as to bring home some prepared foods for dinner, all of which are warming in the oven. I don't know if Frankie likes turkey and all that shit, but hopefully, she'll appreciate the effort. It's enough to make me grit my teeth, bending over backward like this, but Mom is worth it. Nothing's more important than keeping her happy.

“Okay. I'll go up and get her.” I can't believe how much this matters. Of all the times of the year to have a situation like this. There are only a few days we absolutely can't go without visiting Mom, and tomorrow's one of them. Either we threaten Frankie into behaving—which could make her worse and cause her to run for help the second we get to the house—or we ease her into it with a little goodwill and some glittery ornaments. I'll never get the fucking glitter off my skin now. She'd better appreciate this.

I find her lying on her side, hands clasped in front of her face, wrists still bound. I left the light on the last time I checked on her so she wouldn't be stuck in the dark, but it occurs to me now that there's more I could do to make her comfortable than turning on a light and giving her clean sweats to wear. “Hey. We'll have dinner soon. And there's something else for you down there.”

She brings to mind a wary animal when she lifts her head, eyes narrowed. “What is it?”

“You'll have to come down and see.” For fuck's sake, this is stupid. *Think of Mom. This is for her.* I force as pleasant an expression as possible before going to the bed and untying the knots so she's free to get up. “You look cute in my clothes, by the way.” Better than cute. Frankie's one of those women who

looks even hotter wearing oversized clothes, a little ruffled and sloppy.

She ignores the comment, following me into the hall and down the stairs. Her footsteps slow once she catches sight of the lights gleaming off the living room floor. “Oh...” She stops, peering into the room, holding the banister like she might fall over if she lets go.

The tree did turn out well. I’ve always been a more-the-merrier sort of person, so I put on as many lights as the thing could hold. She likes lights. That much, I already knew. “We thought you might like a little bit of holiday stuff tonight.”

She turns to me, beaming, eyes shining. Holy shit. It’s like she punched me in the gut. All it took was a little shopping and decorating to make her glow the way she is. “It’s beautiful! This is what you were so busy with today?”

“And other things.” Some of which she doesn’t need to know about. “Come on. Dinner should be warmed up by now. I’m starving.”

“I guess so, after doing all that.” Her gaze falls on the wrapped gifts under the tree, brows lifting when she looks my way again.

“No. I didn’t do the wrapping. I have my limits.” I can’t believe how much lighter I feel as I lead her to the kitchen, where Evan is fumbling his way through taking things out of the oven. If our mother could see us now, practically doing headstands to appease this girl, she’d laugh herself into a fit, then scream in joy and hug us until we couldn’t breathe.

“It smells incredible.” She’s so shy, so tentative, but so happy.

“I hope you’re hungry. I bought a lot of food.” There are eight containers lined up on the counter. “Do you like traditional holiday stuff?”

“I love it. I can’t remember the last time I had...” She shakes her head a little. “I love it.”

So far, so good. I try to catch Evan’s eye, but he’s deliberately avoiding me in favor of plating turkey, stuffing,

and potatoes. I hand Frankie a plate, so she can fix her own food, trying not to grin at the way her eyes widen when she takes in everything I brought home.

Nobody ever told me what making somebody happy feels like. It seems unfair that she's this excited over so little. She couldn't have had much else going on in her life before we stepped into it. I know what it's like to have nothing and for the littlest things to mean more than they should.

"This is so great." She beams at me before plopping potatoes on her plate.

"There's more coming after this."

"Check out Santa," Evan mumbles. I don't think she heard him. I decide to pretend I didn't—otherwise, we'll end up fighting and blowing the whole scheme to hell.

We sit down and basically gorge ourselves. The girl's got an appetite, but then again, she hasn't eaten much today and probably didn't before then. She's so thin. I can't believe how much I want to take care of her. No wonder I faltered when it came time to kill her.

Once we're finished eating, I lead her to the living room. "There are a few things for you under the tree." If she's suspicious, she doesn't show it.

Though she does raise an eyebrow. "Why did you buy me gifts?"

"It felt right." She'll understand. She'll have to. I stand back, Evan behind me, and watch as she tears into the first package with her name written on the label.

She gasps, lifting the jacket from the box. "I hope it fits okay." How fucking lame do I sound?

"I'm sure it will." Her eyes bulge. "This had to be expensive."

"Don't worry about that." Yes, it was, but that's kind of the point. "Keep going."

She opens a pair of jeans, a sweater, and leather boots. "I bought a couple of different sizes," I admit when she holds

them up. “I can always return the ones that don’t fit.”

“I don’t know what to say.” She lowers the boots, and now there’s obvious suspicion in her eyes when they meet mine. “Other than to ask what this is all about. You bought me an entire outfit.” She nudges a slim box next. “I bet there’s underwear in here.”

Evan chuckles. “Told you she’d see through it.”

When her face falls, I want to murder him. The pain in the ass couldn’t be bothered to play along even for a little while.

“See through what?” Frankie asks in a much smaller voice than before. All the light, all the happiness. It’s gone.

Evan blurts it out before I can find the words. “We’re visiting our mom tomorrow, and you have to come with us. You and Mason will have to pretend to be a couple, so Mom doesn’t get the wrong idea.”

She blinks rapidly. “The wrong idea? You mean the right idea. You don’t want her to know the truth.” Her gaze swings my way, and I can’t believe how much I want to shrivel under it. “This was all your way of buttering me up, so I’d agree to go along.”

“You don’t have to go along.” Evan takes a slow step toward her, then another. “We can leave you here tied to the bed all day... or even better, we can take you back to your apartment and do what should’ve been done last night.” I understand why he said it, even if I know he doesn’t mean it. Or does he? She’s obviously done something to piss him off.

“Listen.” I hold up a hand to stop him from scaring her worse than she already is. If there wasn’t so much hanging in the balance, I might feel differently. “We did you a favor last night by sparing your life. I don’t think you understand the risk we took. If Dimitri catches even a hint of you being alive, he’ll track us down.”

“Not to ask if we wanna go out for a holiday drink, either,” Evan adds in a low voice.

“The least you can do is play along tomorrow,” I finish. “End of story.”

Her gaze drifts down to the gifts, the crumpled paper. “Got it. You didn’t have to go through all this trouble. I’ll do whatever you need.”

Hearing her sound that defeated wouldn’t sting the way it does if I hadn’t already heard her sounding so happy.

FRANKIE

MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ME.

At least nobody tried to have sex with me last night. Thankfully, because my pussy is still sore. Every step I took yesterday, I could feel how they fucked me the other night. I still slept between them, this time with my ankle tied to the footboard instead of my wrists. I pointed out how uncomfortable it is to sleep that way, and Mason didn't put up an argument. I think he feels shitty after last night.

Which he should. Bribing me like that. For a second, I thought he cared. I thought maybe Evan told him how sad I was, and they were making it up to me.

Stupid. So stupid. They don't care about me, just their own needs.

But Mason made a point, too. They didn't have to let me live. And if Dimitri ever found out... yeah, we'll all be screwed. They had to know that since I doubt I was their first assignment. Not if they can afford such a nice house, not to mention the gifts Mason picked up.

Like the leather jacket I shrug into before leaving the house. It's as soft as butter, just like the knee-high boots I'm wearing. He picked up three pairs, and the smallest are the ones that fit. The red sweater is actually one-hundred-percent cashmere. I can't even imagine how much money all this cost.

"Ready?" Evan looks me up and down and gives me a single nod. "You look good. She'll love you." He then hands me a stack of festively wrapped packages for her. He and

Mason are holding bags and boxes, too. They must really spoil her.

This is going to be interesting.

“Remember what we talked about.” Mason loads his packages into a car way nicer than the one they used last night. He then takes the ones I’m holding and closes the BMW’s trunk. “We’ve been dating six months now. We met at work. You’re an assistant.”

“At an investment agency.” What a joke. They kill people for a living, but she thinks they’re investment guys.

“Right.” He strokes his freshly shaved jaw. I almost like him more when he’s scruffy, but both brothers have cleaned up big time for today. I wish they weren’t so hot. I wish I didn’t want to lick their abs and other parts whenever I get a whiff of the cologne they wear. Two different brands, but both are musky and spicy and capable of making me want to forget how they kidnapped me.

Mason drives with me in the front seat. Neither of them trusts me, even with the doors locked. All I can do is look out the window as we roll down the road, noticing how many homes are fully decked out today. One house has a driveway practically overflowing with cars. People greet each other, hugging and generally being happy.

I wish I was one of them. Any of them. I have to fight the tears threatening to well up in my eyes. Wouldn’t want to upset Mom.

“This is the place?” I ask when we pull into what looks more like a luxury hotel than a nursing home.

“What? You think we’d put our mother in some shithole?” Evan sounds like he’s insulted.

“No, it’s just I never saw a nursing home this nice. You don’t visualize someplace like this when you think about a home.” The sprawling yard is sparkling with lights in all the trees and bushes and a huge nativity scene out front. Fresh wreaths decorated with big, sparkly bows hang on most of the windows.

“She deserves it,” he informs me in a tight voice. I’m starting to get the idea he’d kill anybody who looked at his mom the wrong way. It’s almost endearing.

Not as endearing as the reaction we receive upon entering a room a few doors down from the big, sunny lobby. She’s sitting in a rocking chair by the window, wearing a red velvet dress and a sprig of holly tucked in her gray hair. “My boys are here to see me!” Her voice is weak but sweet and full of love.

She adores them. Her sons are hitmen, and she adores them.

We leave the presents in front of a cute little tree in the corner. “Merry Christmas, Mom.” Evan leans over and gives her a hug. Her smile is almost painfully joyful. The same happens when Mason hugs her. She kisses his cheek before patting it.

“My handsome boys. Better looking every time I see the two of you.” Then she notices me—except for a second, where she looks confused, her smile never moves. “And who is this?”

Mason slides an arm around my waist. “Mom, this is Frankie.” He’s holding me almost tight enough to hurt, but I manage to smile. Not for their sake. For hers.

“Mrs. Pavlis, it’s so nice to meet you. I hope you don’t mind me being here on Christmas.”

She reaches for my hand and takes it in both of hers. They’re small, the way she is, but there’s strength in them. “Sweetheart, you’re the first girl either of my sons has ever introduced to me. That makes you special.”

She has no idea.

Evan clears his throat. “That’s not true. Remember Becca from high school?”

“Her.” She rolls her eyes, and I see where Evan gets his attitude from. “She doesn’t count, that little floozy.” Mason chokes on his laughter, and I can’t help but giggle when Evan’s face goes red.

She then eyes all the presents. “You know you don’t need to go to all this trouble.” Though it’s obvious she enjoys it. What she enjoys more is when her sons pull up chairs and sit close to her while she opens them.

At first, I thought coming here today was a joke. That Evan and Mason couldn’t have the hearts to actually care about their mom. Now, I think I’m starting to understand why they tried so hard last night to talk me into this. They adore her.

She slides a look my way. “Did Mason ever tell you how different things used to be for us?”

“No,” I reply while her sons look like they’re ready to choke.

“Mom, she doesn’t want to hear about that,” Mason informs her.

Like she cares. “It wasn’t always like this. When I lost my John, they were only five and three years old. It was just the three of us after that. From as soon as they were old enough to earn money, they helped keep the lights on.”

I can only imagine what they did to earn it, but she doesn’t seem to think there was anything sketchy about it.

“It was too much for a couple of little boys, all that responsibility.” She shakes her head with a sigh.

“We wanted to help you, Mom.” Evan pats her shoulder, and I can’t help but notice how his voice has changed. He’s softer. Sweeter. “You never asked us to. It was our pleasure to take care of you after you took care of us all on your own.”

She smiles lovingly at him. “When my health declined, they insisted on moving me into this fancy place. I get waited on hand and foot like I’m a queen. But no matter how many times I tell these two I don’t need something so nice, they pretend they can’t hear me.”

“You deserve it.” Mason kisses her cheek. “Just like you deserve all the presents.” The three of them go through everything she received, folding sweaters and blouses, and putting the jewelry away.

They're just a family. I don't think I've ever felt this conflicted in my entire life.

"Excuse me." I stand and pick up the purse Mason bought me for today. "Where's the nearest restroom?"

"Out in the lobby, dear. When you get back, I want to hear all about how you two met." Mrs. Pavlis winks, and I give her a little smile before backing out of the room. Neither of the guys seems to notice I'm leaving. They're too busy going back and forth over whether Mom should have a safe in there with all this new jewelry.

I'm in the lobby before it hits me.

I'm alone. Finally. I don't know for how much longer, either.

I can go to the bathroom, or I can get out of here. The way my chest tightens at the thought of leaving Mason and Evan here is exactly why I have to go. What I saw from them back there in that room is almost enough to make me see them as whole people. Little boys who grew up in poverty without a dad. Who did what they had to do to take care of themselves and their mother. No wonder they turned out like they did, but they're still devoted to her.

Sorry, Mrs. Pavlis, but I can't live with your sons. Not if I want to avoid falling for them.

That's why I hurry through the front door without even bringing my jacket. It's freezing out, but I'm free. That's what matters. I have a little money in the bank, enough to afford a bus ticket somewhere. Anywhere.

I start jogging for the parking lot, hoping to reach the main road before anybody knows I'm gone. Maybe I can flag down a cop.

It's not until a black car skids to a stop in front of me that I realize I was never going to get away. I know even before the door opens and a man darts out to grab me and shove me inside that this was the way it was always going to end.

That it wouldn't be Evan or Mason who killed me. That it would be Dimitri.

“Hello again,” he purrs once I’m inside, and his goon climbs in behind me. “Let’s catch up.”

MASON

“TO THE BATHROOM?” I LOOK AT EVAN, WHO ONLY SCOWLS.

Mom shoots me a look. “What? You don’t think women use the bathroom? I thought you knew better.”

It’s not easy to laugh it off. I go to the door, looking up and down the hallway, but don’t see any sign of her. “I’ll see if she’s okay.” I hear Mom murmuring something to Evan about it being cute, the way I care so much about Frankie. If she only knew.

Rapping on the door, I mutter, “You in there, Frankie?” For the sake of anybody who might be passing by, I keep my voice light. Inside it’s another story. Inside I’m seething. I knew she’d pull something like this. I hoped she’d prove me wrong, though.

Finally, I turn to the front desk, where a cute little thing wears reindeer antlers on her head. “Excuse me, did a girl in a red sweater pass a minute or two ago?”

“Sure. She was in a hurry. I figured she left something in the car and would be right back since she wasn’t wearing a coat.”

She took the first opportunity and hauled ass. *Dammit, Frankie.* I go outside, searching, knowing I won’t see her. She must’ve taken off at a run.

“Hey, Mom.” I somehow manage to keep it together for her sake on returning to her room. “Frankie’s not feeling well. I think we need to take her home.” Evan doesn’t say anything, but he puts on his coat and picks up Frankie’s.

Mom's face falls. "Oh, no. I really wanted to get to know her better."

"We'll be back soon." I kiss her forehead and hope I didn't tell her a lie. Not that I haven't lied to her before, but this feels different. "I'm sorry to cut our visit short." Mom murmurs something vague about lunch in the dining room and movies in the entertainment center, so I don't think she'll be lonely.

Once we're outside, Evan blurts out what he's been holding back. "Motherfucker."

"I told you the tracker would come in handy." One of the errands Frankie didn't need to know about was picking up a tracking device that I then worked under the lining of her new sweater. She's not going anywhere without me being able to follow on my phone. By the time we reach the car, I have the app pulled up and working.

She's moving fast. Too fast to be on foot. "Where does she think she's going?" We stop at a light, and I hold the phone out for Evan to see.

"She's in a car. She got a ride."

"Somebody doing a good deed on Christmas Day or something else?" It only takes another moment or two of watching the blue dot's progress before I know exactly what happened. "He's got her. It's Dimitri. They're going straight to his club."

"How is that possible?"

"He followed us. I don't know, but it doesn't matter now." The closer the blue dot gets to the seedy section of downtown, the more certain I am. "I'll fucking kill him."

"Not if I get to him first." Evan hits the gas, rocketing the car down the freeway. Traffic's heavier than it would be on a normal weekday afternoon, but the BMW slides in and out with ease. Every second she's with him is one second closer to whatever Dimitri has planned. How much time passed between her running and us realizing she ran? A few minutes? Anything can happen in that stretch of time.

She's mine. Ours. It doesn't hit me until this moment how true it is. Even with only having spent a short amount of time together, I know she belongs to us. And we don't take well to anybody fucking with what's ours.

Surprisingly, Evan seems to feel the same since he is following her without question. We could just leave her with Dimitri and skip town. Instead, we're heading straight to his club.

Evan parks a couple of blocks down from the place. We get out of the car, heads on a swivel, and go to the trunk. Under the liner, we've stashed a couple of guns. I check two of them, making sure they're loaded before tucking both into my waistband. Evan does the same, then joins me as we head down the otherwise empty sidewalk. It's like a ghost town at this time of day.

There's no need to discuss a plan. We know what needs to be done.

Which is why we go through the alley and use the service entrance rather than knocking on the club's front door. He left it unlocked for us. Either he is that stupid, or he knew we'd come for her, and this is a trap. This is his way of killing two birds with one stone—getting Frankie out of the way and eliminating us for failing to complete the assignment.

Entering the kitchen, we find a pair of thick-neck thugs sitting at a prep table eating leftovers. They're too busy having lunch to notice us. I immediately fire on the one closest to me, and he falls backward off his stool and takes the plate of food with him.

"Not so fast." Evan's got the other one in his sights. The guy stops going for his weapon and raises his hands instead. "Where are they? Where did he take the girl?"

Before there's a response, a scream from somewhere in the building tells us she's on the second floor.

"No, no!" That's all Dimitri's guy manages to get out before Evan puts a bullet in his shoulder.

“Now.” Evan takes him by the collar, hauling him to his feet. “You’re gonna take us to her if you don’t want a matching slug in your skull. Get it?” He keeps the muzzle pressed to the guy’s temple while I disarm him, then shove him toward the doorway.

“I just work here, you know?” The guy smells like piss, and I realize he wet himself with fear. Of course, he did. A weak little pussy would hire guys weaker than himself, so he can feel superior. When he doesn’t move fast enough, I shove him harder.

“Move, unless you want me to do to you what he’s doing to her.” That gets him practically jogging across the empty club. He unlocks a door set in the wall and leads us up a set of stairs so narrow we can only walk single file. It opens into a wide hall with a room at the end, the door half-open.

“His office,” the guy whispers. I take him by the back of his collar and nudge him forward, standing behind him for cover. Evan’s behind me, checking to make sure the other rooms are free of threats.

The door at the end of the hall suddenly swings fully open, and three armed men rush out. “Don’t!” That’s all the guy in front of me has time to shout before they pump lead into his gut. When the shooting slows—they must realize their mistake—Evan and I return fire until all three are on the floor.

I let the now-dead guard drop at my feet before continuing down the hall. Frankie’s weeping loudly. The sound only intensifies my rage. “Don’t hurt me anymore,” she pleads as Evan and I approach, guns at the ready.

It’s just the two of them. I see Frankie tied to a chair and take her in with a single glance: torn sweater, hair hanging in her face, bruises already forming on her bared shoulder. A handprint.

Dimitri’s head snaps around when we enter. “What the—?”

A bullet to his knee makes him drop, screaming and clutching the spurting kneecap. It’s one of the most painful places to be shot, but not deadly. I want this to last.

So does Evan, clearly. He steps up close to Dimitri and kicks him in the wounded knee. “How’s it feel, fucker? Does it hurt?” Another kick makes Dimitri howl. There’s already sweat rolling down his face.

I bend, taking a handful of greasy hair in one hand and yanking his head back. “You think you can hurt what belongs to us?”

“You accepted a job!” he bawls. “You were supposed to —”

I cut him off by shoving the muzzle of my gun into his mouth. “What’s that? Did you want to say something?” Evan goes to Frankie and unties her. “What did he do to you?” I ask her.

She raises her head and reveals a bruise on her cheek. “He slapped me around and grabbed me a little. I’m okay.” She’s still weeping, trembling in Evan’s arms, when he raises her from the chair. He envelops her, one hand cradling the back of her head.

“Nobody will ever hurt you again,” he vows.

I jam the gun deeper into Dimitri’s mouth, making him sob around the barrel. “You deserve every moment of agony you’re going through, you sick fuck. A girl won’t let you pimp her out, and you put a hit on her life?”

“This is nothing compared to what you deserve.” Evan joins us, stepping on Dimitri’s wounded knee until he shrieks.

I look up at Frankie, who’s standing in the center of the room with her arms wrapped around her trembling body. “You shouldn’t watch this,” I warn.

She only stares at Dimitri, her eyes cold. “I want to.” He whimpers, eyes wide, pleading to her without saying a word.

“Fair enough.” I look at Evan, who shrugs before aiming for Dimitri’s crotch and pulling the trigger.

His body jerks, his screams deafening. He cups himself with both hands, but blood pours from between his fingers anyway. “Thought you were hurting before?” I ask with a

laugh. A glance at Frankie reveals her smirking satisfaction. She's not shaken by this at all. Pride swells in my chest. Our girl is tougher than she looks.

We let him drag himself across the floor, leaving a trail of blood behind him until he curls up in the corner. "Please... need a doctor... oh, fuck!" He looks down at his blood-soaked crotch and hands, wailing in agony. "I'll fucking kill you for this!"

"Which is it? You want our help, or you want to kill us?" I stand beside my brother, who's as unbothered as I am. Dimitri's nothing but a bug who needs squashing. We should've done this from the beginning.

When we raise our guns, aimed at his head, he holds up his blood-covered palms. "Please, wait, wait! I'll give you anything you want!"

"You're right. You will," Evan confirms before we both pull the trigger. At least there's no more screaming.

I turn to Frankie, who's watched every second. Now she's trembling harder than ever. "Come on. We need to get her out of here." I sneer one last time at what's left of Dimitri before going to her, taking off my jacket and draping it over her shoulders.

"I'm sorry." Her eyes bulge when they meet mine. "I didn't mean to cause this."

"You didn't." Evan leads the way, watching for any strays we missed on the way up. It seems like the place is otherwise empty. I hurry Frankie past the bodies, noticing the way she gasps when she sees them. She doesn't say another word until we're away from the club, and I bundle her into the back seat before climbing in beside her.

"Is that it? Isn't somebody else going to come looking for you two?"

I pull her into my lap, then guide her head to my shoulder. She's safe. She's with us, and she's safe. "Don't worry about that. I didn't see any cameras, anyway."

“He wouldn’t have wanted to record you in there with him,” Evan points out. “Nobody will know it was us. He had plenty of enemies.”

“I’m so sorry. I...” She shakes her head, her face pressed to my shoulder. When her shoulders start heaving, I can only hold her and stroke her hair, letting her cry it out on the way home. Right now, it’s enough.

FRANKIE

“YOU OKAY IN THERE?”

Mason’s on the other side of the closed bathroom door, having taken Evan’s place a minute ago. They don’t want to be too far from me, but it’s not like before.

They understood when I said I needed a little time alone. All it took was getting kidnapped and watching them commit murder.

“I’m okay,” I murmur, so he knows I didn’t do something drastic. I have no intention of doing anything—not the way they think, anyway.

My skin will prune if I sit in the tub much longer, so I stand and drain the water before climbing out with a thick, fluffy towel wrapped around me. It’s so luxurious. I still can’t believe how comfortable I feel here... with them.

They came for me. They killed for me. For themselves, yes, but more to protect me. I know it. I feel it. And Mason holding me the whole way back? It was exactly what I needed.

They might be exactly what I need.

I dress in the satin nightie Mason bought me, another gift I didn’t open last night when I was so hurt. It skims my thighs, hugging my curves. My nipples stand out against the black fabric. It’s perfect.

I only hope I have the nerve to say what’s in my heart when the time comes.

Mason's still waiting when I open the bathroom door. He and Evan took turns cleaning up, and now he's dressed in a gray tee and jeans. Even now, he looks good enough to make my stomach flutter. "Hey. I was wondering when you'd come out."

Then he notices what I'm wearing, and his eyes go round. "Oh. Fuck me."

That's sort of the idea. "Where's Evan?"

"Downstairs. He was going to heat last night's leftovers." His voice is sort of distant, softer than it should be, his eyes taking me in a little bit at a time. My skin flushes from the attention.

"Let's go down. I want to talk to you both." I can do this. I have to do this. What's the worst that'll happen? If they turn me down, I'll go home. I can do that now. No more hit on me. No more Dimitri. Remembering that helps me lift my chin and gives me more confidence.

Evan is standing in front of the tree, the glowing lights making his black hair gleam. His reaction to me is close to Mason's, though he finds his voice easier. "You're fucking incredible."

I can only smile while my insides twist and turn. This is it. "I have something to say, and I have to get it out all at once, or else I'll lose my nerve." Now I wish I was wearing more clothes because I feel more exposed than ever. "I'm sorry I ran from you today, but I want you to understand why. It wasn't because I didn't want to be with you. It's because I did. I wanted to."

When all they do is frown at me, I shrug. "I was afraid. Being with you today, as a family, almost... it was nice. Too nice. I didn't want to start catching feelings for you two because of, you know, how things started out for us. You keep showing me these little bits of yourself, how sweet and thoughtful you can be, and that scared me. So I tried to run away. My heart wasn't really in it."

Somehow, I manage to take a deep breath. “I want to stay. I don’t want you to send me home now that Dimitri is not after us. I know it’s crazy, but I want to stay. I could take care of the house if you want. I’ll earn my keep.”

That seems to snap Evan out of it. “You think you’d have to work to earn your keep if you lived with us?” He glances at Mason, who only gapes at me. “Don’t get me wrong. We’ll put you to work. Just not the way you’re thinking.”

“We weren’t about to send you home. Didn’t you listen to anything we said before? You’re ours.” Mason moves toward me, shaking his head slowly. “You belong to us now.”

I’m almost afraid to believe it’s true. “You mean it? You still want me?” Evan comes up behind me and brushes my hair over one shoulder so he can kiss the other. “I thought... you hated...”

“I hated how unhappy you were.” He kisses my shoulder again before caressing my neck with his lips. “That’s all. Thinking I couldn’t make you happy.” I shiver when his hot breath hits my ear, and my legs threaten to go out on me. I have to lean back against him to support myself.

“There’s no way we were going to let you go.” Mason presses his body against mine, sandwiching me the way they did the first night together. Only this time, I admit liking it. His eyes stare deep into mine while his hands move up my thighs, working the satin higher. “Not now. Not ever. You belong with us. Always.”

“Always,” I whisper. He lowers his head, our breath mingling for a moment before our lips meet. It’s sweet, tender, but still hot enough to make me moan when his tongue brushes mine.

Evan snakes a hand around my neck, breaking the kiss so he can turn my face to his. “Forever.”

“Forever,” I agree, and this time, he kisses me deeply, slowly, until wetness floods my pussy.

Mason sinks to his knees in front of me, nightie bunched up around my waist. He plants light kisses across the

waistband of my panties before sliding them down and tossing them aside. I watch, transfixed by the sight of him closing his eyes and inhaling my scent like it's some precious perfume.

His tongue darts out, touching my slit, and I moan in approval. One of my hands sinks into Mason's hair while the other wraps around the back of Evan's neck. Evan's tongue trails down my throat, then up again while his arms slide around me so he can fondle my tits.

It's heaven. Pure bliss. Being worshipped and adored by men who'd kill to keep me safe. Who want me, always.

"That pussy belongs to us," Evan murmurs in my ear as Mason licks me. "Only us." He squeezes my tits, pinching the nipples, sending bolts of sizzling electricity through me.

"Yes... yes..." My head drops to his shoulder, eyes closed. I'd agree to anything right now. Mason moans against my pussy, grunting like a hungry animal as he eats me. All I can do is run my fingers through his hair and grind my hips against his face.

Evan chuckles darkly. "That's right. Ride his face. Take what you need before I take your ass, doll." I shiver at the thought and grind harder, more eager than ever to come. I want him that way. I want them both in any way they want to have me. They've already shown me part of myself I didn't know existed, the part that likes it rough and kinky. What else do I have left to learn?

Plenty. Like what it feels like to be slowly undressed before a leather belt is drawn around my wrists, hands behind my back. "What are you doing?" I ask, hazy and confused, as Evan suddenly turns me in place until I'm facing him.

He continues taking off his clothes while Mason guides me to my knees. "Getting ready for that ass." Evan drops his shorts, his cock springing free, close to my face. "Put it in your mouth."

I lean in cautiously with my arms behind me like they are. He guides himself between my lips before rolling his hips, plunging deep inside.

Mason spreads my legs until they're wide apart, which helps with my balance—and helps him drive his fingers up inside me. I find his cock rubbing against my lower back and manage to wrap a hand around it. “You hungry for this?” he rasps in my ear, fucking me with his fingers while he fucks my hand. I grip him tighter in response, and his groan sends goose bumps racing over my skin.

“Good girl.” Evan strokes my hair while pumping into my mouth. “Keeping us nice and hard for you. I can't wait to feel you milking my cock.” I suck in my cheeks, and his gentle hand turns into a fist, holding my head in place so he can let loose with a series of hard, sharp thrusts into the back of my throat.

It comes on all at once. The tightening around Mason's fingers, the tension building deep in my belly until there's nothing I can do but let go. Mason makes an approving sound, fingering me hard and fast, sending aftershocks shooting through me every time he rubs against my G-spot.

I barely know what's happening by the time I collapse against him, Evan's dripping cock swaying in front of me. He lowers me to the floor in a panting heap, still shivering as my climax fades away.

When Mason positions himself beside me, facing me, I want to reach out and grab him. I need the closeness, the connection, but my hands are tied. Evan's presence behind me helps ease the last of the trembling. “So fucking beautiful,” he whispers in my ear, his fingers dancing over my thigh, my hip. He lifts my leg, draping it over Mason's thigh before running his cock between my ass cheeks.

“I've never... I don't...”

He kisses my shoulder, my neck, still lubing up my ass with the creamy remnants of my orgasm. “Shh, doll. I'll take it slow. You just relax now.”

Mason turns my face to his and kisses me, his tongue probing mine, and soon there's nothing but pleasure again. Deep, sweet pleasure that goes on and on and only gets deeper

when the pressure from Evan's head at my asshole unlocks sensations I've never imagined.

I tense up when he pushes inside, but Mason's kisses ease me back down again. Evan groans, frozen in place. "So fucking tight. Oh, my god..." He pushes in a little farther, and I moan into Mason's mouth. When his fingers brush my clit, I spread my legs wider to encourage him.

Though it isn't my clit he's interested in. Not really. More like my cunt, still dripping wet. He guides his cock to it, and my eyes fly open wide. I don't think I can handle this. I don't even think it's possible.

But it is. He enters me, and my eyes roll back in my head for a second as unthinkable pleasure threatens to break me in half. This is what I was meant for. This is who I was meant for.

They move together, only a thin wall separating their cocks. I'm lost, totally gone, my voice cracking and finally breaking, but I keep trying to cry out how incredible it feels. How much I want this. "Fuck me... please, fuck me..." I've never felt so connected, so right.

So damn good.

"Gonna come," Evan grunts, working in and out in time with Mason's thrusts. He groans his agreement, holding my leg high so he and his brother can take me hard. Fast. Deep.

It's building in me, too, starting from the place where we're connected. I can only close my eyes and hold on as they take me, using me to satisfy their needs while satisfying needs I didn't know I had. Rutting like animals, they're grunting and sweating against me, and it's all too much, it's too good, I can't—

"God, yes!" My shriek echoes off the walls and floor the instant before fireworks go off behind my eyelids. Evan buries his face in my hair and groans, hot cum flooding my ass and dripping out to mix with what Mason shoots up my pussy.

It's the sensation of their mixed juices running down my thighs that brings me back to reality, lying naked and panting between them. The Christmas tree lights make everything

glow warm and bright—unless it's my joy making things seem that way. Maybe it's a little of both.

All three of us jump when a buzzer goes off in the kitchen. Evan laughs, disentangling himself from me. "I almost forgot dinner was in the oven."

"Good thing. We'll need sustenance if we're going to do that again before the night's over." Mason meets my gaze and flashes a naughty grin.

This is shaping up to be a very memorable holiday season indeed.

SANTA'S LITTLE ELF

Noel loves Christmas but more than anything she loves spreading joy.

When she meets her new sexy, dark, and mysterious neighbor Luka Donovan she can't help but notice how gloomy and grumpy he is about the holiday season.

I mean he tries taking her Christmas lights down, or so she thinks. She wants to cheer him up, but isn't sure how.

That is until she realizes it's not the Christmas presents under the tree that he wants to unwrap, it's her.

NOELLE

I SWEAR, WHEN I FIND WHO'S BEEN SCREWING WITH MY decorations, they're going to get a lump of coal wedged straight up their ass. Maybe I'll hang a sprig of holly off the end for good measure.

I know it's just dumb kids who don't know any better. They don't understand how much lights cost, especially when you put up as many as I do. A few of the neighbors like to joke that my house can be seen from space. I like it that way.

What really sucks and has me gritting my teeth as I climb a ladder for maybe the fifth time in the past few weeks is the way it seems like somebody has a problem with me going all out every year. This year, I did more than ever before—I've added a few strings of lights every season, and this time around, I also put out a few light-up reindeer. They look great with Santa sitting in his sleigh, who waves an arm to people passing on the sidewalk when I turn him on.

It's not easy disconnecting the string of lights that somebody was mean enough to cut through, what with it being so cold outside. Even with my gloves on, I fumble around with the plug. Don't they know they could end up electrocuting themselves? And this was definitely done with a pair of scissors or a knife. The wire is perfectly cut, not frayed the way it would be if an animal had chewed through it. I can't help but cast a disparaging look around me as if I expect to find the culprit watching, smirking, and holding a pair of scissors that they'll snap menacingly. No, my street's as quiet as it usually is on a Sunday morning, and even in my less-

than-charitable mood, I can't help the happy sigh that stirs in my throat when I admire the fresh snow that fell yesterday. It makes everything feel even more Christmassy.

Unfortunately, it also makes setting up a ladder a little treacherous when you accidentally place it on a block of ice rather than on the ground. I know the instant I lean over to disconnect the other end of the string of lights that I've made a mistake. The ladder sways hard enough that I can't maintain my balance, and the next thing I know, I'm falling through thin air before hitting the ground with a bone-rattling thud.

"Hey!" A man barks in the distance, and a moment later, I find myself in his shadow as he hovers over me. "You okay?"

"Give me a second, and I'll let you know." I groan.

Aside from an extremely frozen ass, I think I'm fine. Embarrassed but fine.

"You should go to the hospital to get checked out. Adrenaline can be deceptive, and it'll be coursing through your body right now."

He backs up a step, and I can't help but gasp in surprise at the sight of my hunky next-door neighbor, aka the last person I would expect to come running outside once he saw me or anybody else fall. He's lived in that house for months but has barely said a word to anybody on the block. I've asked around, too. Mostly because we're all pretty friendly and easygoing, so he sticks out like a sore thumb.

Sure, tell yourself that is all you want. Okay, so it doesn't hurt that he's the hottest man I've ever met in person—definitely the hottest human being, male or female, in this neighborhood. If there was ever a textbook definition of the phrase *tall, dark, and handsome*, he'd be it. His muscular body and chiseled face stirred up rabid interest from the ladies on the block from the day he moved in and when he painted the shutters without a shirt on? I could've sold tickets to the salivating women wanting to watch from my side windows.

Now, it's much too cold for him to show off those broad shoulders and eight-pack abs, but there's still plenty of reason

for him to stand out. His is the only house on the block with no decorations. Not a single light.

He's wearing his customary scowl as he helps me up. It's nice of him, but still, he doesn't have to look so put out by the whole thing. I didn't ask him for help.

"I'm pretty sure I'm okay. This isn't the first time I've fallen while putting up decorations."

He narrows his piercing blue eyes to squint up at the lights lining my roof. "Yeah, I can imagine that." I can't tell if he's making fun of me or just plain grumpy. "Anyway, be careful." He's not wearing a coat, I realize. Which would explain why he's in a hurry to get back to his house. Is it wrong of me to admire his muscular build beneath the thick sweater he's wearing? Not to mention the way his jeans highlight a perfect peach of an ass? *Maybe.*

But at least he came out to see if I was okay. He knows how to be neighborly.

Once I've finished replacing the string of lights and have warmed up in the house, I put together a plate of cookies for him as a thank you. He can't be such a bad person if he ran out without even taking time to put on a coat, right? He just needs a little encouragement to come out of his shell.

That's what I keep telling myself as I cross the frozen lawn and step onto his front porch. The house looks so gloomy and depressing against so many bright, colorful displays. It could possibly be this is the first actual house he's ever lived in. He might not have the decorations, and I know all too well how expensive they can be. Would it seem rude if I offered a few strings of lights in case he wants them?

I make up my mind to do just that as I ring the bell, waiting for him while wearing a smile.

A smile that doesn't stand up to his scowl once he flings the door open. "What?"

His greeting startles me out of any holiday cheer I was feeling. "I wanted to thank you for helping me before, so I brought over some cookies. They're homemade. I usually

make a ton of them and give them out to the neighbors, anyway, so you're getting yours a little earlier than usual."

He looks down at the cookies like he's never seen cookies before. "You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to." I smile. "You didn't have to come out and help me, either."

"It's no big deal. I happened to be passing the window when you fell off that ladder. It doesn't make me a superhero."

"I didn't mean to offend you." He could tell me he doesn't eat sugar or that he's allergic to gluten. He could at least try to make up a kind excuse for his attitude. But no, he would rather do his best *Ebenezer Scrooge's* impression and make me feel small and pitiful.

It's probably best if I leave. I don't want to make things any worse by letting my temper get in the way, especially not at this time of year. "Thanks again," I whisper before turning on my heels and taking the plate of sugar cookies with me. It's fine, more for me, I guess.

As I cross the street, it occurs to me that he might be the one who's been sabotaging my lights. I wouldn't put it past him. I could let my thoughts go to a bad place but not this time of year. Maybe he just needs somebody to be kind. Maybe he's not used to that.

But I'm not sure I should be the one to show him that kindness. He obviously doesn't like me.

LUKA

SEVEN O'CLOCK. SHE'LL BE SITTING DOWN TO DINNER BY NOW.

A glimpse out my kitchen window confirms this. I can see straight into her kitchen from here. The thin curtains on her window allow me to watch as she sits down with her meal at the small table. Our houses are laid out the same, but there is a difference between my dark, almost sterile kitchen and hers: she's decorated it to the hilt, like the rest of her house. It's a wonder there's room for her to turn around, much less cook a meal with a fully decorated tree in one corner and racks of homemade cookies cooling on virtually every flat surface.

She's a creature of habit, following the same pattern every evening. After this, she'll spend more time baking, then sit down to a holiday movie in her living room. Last night she wrapped gifts at the same time. I assume she has a large family or a lot of friends, considering the stack of boxes already colorfully wrapped.

She doesn't bother closing the front curtains, preferring to show off her enormous, shining living room tree. Does she realize how dangerous that is? With all those presents lying around, all it would take is the wrong person getting a look inside. The next thing she knows, she could be robbed blind.

The girl needs help. Lucky for her, I'm the man to provide it. She doesn't know it, and that's by design. I've never been one for small talk, and even if I was, I wouldn't share the confidential details of my former job. One in which it behooved me to learn as much as I could about my clients and

the people they needed protection from. I'm sure if I were to even hint at her needing protection, she would laugh it off before adding yet another ridiculous light-up reindeer to her front lawn.

It's so bright I hardly need lights in my house, thanks to the ambient glow shining through my windows. These past few months, my opinion of her hasn't changed. She's a little strange. Quirky. At first, I figured her overly friendly act was just that—an act, the persona she puts on. But no one can maintain that level of energy for months on end without showing a single crack in the I. If anything, she's only gotten worse, more determined to make friends and to cheer up the neighbor I'm sure she sees as a grouch.

She has no idea who she's dealing with. If she did, she wouldn't waste her time on me.

Outside her house, everything's quiet. I have yet to catch whoever's been fucking with her decorations. At first, I decided to let it go, telling myself that it's her problem. However, if she's going to be up on a ladder trying to replace the damaged strings of lights, I need to put an end to it before she breaks her neck. I have a few security cameras in the garage I never bothered putting up because, let's face it, this neighborhood is perfectly dead. Not that I mind. I had enough excitement before I unofficially retired.

Maybe it's time to break them out.

Only the rumbling of my stomach is enough to distract me from my silent, lonely vigil. I head back to the kitchen to heat up something from the freezer when movement outside the window stops me in my tracks. At first, I figure it's somebody cutting between our houses to reach the ones whose backyards face ours, something people do all the time rather than walking down to the corner, then around. In this weather, I can't blame them.

But no, they're not moving much, and instead of walking upright, they're bent at the waist.

I open the back door quietly, hoping to catch them before they run. Unfortunately, they're close enough to the rear of the

house to hear it, and I've barely stepped off the back stoop before they take off at a run. *Damn it.* I watch their retreating figure, my breath hanging in a fog around me, thanks to the frigid air. Whoever they are, the size of their bootprints tells me they're a grown male.

I thought it was just kids fucking around. Now I'm not so sure.

"Hello?" I freeze like a scared rabbit at the sound of Noelle's voice. She steps out through the kitchen door, rubbing her arms, shivering as she scans the area. God, she's beautiful, the moonlight reflecting off the snow turning her blonde hair platinum. "Who's out there?"

She turns my way before I can escape. The recognition that touches her face and turns confusion into anger makes my heart sink. "You! I should've known!"

"What?" Confusion laces my voice.

"It's been you all along! Messing with my lights."

I didn't expect this. She's got me at a loss. "I'm—"

"Don't bother trying to make up a lie. I've seen you with my own two eyes." Baby blues which now well up with tears while her face goes beet red and her chin quivers. "Just because you're a miserable grinch doesn't give you the right to screw with other people's Christmas spirit! How could you?"

"Hang on, damn it." But it's too late. I've covered half the distance to her back door, but she's already inside, slamming it hard enough that some of the snow on the overhang plops to the ground.

In my mind's eye, I see myself kicking that door down. She'd whirl on me, gasping, stunned that I would make a move like that—because she doesn't know me, does she? She doesn't have the first idea of what I'm capable of. What I've done in the past.

How many nights I've spent fighting the impulse to go over there and make myself part of her life?

Instead of breaking down the door and setting her straight, I turn around and trudge back to my kitchen door. The fact is, she doesn't need me to be a part of her life.

And if she knew me, really knew me, she wouldn't want any part of my darkness.

NOELLE

FUNNY HOW WHAT SEEMS LIKE A GOOD IDEA AT THE TIME CAN look like anything but by the next morning.

I shouldn't have freaked out without waiting to learn the facts. Just because Luka was outside doesn't mean he was messing with my decorations. I was too quick to charge.

Now how am I supposed to face him when we cross paths? What's the alternative? Apologizing? Who's to say he would want to listen? I mean, he didn't even want any of my cookies yesterday, and that was without the whole screaming at him thing.

After swallowing down some toast and coffee, I put on my coat and head outside to see if any damage was done last night. I smile up at the sky, happy to find everything in working order without so much as a burned-out bulb that needs replacement.

So, you caught him before he had the time to ruin anything.

That cynical voice in my head is forgetting something: why would he do something like that when I was right there in the kitchen with the light on? It would have been pretty ballsy and very stupid to pull any tricks at that time.

I cringe when his garage door swings open right at that moment. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him carrying a ladder. He doesn't say anything, ignoring me while he sets it up at the rear corner of his house. He's not hanging

decorations up now, is he? I mean, it's less than a week until Christmas.

No, there's no way. He's got a bunch of tools on his back porch, and he grabs a drill before climbing the ladder. I should say something, shouldn't I? I feel like a dumbass for freaking out on him.

Turns out, he's thinking the same thing 'cause he breaks the silence first. "Everything in one piece?"

"It seems to be. Look, I'm—"

"I've been meaning to mount this camera since I moved in," he explains without waiting for me to ask. "This is a safe enough neighborhood, but you never know."

"I see." I want to ask if this has anything to do with me, but I'm afraid to. I don't know why. He's already intimidating enough, so big and muscular, and his chiseled profile with thick, dark hair has already caught my eye more than once over the past few months. In other words, he usually leaves me tongue-tied as it is.

But something else is going on now. I'm embarrassed, yes, but his energy has my heart pounding, too.

I'm not used to people not liking me. I guess I need to grow up, but right now, what matters more is getting him to come around. "I would really like to make up for my embarrassing behavior. Would you be interested in coming over for dinner tonight?" Jeez, where did that come from? It just fell out of my mouth before I knew it was coming.

He finishes drilling holes into his siding before lowering the drill and casting a look my way. Those eyes of his pin me to the spot—I feel flushed and breathless though I have no reason to be either. "Dinner?"

"You know, the meal you eat at night?"

"I've heard of it." Is it my imagination or did his lips twitch like he was trying not to smile? No, I must have been imagining things because he's back to scowling.

“I’m a pretty good cook. And it’s the least I can do to make it up to you. I shouldn’t have assumed anything last night.”

“You don’t have to try so hard.”

“Who said I was trying hard?”

“Is this you taking it easy?” My heart sinks, and it must show itself on my face since he frowns and clears his throat. “All right. I’ll come by for dinner. Seven o’clock sound okay?”

Funny. That’s what I was just going to say. “That would be perfect. I’ll expect you then.” And then I practically fly into the house. I can’t say anything stupid if I’m not in front of him.



IT’S QUARTER TO SEVEN BY THE TIME EVERYTHING’S READY. There’s garlic bread in the oven, and the baked ziti I prepared is cooling on the stove. I made a big salad and broke out a bottle of wine for the occasion. I even made a chocolate cake with peppermint buttercream for dessert.

I’m trying too hard. I know I am, and I hope he doesn’t call me on it. I don’t know what it is about him. He captured my imagination the day he moved in alone. I know for a fact every single woman on the block—and a few not-so-single—beat a path to his front door within the first few days once word got out he wasn’t wearing a wedding ring.

By the time the last of the women tried and failed to get a date with him, they all wrote him off as either oblivious or gay. Either way, not somebody they were going to be successful with.

I don’t really care about that. Well, maybe I do since he’s gorgeous, and it feels like there are butterflies in my stomach whenever he looks at me. But more than anything, he seems sad. Lonely. There’s a difference between being alone and being lonely. I should know since I’ve been alone for a long

time. But I'm not lonely, and I'm not unhappy. It makes me sad to think he might be.

I was extra careful with my hair and makeup tonight, but that's just because I want to make a good impression. Not because I hope anything else will happen, even if there's a big part of me that is kinda-sorta hoping it does. At least, I wouldn't exactly be unhappy if it did.

A knock sounds at the back door at precisely seven o'clock, and I rush to answer it like he might disappear if I don't get there right this second. "You didn't have far to go," I point out with a laugh, stepping aside to let him in. *Seriously, that's what you say?* I give him a once over, trying my best not to stare. He looks good, more than good, in a gray turtleneck that sets off his thick biceps and barrel chest.

"It smells good in here." I catch him eyeing the tree and can't tell if he's scowling because it's in the way or because he thinks it's stupid to have a Christmas tree in the kitchen. I guess it'll be better for me not to ask since I'm not trying to start a fight and already feel myself bristling against what looks like disapproval at first glance.

"I told you, I'm not a bad cook." I pull back the foil covering the ziti, and he whistles, which leaves me flushing with happiness.

"I haven't taken a bite yet, but I'm pretty sure it beats a frozen meal any day of the week."

"You don't do a lot of cooking for yourself?"

"Nope, I'm not good at it. I leave it to the professionals."

"Everybody has their own strengths. Would you mind opening that bottle of wine for me? The corkscrew is—" Before I can point him to the correct drawer, he opens it and pulls out the corkscrew without saying a word. *Weird.*

"There's something I've wanted to ask you." The idea that he's been curious about me leaves me blushing again. "What's with the Christmas obsession?"

He doesn't exactly sound complimentary, but I laugh it off, anyway. "I mean, it's right there in my name. Noelle. It would

be a shame if I didn't love Christmas."

"There's loving Christmas, and there's... *you*."

I almost choke on my saliva. "Are you offended?"

"No, don't get me wrong. I was just curious."

"When I was younger, I always dreamed about having big, splashy holidays."

"That wasn't possible when you were younger?" After pouring two glasses of wine, he takes a seat at the table while I pull out the bread from the oven and slice it.

"I grew up in foster homes. There was never a lot of money—even when there was, I wasn't one of the family's real kids, you know? The nicer couples would make sure I had a few things under the tree, but it was never the same as it was when there were biological kids in the picture."

"So you decided you would do it right when you got old enough?"

"Exactly." I plate us both up some salad, then add a big serving spoon worth of ziti to both our plates. "I look forward to it all year long."

"Hmm." That's his only reaction as I slide the plate in front of him. I wish I could read this guy. I want to ask why he doesn't seem to care about the holiday, but I don't want to offend him. There's a strange energy about him. I can't put my finger on why he comes off so forbidding.

"How is it?" I can't help asking.

"It's... very good." He offers a brief but promising grin before taking a huge bite of ziti. What's the old saying? The way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Even though I'm not trying to find my way to his heart, it's nice to be appreciated.

That tiny grin gives me courage—or it's the wine. "So, how about you?"

Mistake. Big one. "Me?" There's that sour look I've come to recognize.

But screw it. We're in my kitchen, and he's eating my food, and I'm curious. "You've lived next door for months, and I don't know anything about you."

"I prefer it that way." He glances up from his plate to find me staring. "I like my privacy."

"I like privacy, too. But there's a difference between privacy and being deliberately evasive when somebody's only trying to be your friend."

He sets down his silverware, his jaw twitching. "Did I say I wanted a friend?"

I feel the heat in my cheeks. "Who doesn't want friends?"

"Me, clearly."

"Why? What's so bad about having a friend?"

"Are you always this disgustingly pushy?" He stands, his palms on the table.

I stand, too, shaking with disappointment that's turning to anger. "Are you always this rude?"

"Yeah, I am. Now you know something about me." He shoves his chair back. "Thanks for the ziti; it was good until you decided to stick your nose in my business."

"No way." I throw myself in front of the door. "You don't get to come to my house and be a rude dickhead." The air around us sizzles with angry energy.

"I'm rude?" He sounds shocked. "When you insist on ignoring boundaries?" He folds his arms, nostrils flaring. "Get out of my way."

I shake my head. "Not until you tell me why you're determined to be rude."

"It's not rude to keep to myself. And I'm not going to apologize for not lighting my fucking house like I'm trying to get the attention of the entire neighborhood."

That hurts. I can't pretend otherwise. "That's what you think I'm doing? No wonder you don't have any friends. All I

wanted was to get to know you.” I wish my voice wouldn’t crack. I wish I wasn’t so close to tears.

When he lunges, I flinch, ready for him to shove me aside so he can make his escape.

But instead, he presses me against the door, his hands on my hips, his face inches from mine. “You want to get to know me? Is that what you think you want?”

Then, everything else melts away when he crushes his mouth against mine.

LUKA

THIS IS IT.

Months of watching. Waiting. Obsessing. Months of imagining what her lips tasted like, the sounds she would make if and when we got this close.

All of it comes together all at once. At this moment, here and now, pinning her between my body and the door at her back while my tongue explores the inside of her mouth, brushing against hers, teasing helpless whimpers from deep in her throat. I could go on like this all night, savoring her reaction.

Except I'm not in a savoring mood, either. Perhaps someday down the line, when this isn't so new, I could spend hours playing with her. Pleasuring, worshiping, forcing pleasure on her if I have to, making her come until she begs me to stop.

Right now? Nothing in the world matters more than claiming her. Hard. Fast. Here. Now.

My hands are still on her hips, and I pull her in until she's pressed against my already straining cock, hidden behind my zipper. A whimper escapes deep in her throat and turns to something closer to a growl. The sound sends a surprising rush of pleasure through me. My lips tip up at the sides. So she's got another side. I always wondered.

Yet when she makes the mistake of trying to touch me there, I break the kiss, wrapping a hand around her throat. Her eyes flutter open, her lashes thick as she blinks slowly up at

me when I apply pressure. She's so fucking beautiful. Her cheeks turn this pretty pink hue, and my mind starts to conjure up images of what other parts of her body would look like in that shade of pink.

"Is that how you think this is going to be?" I whisper, lips brushing against hers. "If you want to get to know me, you're going to have to work for it."

With my other hand, I stroke her unbelievably soft hair before winding it around my fist. A gasp escapes her full lips, and I want to swallow her whole. "You do not call the shots. I do, and you'll do as I say. Understood?" Fear or surprise, or maybe even a mixture of the two, keep her silent. Silence isn't what I want, though. I deliberately tug on her hair once more.

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes," she finally agrees with a shaky whisper.

It is not only the way she said it that sparks an inferno of pleasure deep inside me. It's the way she melts against me. Giving herself to me. Trusting me, even if I'm the last person in the world she should trust.

Standing there with my hand in her hair, all I can think is: mine. No amount of fantasizing could ever live up to the thrill of her body molded to mine, the sound of her sharp, short breaths as the hand around her throat slides down until I cup one of her firm, full tits while my lips trace the line of her jaw, and up to her ear. "Sweet," I growl, massaging until the hard bud of her nipple rises against my palm. "So fucking perfect!"

It's when she arches her back, thrusting herself more fully against me that the absolute maddening ache in my balls forces me to pull her away from the door, and kick one of the chairs out of the way with my foot before pushing her against the table. My gaze sweeps over her face. She's cautious and nervous, jumping with a gasp when I sweep my arm over the surface, sending plates and even what's left of the ziti flying. It all crashes to the floor, but I couldn't care less.

I'll clean it up later. At the moment, what matters more is indulging all the sinful fantasies she's inspired. Her sweetness

and innocence. I need to fucking claim it, break her down, and make her scream my name. I lay her across the table before running both hands down her body, stopping at her waist only to work my hands under her festive sweater and peel it away from her body. No one would ever guess at the sheer black bra she wears underneath—on the surface, she’s all festive cheer, but under that is a woman with cravings and a body that could drive a man to kill.

I can’t help but lean down to catch one of her taut nipples between my lips through the sheer cup. A tiny shocked gasp falls from her lips, and instantly she weaves her fingers through my hair.

“No.” All it takes is grabbing both of her wrists, holding them together in one hand, and slamming them to the table above her head to get her attention. Her sharp gasp is music to my ears. “I told you once before. I’m in control. Don’t make me tell you again.”

When our eyes meet, something passes between us. *Understanding?* I don’t know. What I do know is she thrusts her hips forward, the delicious friction making me crave her worse than ever. The fucking temptation. She knows what she’s doing.

With a growl, I unbutton her jeans, working one-handed, now in a frenzied rush. Do the panties match the bra? I can’t shake the mental image of a kid tearing open a gift on Christmas morning as I unzip the jeans, then yank them down, revealing her porcelain skin. Sure enough, it’s a matching set, meaning the sheer fabric leaves nothing to the imagination.

Better yet, there’s a growing wet patch, saturated to the point of plastering the crotch to her plump little lips.

Seeing it brings me to my knees—helpless against the sight and the scent. I release her wrists in favor of spreading her thighs with both hands, aware of their silky smoothness. What sits at the forefront of my awareness is that pussy, beckoning me, hinting at what’s to come. I press my face against her wetness, and she shudders before parting her legs wider.

I do like a woman who knows what she wants and isn't afraid to beg for it. I touch my tongue to her wetness, and the almost ear-splitting cry that fills the room ignites me with renewed purpose. Yes, I'm going to make her scream. I'm going to make this goody two shoes come until she can't see straight.

Only not with this fabric in my way. I need her cunt bare. She gasps when I yank them down hard, rough, scraping my nails along her tender flesh as I do. I notice she kicks off her flats, allowing me to strip her down before I place her feet on my shoulders and sink between her soft thighs, plundering her slick, swollen pussy.

"Oh, my god!" Her words echo around me. Using my shoulders for leverage, she grinds against my face before making the mistake of reaching for me again. Without lifting my head, I take her wrists and press them against the table, one on either side of her. All the while, my tongue moves, her juices coating it, her musky sweetness playing games with my very soul. Pulling me in, promising oblivion if only I agree to lose myself in her. It's a deal with the devil, a deal I'm willing to make, more willing with every sweep of my tongue through her hot, wet folds.

"Yes, Luka, yes," she whispers. A look at her from across the length of her body reveals what might be the most erotic sight I've ever witnessed: her head rolling from side to side, hair fanned out around it in a halo, tits heaving with every ragged breath while she undulates like a wave, moaning her pleasure into the void.

I let out a growl of approval, my tongue slipping into her pussy. I tongue-fuck her, deep, loving how she squirms against me, her pussy clenching, trying to suck me deeper inside. I release her wrists in favor of taking her tits in my hands, pulling the bra cups down, and exposing them before toying with her nipples. I pinch and twist them, wishing I could taste them but knowing I'll get to that sooner or later.

It's building, her orgasm, her body tightening, coiling, the tension enough to force wordless screams from behind her clenched teeth. I give her cunt a break and focus on her clit,

giving it quick, short flicks. Her juices coat my face, and I can feel them dripping down my chin. Fuck, being this turned on should be illegal. I continue my assault on her little clit, and a moment later, her hips shoot up, and a guttural moan announces her release, and fuck, I wish my cock was inside of her right now, feeling the tight clenches and muscle spasms. I'm close to coming right now, simply from thinking about it.

I decide then that she'll never come for another man. Only for me from this night forward. I know it with every sweep of my tongue, with every one of her moans—they grow quieter, softer, and I lift my head only when her legs fall to the sides, still trembling.

Her arousal and the sounds she's making have pushed me to my limits. Precum leaks from the tip of my cock, soaking my boxers. Noelle opens her eyes to find me pulling off my sweater, then opening my belt. She makes the mistake of reaching for me and pulls back a moment too late. “

You'll pay for that,” I warn, freeing myself from the prison of my dampened boxers.

“I'll warn you now, sweetheart. I'm going to fuck you hard. You'll feel me for days, and that's what I want you to remember. This moment, the moment my cock enters you, and I fuck you so good you'll never be able to come for another man.”

Her lips part, a response hanging on the tip of her tongue, but I don't give her a chance to spit it out. Taking my cock into my hand, I stroke myself a couple of times, my thick shaft leaking cum from the tip, and I know if I don't get inside her soon, I'll lose my fucking mind. I close my hand around her throat once more, holding her down while I drag my swollen, dripping head through her slit.

Fuck, so soft, so fucking perfect. An angel lighting up the darkness. With a single roll of my hips, I'm inside her, where it's so tight and hot and wet I nearly come from the sensation itself.

“You're fucking heaven!” I groan, and my eyes roll to the back of my head. Her muscles still ripple from the aftershocks

of her orgasm, drawing me deeper, her greedy pussy threatening to milk me dry. I blink my eyes open, and my grip on her throat tightens. Her blue eyes bulge, both hands now gripping my forearm in a vain attempt to push me away.

No can do, sweetheart. It's time for you to see me, the real me.

“Now, little Noelle,” I growl between hard, deep strokes. My cock weeping with despair as he sinks deeper inside of her. “You said you wanted to know me? Now you do.” Fuck, she’s tight, so tight I can barely hold on.

But I have to because the sight of her slowly drifting away due to lack of oxygen is intoxicating. There’s nothing in life like the feeling of control, of knowing I hold this woman’s existence in my hand. Just when her eyelids begin to flutter, I let up, allowing her to draw a breath before tightening again. It’s a knife blade’s edge, balancing between life and death. Too much pressure and she’s passing out, not enough, and I don’t get the effect I want.

“Aren’t you glad you pushed me so hard? Is this what you wanted?” She can’t answer. She can only claw at my arm while at the same time drawing me deeper. Her sleek legs lock behind my lower back, her heels digging into my ass. It’s that tiny gesture that leaves me grinding my teeth, fighting now to hold on until she comes again. Until I push her to the brink, and she starts to panic.

I look down to watch as I disappear and reemerge, my shaft coated in her juices, slick and shining. The table jolts each time our bodies crash together, faster and harder. My hand tightens, cutting off her air supply, and her already tight channel clenches around me even as her eyelids flutter again and a rattling noise stirs in her chest.

I ease up, giving her a chance to breathe before tightening more than ever. “You ready to come for me before I split you in two with my cock?” She closes her eyes, and a single, ragged moan escapes her parted lips before she goes still, gripping me tight enough that I see stars before flooding me in a fresh wave of warm wetness. On and on it goes, her body

spasming, her linked legs holding me in place so I feel every ripple.

I can't hold on any longer. Not when the sight, sound, and feel of her coming undone under me have my balls aching for release.

I let go while still inside her, filling her with my cum while groaning her name. "Yes, Noelle ... fuck, yes..." Once the last of it is released, and I'm beginning to soften, I pull out of her spasming tunnel with a satisfied sigh.

Her pussy was beautiful before, but now? With my cum beginning to slip out, it's magnificent? Before it can drip out onto the floor and become useless, I catch it, pushing it back inside.

It happens before I have the conscious thought to do it, and I'm not sure why. She's already mine—I've known it all along, but now that I've claimed her, it's a fact. Still, I can't shake the impulse to prove to the world she belongs to me. What better way than to get her pregnant?

As if she hears my conflicted thoughts, she murmurs, "It's okay. I would've stopped you if I didn't think it was safe."

"Meaning?"

"I'm on birth control."

Shit. So much for that idea, but birth control can be stopped. It's only a matter of time. This woman is mine, now and always.

And I'm not finished with her yet.

Despite the wrecked kitchen, I scoop her up from the table and hold her against my chest. She's still catching her breath, moaning softly as she curls up with her head tucked beneath my chin.

"What are you doing?" I can barely hear her whispered question as I carry her through the living room and up the stairs.

"Taking you to bed. I'm not even close to being done with you."

NOELLE

WHEN I WAKE THE NEXT MORNING, I FIND MYSELF ALONE IN bed. A delicious ache between my legs, and a memory of pleasure so deep it could've only been my imagination, but it wasn't. What we did last night was real. I had a few one-night stands in college; I'm a big girl and can handle it but standing in my kitchen, which is now gleaming as if nothing happened during dinner, leaves me a little unnerved. Not that I'm ungrateful—I wasn't looking forward to having to clean up last night's mess. The question now is, when did he do it? How was he so quiet? And how did he make himself so comfortable in my kitchen?

I run a finger over the top of the table, and it comes back clean. Of course, it does, and he even mopped the floor.

I look out the window toward his house. It looks the same as ever. Is he there? Did he seriously go out of his way not to wake me up so he could sneak back home? How weird is that? Actually, how disappointing. That's the worst of it, how disappointed I am.

I wish I wasn't. Last night was unexpected, and it is something I'll remember for a long time. I've never experienced anything like that before—the closest I've ever come to anything that hot and exciting and dangerous was when a boyfriend blindfolded me before sex. That's child's play compared to what Luka can do.

That doesn't mean it has to happen again or that it ever will. We both got caught up in the moment; that's all that was. We aren't an item or anything.

However, it would've been nice if he had given me the chance to tell him that rather than running off on me.

With a heavy heart, I start making coffee. Maybe it's for the best he left. Who knows what the morning would've held? Trying to face each other after last night would only be awkward and uncomfortable. Plus, we're like squabbling old people, who tend to argue at the drop of a hat, so this is probably for the best.

When the back door to the house opens, letting a cold breeze in, my heart leaps into my throat, and I spin around, ready to reach for a knife. Luka stops dead in his tracks, eyes widening though his gaze is filled with anything but fear. "Sorry. I figured you would still be in bed."

I close my bathrobe a little tighter, my heart fluttering and my stomach in knots. Even though he scared me half to death, I can't help but smile. "Where did you go?"

He holds up a paper bag from the bakery around the corner. "I borrowed your keys." Right, they're not on the hook where I usually keep them. I didn't even think to look there.

"That's okay. Thank you, this is very thoughtful of you." Now I remember something else about last night: he's very comfortable around here. For somebody so standoffish and even rude, he doesn't think twice about getting familiar with my home and my things.

I can't even bring myself to be annoyed. Now, I understand how sorry I would've been to let go of last night without saying a word.

"Thank you for cleaning up the kitchen." I wave a hand around while he unpacks fresh bagels and what looks like every add-on the bakery sells: cream cheese, butter, jam, smoked salmon spread.

"It was the least I could do after causing the mess." He offers a wince, his shoulders rising. "And I'm sorry about ruining the dinner you worked so hard on. I'm sure you would've liked to have leftovers."

"Don't worry about it."

I can't believe he's suddenly so thoughtful and almost soft-spoken. He's smiling as he sits at the table, slicing a bagel for me before doing the same for himself. I wish I knew what to make of him, but I don't. "By the way, everything looks okay outside. I checked the lights before I went down to the bakery. No cut wires."

"That's a relief. Most mornings, I never know what I'm going to find."

"You won't have to worry about it much longer. Christmas will be here soon enough."

"That's depressing," I tell him with a laugh. "I guess there's always next year to look forward to."

He doesn't say anything, settling for a soft grunt before taking a bite of a bagel slathered in cream cheese. Whatever he's thinking, it doesn't make him happy—a familiar set of lines appear between his eyebrows and over the bridge of his nose. It feels like he went away all of a sudden. Like he sunk inside himself.

I want to bring him back. "So, what are you doing today?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Why do you ask?"

"A bunch of us are going caroling tonight. Just people from the neighborhood. It's something we do every year. It's really fun," I add, and just thinking about it makes me smile. "Some people make hot chocolate or mulled wine and pass it out to us when we visit, and it's just nice. I thought maybe—"

He interrupts me before I can finish. "No. I won't be doing that."

I wish I hadn't asked. *Why did I ask?* Shouldn't I know better by now? "I just thought maybe it would be good for you and give you a chance to meet some of the neighbors."

"When did I say I wanted to meet the neighbors?"

"I don't understand what's so bad about having a little Christmas cheer and being social."

"I'm not asking you to understand. I don't care whether or not you do. I have my reasons, and that's enough." When I

open my mouth again, he shakes his head. “That’s enough. I told you my answer. I have things to do. Enjoy your caroling.”

“Wait, please—” But it’s too late. He’s already out the door, and dammit, he took the rest of his bagel with him.

What is it going to take to get through to this guy? And why do I care so much, anyway? He’s made it pretty clear he wants nothing to do with me or our neighborhood or anything, for that matter. Did I expect him to suddenly have a change of heart just because we slept together?

Yes. That’s exactly what I was hoping deep down inside.

I guess he’s right. I guess I have to let it go and write the whole thing off.

And I wish I knew how. There’s something about him that captured my imagination from day one, and now that we’ve been together, that’s not going to change. No, it’s worse than ever. I’ve never come like that in my life. I didn’t know it was possible. I won’t be forgetting it any time soon, so how do I get to know somebody who’s determined to stand in my way?

LUKA

IT'S LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF A FUCKING CHRISTMAS MOVIE. There they are, a dozen of them, going door to door wearing their coats, hats, scarves, and gloves, with big, cheesy smiles on their faces. Sitting half a block away in my car, I'm not sure whether they irritate me or if I want to get them some psychiatric help. It's cold as fuck out there. Who carols nowadays, anyway?

Most importantly, what the fuck is she doing, letting some douchebag put an arm around her as they walk from one house to the next?

That's what I watch most intently as I follow in my car, staying far enough behind them that they don't notice. They're too busy in their happy little world, intent on spreading cheer or some dumb shit like that. The way he's touching Noelle, I get the feeling this asshole doesn't care about holiday cheer. He'd rather get his dick wet.

I don't realize how tight I'm gripping the wheel until the ache in my joints advises me to ease up a little. How blind can she be? Has she never seen assholes like this guy before? It's obvious from the way he hangs all over her that he wants to get in her pants.

Maybe he already has. The very thought turns my stomach. Imagine following up this asshole's performance. No, she has better taste than that.

How could she let any other man touch her now that I have? What does that say about me? What does it say about

her? I thought she was better than this. I've been watching her for months, and this is the first time I've seen her getting close to a guy.

He looks like the stereotypical ex-athlete who's since put on twenty pounds of flab. Football, I'm guessing. He narrows his eyes when Noelle slips away from him but lets her go. "Smart move, shithead," I mutter. I almost wish he'd give me an excuse to run him down.

But it would make her unhappy. The girl practically glowed when she described this silly tradition. Her unwillingness to leave well enough alone might set my teeth on edge, but her innocence and sweetness need protecting. They're a big part of what drew me to her from the beginning.

The rest of it? My cock twitches when I remember last night. I couldn't have suspected she would explode the way she did. The rougher I got, the tighter I squeezed her throat, the more she wanted. She was made for me.

I can't help but think of...

No. No returning to the past. I need to focus on Noelle, who's now moving down to the next house, where they're waiting on the porch for the entertainment to arrive. What the hell is this place? It's like living on the set of a Hallmark film.

The blond, flabby douchebag clearly agrees with me. Does he know how obvious he is? He's no more interested in caroling than I am, but he's willing to play along for the sake of getting close to her.

"I got there first, asshole. She's mine." I'm the one who's watched her every night for months. I'm the one who's committed her routine to memory, who's learned her likes and dislikes. As if he could put in that kind of effort.

I need to find out who he is and where he lives. If he touches her one more time, I'm paying him a visit.

Now I wish I'd agreed to go with them. She needs protection. Assholes like him spot weakness in a woman like her and can't help but move in for the kill. He leans down to

murmur something close to her ear, and she laughs before giving him a playful shove.

I'm going to murder the bastard.

By the time they return to our block, I've seen enough. I continue and park in front of my house, where I seethe while waiting for Noelle to return. My blood's close to boiling by the time I spot her pink coat and white hat in the rearview mirror. She's alone—I don't know whether that's good or what. I'd love an excuse to introduce that asshole's spray-tanned face to my fist.

"Hey," I call out, getting out of the car. It's fucking frigid out here. "Frozen yet?"

She hesitates, the smile she was wearing sliding away. The lights from the houses around us illuminate her perfect face, and I'm torn between wanting to demand her obedience and craving the feel of her skin. What was I so mad about?

"Were you... waiting in your car?" Her gaze slides in that direction as she digs her teeth into her lip.

"I just got home from running errands. What's it to you?" I reply far more grumpily than intended.

"Nothing." She straightens her spine. "You sound angry. I'm not in the mood for that. I had a great night with friends and would rather not spoil it."

"What does that mean?"

"Why do you care?" She throws her hands into the air. "You've made it obvious you aren't interested in having friends. Especially if that friend is me."

"But there are other guys who are interested in being friends with you, aren't there? Is that the kind of friend you want?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't care. Have a good night." She goes so far as to bump me with her elbow as she passes—but she doesn't get far when I wrap an arm around her waist and pull her toward me.

“No. That’s not how this goes.” I haul her in close and pin her against me with a hand on her back. She smells like vanilla and cinnamon, and I intend to wear that scent all over me by the time I’m finished. “You don’t get to walk away from this.”

“Let me go.” There’s not much conviction in her voice, not that I need there to be.

“We’re going to get clear on a few things first.” She lets out a soft yelp when I bend and throw her over my shoulder. Her soft, weak protests fall on deaf ears while I march up my front steps and carry her into the house.

She’s not going to sleep tonight without remembering who she belongs to.

NOELLE

“THIS IS INSANE.” NOTHING I SAY SEEMS TO MATTER SINCE Luka never breaks his stride as he carries me into the house, then kicks the door shut. I’m too busy freaking out to notice much about the interior—it’s dark, but I get a feeling of emptiness. Sparseness.

It goes by in a flash. He’s moving fast, a man on a mission, and before I know it, he takes me up the stairs and to the end of the hall where the master bedroom must be. Only once he’s thrown me to the bed does he say a word.

“You’re mine.” He’s rough as he yanks off my hat, then unbuttons my coat and pulls it away before tossing it to the floor at the foot of the large, soft bed. A bed softer than I would expect a man this hard to sleep in.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” The fact is, I could fight harder. I really could. I could have screamed for help before he brought me in here—I’m sure somebody would’ve heard, with the rest of the group still chatting a few houses down.

The fact is my heart’s racing from something more than fear. I’ve never been through anything like this, but I think I could learn to enjoy it.

Still, I’m his? That’s a little more than I feel comfortable with.

But I can tell he’s serious, stripping quickly, his eyes never leaving mine. He’s angry with me. Why is he angry? “What did I do? Why are you doing this?”

“Oh, so letting that piece of shit hang all over you is normal? It doesn’t stand out to you at all?”

“That piece of shit?” My panicked brain races around, trying to decode his cryptic growling. “Do you mean Jake Miller?”

“That’s his name?” He kicks off his heavy-soled shoes before dropping his jeans and his boxers along with them. Naturally, his dick catches my eye, hard and thick and swaying slightly.

Then he pulls me closer by my legs before hauling me up into a sitting position. “We’re not talking about him anymore. I can think of better things for you to do with your mouth.”

It wouldn’t matter if I tried to fight him off or not. There’s no stopping him from pulling my sweater over my head before he fondles my breasts almost cruelly; his touch is rough and careless. I’m caught between groaning in pain and begging him for more. It hurts, but not enough to make me want to stop. It’s good, exciting, and makes my heart beat faster than ever.

“Like anyone could give you what I give you. Like any man could make you come the way you come for me.” He winds my hair around his fist and tugs until I suck a sharp breath into my lungs.

I don’t realize what he’s doing until the head of his cock runs over my lips, coating them in salty precum. “Now, I’m giving you this. Suck it. Suck it like a good girl who knows she’ll be coming on it before the end of the night.”

I don’t know what it is about the things he says and the way he says them, but it has me almost painfully aroused by the time I part my lips to take him inside. His deep groan of approval makes me bolder—I want to hear it again and again and know I’m the one who makes him do it.

“Damn, baby,” he growls, moving his hips. Slowly at first, with shallow little thrusts, moving faster until I have to fight to keep up. “You know how to treat a cock. Maybe I’ll come down that pretty throat of yours instead.”

I press my tongue to the underside of this shaft, and again he groans. It's a helpless sort of sound, and it drives me wild. I could get addicted to that sound.

I could get addicted to this man. There is nothing right about that. It doesn't matter that my panties are flooded, my skin feels like it's sizzling, and I'm pretty sure I've never felt this alive. There's something wrong with this.

Maybe that's what makes it feel so right.

Suddenly, he's holding my head in place and fucking my face with abandon, leaving me struggling to breathe while fighting just as hard not to let my gag reflex ruin things. "Or maybe I'll come all over this beautiful face. I'll leave you dripping and throw you back outside. Maybe your little boyfriend would take the hint. What do you think?" He plunges in deep and holds himself in place, laughing as he imagines my humiliation. A tear rolls down my cheek, but he doesn't notice, too wrapped up in his imagination.

My body sags with relief when he pulls out, and I can suck in a ragged breath. "No. I need to remind you how much you love having my cock shoved deep inside your cunt." He catches my jaw in one hand, leaning down until our noses touch. There's nothing in the world but him, overwhelming me, blocking out everything else.

"Please..." I breathe, trembling.

"Please, what?"

That's the thing. I don't even know why I said it. I don't know what I want. I only know I'm hanging in limbo, lost in the way he makes me feel.

He lets out a dark chuckle. "You want to beg? I'll make you beg." He pushes me, and I land on my back before he flips me over onto my stomach. I gasp when cool air hits my ass once he pulls down the thick leggings I wore to keep warm outside.

"This ass," he mutters, sinking his fingers in until I know I'll have bruises. "I could feast on this ass." Instead, he delivers two sharp smacks, one on each cheek. Instinct makes

me try to fight my way out from under him, but he's not having it.

No, instead, he takes me by the hips and angles me, so I'm in the perfect position for him to impale me. "Yes! Oh, god, yes!" I don't know what comes over me, but I can't make it stop, and I don't want to. It feels so good. The sensation of being so filled and stretched. He sinks all the way to the base, and we're completely connected. I could stay like this forever and die happy.

He doesn't stay still for long, driving into me with a bone-jarring thrust. "No one else." I can barely hear him over the blood rushing in my ears and the animal grunts I can't hold back. "No one else. This is mine. You are mine."

I know I shouldn't say it. But right now, I don't care about making sense or what's right. I only know one thing: I'm his, here and now. "Yes!" I sob out, losing myself one stroke at a time, with each crash of his body against mine.

My moans lengthen until they are nothing more than a single, high-pitched whine that feels like it's coming up from my toes. It's happening, it's happening, I'm going to come. "Yes! Yes!" I shriek, the tension in my core rising until I have no choice but to let go.

The most exquisite pleasure erupts, sending shockwaves rippling through my arms, my legs, my entire body. I don't know if I'm laughing or crying or both—it's all too intense, bringing up feelings I've never experienced before in the middle of an orgasm.

And I'm still caught in that dizzying high when Luka slams into me one last time before pulling out, breathing hard and fast before a telltale rush of warmth on my lower back tells me he's finished. I can only whimper helplessly, still lost in an unspeakably sweet sensation.

Who is this man? What have I gotten myself into?

It's not until he starts gently cleaning me up that I snap out of it. "Stay still," he murmurs, gentle now. All it took was

coming that hard to cool him off. I couldn't complain even if I wanted to, not when it was so good.

Finally, once I'm clean, he goes through the process of fully removing the rest of my clothes. "Get into bed while I go downstairs to get us something to drink," he advises. "I plan on eating that pussy."

I should fight him. I should tell him to go fuck himself next time he feels like coming. But all I can do is smile, still a little drowsy and dizzy in the aftermath.

He's right. Only he can do this to me. Nobody else has ever come close.

I push myself up on my palms and finally stand on shaky legs before taking the corner of the comforter and pulling it back. It's a nice enough room, masculine, but just as sparse as the downstairs. I guess he doesn't have anybody to impress.

I'm about to slide between the sheets as ordered when my big toe catches the corner of something under the bed. Curiosity makes me crouch before I think about it. It's a picture frame. I wonder why he keeps it under the bed. Is it snooping to want to know more?

I can't help it. The corner of the frame is sticking out like it's begging to be discovered. I glance over at the partly open door and listen hard to make sure Luka's still downstairs. Why am I so nervous about this—and if I know it's wrong, why am I about to pull the frame further out?

"Oh, wow," I whisper, holding a wedding photo. The couple is coming down the aisle after the ceremony while guests on either side of the aisle throw flower petals. She's a gorgeous brunette, beaming with joy, her smile the sort you usually only see in a magazine spread.

And the groom is a laughing, joyful Luka. He's a little younger. His hair is a little longer. But he's Luka, all right, holding his bride's hand while looking at her the way every woman wants their man to look at them.

"What the fuck are you doing with that?" A bottle of water hits the wall above my head, hard enough to burst.

I drop the photo with a yelp—thank god it didn't have far to fall, so there's no damage done. I've barely stood upright by the time he reaches me and takes me by the arms. The way he squeezes makes me yelp again, louder this time, while tears fill my eyes. "You're hurting me!"

He doesn't hear me, or he doesn't care. His fingers dig deeper as he yanks me close so he can scream in my face. "Why can't you leave well enough alone? Why can't you keep your fucking hands to yourself?"

"I'm sorry!" I'm sobbing by the time he throws me away from him. I land on the bed before he sweeps his arm over the nightstand, sending the lamp and clock crashing to the floor. That isn't enough. The nightstand itself comes next, tipping over and splintering against the wall.

Then he whirls on me again, and the rage in his eyes—and his clenched fists—make me recoil in fear. "Please, don't hurt me." I throw my arms over my head, cowering, waiting for one of those fists to make contact.

"Get out of here," he pants. "Get away from me."

I'm not about to press my luck. I'm too scared to even look at him.

My hands shake as hard as the rest of me, but I manage to get my clothes together, pulling on my sweater and leggings in the hallway, then shoving my feet into my shoes before running down the stairs and out the door without a backward glance, my coat and hat in my arms. The last thing I hear is something else hitting the floor up there. Something heavy.

I think I just dodged a bullet. A very violent, terrifying bullet.

LUKA

NOT MANY THINGS WENT RIGHT THE LAST TIME I SAW NOELLE two nights ago.

Except for one thing: when she told me that bastard's name. Jake Miller. It's been there all this time at the forefront of my mind, the way a new target tends to take over my every waking thought.

Since then, I've found his address and virtually everything there is to know about him. At the time he got arrested for domestic assault but was released when the charges were dropped. He has a sports betting problem, too, and is deep in debt as a result. Probably trying to relive his glory days.

There's one more thing I know about him after checking last night's camera feed: he's been paying nighttime visits to Noelle's house, fucking with her lights. I don't know what he expected the outcome to be—was she supposed to collapse into his arms and beg for protection? Or is he simply a childish prick who would rather torment a woman than win her over?

Either way, with the footage taken overnight cued up on my phone, I knock at his front door six houses down from mine. He answers, wearing a football jersey, and with a beer in one hand. "Yeah?"

"You're Jake Miller, right?"

"Sure am. Don't you live down the street?"

"Are you home alone?" I ask, ignoring his question.

“Yeah...” He cocks his head to the side. “What’s this all about?”

Before he knows what’s happening, I shoved him inside and closed the door. He’s still sputtering, his beer sloshing everywhere when I take him by the jersey and haul him in close. “I have something on my phone I want you to see, Jake Miller.” I pull it from my back pocket and push play on the video, which clearly shows him peering through Noelle’s front window in the middle of the night before destroying the lights hanging from Santa’s sleigh.

“This you?” I ask, and the sight of his blank-faced shock is almost too gratifying.

“How... why...”

“Why? Because some asshole’s been fucking with her, that’s why.” I shove him away from me but am soon on him again, holding him in place by his throat. “Now, here’s how it’s going to be. You are never, ever to step foot on her property again. Not even if she invites you, which she will never do again once I tell her what I found. Do you understand me?”

“So fucking what? I didn’t do anything that bad.”

I’m almost glad he said that. “Is that really the defense you’re going with? Then maybe I have to convince you in some other way.”

Before he can stop me, I take the beer from his hands and smash the bottle upside his head. He falls back against the wall, stunned, immediately placing a hand where I made contact.

“What the fuck?” He barely has time to study the blood on his fingers before I drive my fist into his nose.

He bends at the waist, choking and gagging on blood, and this time, it’s my knee driving into his face, catching his cheek and his eye. “You are never, ever to go near her again!” He falls to his knees, and I kick him in the ribs again and again until he lands on his side and curls up in a defensive position.

“Please, stop!” he cries out between each deliberately placed kick to his back and stomach.

“Say it. Say you’ll leave her alone.” He doesn’t answer quickly enough, so I pick up an empty bottle from the end table. It, too, finds his head, leaving me with nothing but the jagged neck in my hand.

I roll him onto his back, cupping a hand around the back of his head and pulling him up before touching the jagged glass to his throat. “Or I will watch you bleed out here and now. Do you fucking doubt me?”

His eye is already swelling shut, his nose gushing blood, and his scalp bleeding in two places. He’s bleeding inside, too, I’m sure of it. “Please...” he whispers, his body heaving in silent sobs.

“Say it. Say you will leave her alone from now on. You are never to go anywhere near her again.” I press the glass against his flesh just hard enough to draw blood, and that’s what snaps him out of his indecision.

“Yes! Yes, I swear. Please, don’t kill me!” The smell of piss fills the air, and I look down between us to find a wet spot growing on his sweatpants.

He lets out a broken sob when I release him, falling back onto the floor with his hands laced behind his head. “Don’t make me pay you another visit, or I might decide to cut off your balls instead of slicing your throat,” I warn before peering out through the front window, then leaving the house and heading down the street.

No one saw me. Even if he dared go to the police, he has no proof—my blood-stained leather gloves are the only thing that made contact with him. I peel them off now with the intention of disposing of them soon. I doubt he would tell any of the neighbors. Even if he did, I could just as easily reveal what I know about his gambling habits. Who’s to say one of the people he owes money to wasn’t the one who turned his face into a horror show?

It's been a long time since I've done anything like that. Not since my unofficial retirement, a few months after my whole world fell apart. After I lost the one single light in my life, work was the only chance of losing myself. Burying the pain.

There was one problem: I felt her on my shoulder, my Christine, and she was disappointed in me. Stupid superstition, but I couldn't shake it. I couldn't bring myself to harm or kill for money, with her always watching.

She's at the forefront of my mind when I reach home and step into the garage, where I drop the gloves in the garbage can before turning my attention to the stack of boxes in the corner that haven't been touched since I packed them up. The sight of her handwriting along the sides stirs something in me that I've fought to avoid revisiting.

Christmas decorations. I finally have a reason to go through the memories I fought hard to avoid. Noelle is worth it. Her happiness is worth it.

Eventually, I find the strands of multicolored C9s like the ones she draped along the Santa sleigh. After plugging them in to make sure they still work, I take them outside and close the garage door.

My hope is to get this done before Noelle notices the damage Jake caused. She hasn't bothered me since I threw her out of the house, and I don't blame her. I'd be afraid of myself, too, if I was her. She has more than enough reason to be.

"I should have known I'd fuck it up," I whisper, and I don't know if it's myself or my dead wife I'm talking to as I unplug the two halves of the cut lights. "You were the only thing keeping me together. I thought she could fill that hole you left."

As if in response, the front door creaks open. "What are you doing out here?"

Fuck. "I thought I would replace this busted string of lights on the sleigh." I force myself to look up from the lights and

find her wearing a guarded expression and another of her corny Christmas sweaters.

“Where did you find lights this close to Christmas?” Noelle asks, eyeing the string I’m holding.

“I took them from my own stash.” She raises an eyebrow. “Yes, I do possess Christmas decorations.”

“You don’t have to do that. It’s not your responsibility.”

“Yes, it is.”

“So you are the one who has been ruining everything?”

“No, that’s not how I meant it. Just let me do a nice thing, all right? It doesn’t have to be a big deal.” On second thought, I add, “You won’t have to worry about it anymore. You won’t have to worry about Jake Miller in general.”

She winces but doesn’t look surprised. “He asked me out a few times, but I turned him down.” She draws her arms tighter around her shivering body. “So it was him?”

“Like I said, he won’t do it again.”

“What, did you kill him?” She scoffs—but stops when I continue gazing at her with no reaction. “You didn’t, did you?” she whispers.

“No. He’s still alive.” Though he probably wishes he wasn’t.

“Well, thank you, I guess. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry I stuck my nose where it didn’t belong. I only wanted to get to know you better, but I get it if you don’t want me to.”

“It isn’t that.”

“Then what is it? Why won’t you let me in?”

She’s fucking killing me. Doesn’t she see it? Every word is torture, tearing its way out of me, ripping my soul to shreds. It’s only for her sake that I push through.

“Because... I’ve never had a lot of friends, to begin with, but this is the hardest time of year for me. You know by now I was married. Christine. She... died last year.”

The last thing I want is pity, which is why the wounded sound she makes sets my teeth on edge. “Oh, Luka. I’m so sorry.”

“She was like you. Christmas was what she lived for. I couldn’t bring myself to...”

“You don’t have to say anything.” Because she has the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever met except for my late wife, she practically flies off the front porch and throws her arms around me. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I pushed and was too nosy.”

“Here. You shouldn’t even be out here without a coat on.” I wrap mine around both of us rather than pushing her away because pushing her away isn’t what I want to do. Not when it’s so much better being close to her. The noise in my head and my disgust with the entire world, all fade to unimportance when she’s close to me. I can forget the past for a little while.

That’s her gift. That’s the gift she’s given me.

“You don’t have to apologize, either,” I murmur, inhaling the scent of her hair. It loosens up more of the tightness in my chest. She’s like living, breathing magic. It’s almost enough to make me believe I can exist as part of her world the way I’ve wanted to all along.

“I don’t?” The question is muffled against my chest.

“You make me want to open up.” When she lifts her head, brows raised, I add, “Not that I have to like it. Most of the time, I hate it.”

“No kidding.”

“But you’re worth it.” I kiss the tip of her nose, which is cold enough to remind me where we are.. “You should get inside. You’ll freeze out here.”

“You should come with me.” Her eyes gleam with an unmistakable light. “Like, right now.”

My cock twitches in anticipation. “Now that you mention it, I could use some warming up.”

“I’ll get you good and warm.”

Oh, I know she will.

NOELLE

EVERYTHING'S DIFFERENT NOW. EVEN IF I HADN'T FOUND HIM outside, I would have broken down sooner or later—I've been fighting hard enough as it is to stay away from him.

Once I got home and the tears dried, I got a hold of myself and started thinking. I haven't been able to stop since. Why would a man react the way he did all because I happened to find a wedding photo under his bed? It was the most innocent thing in the world. There's wanting privacy, and there's his reaction.

I figured it was either an ugly divorce or he was widowed. Hearing him talk about her broke my heart a little, but that pain has quieted to more of a dull ache by the time I pull Luka into the house with me.

Now I understand why fate brought us together. He needs healing. He needs another chance. I want so much to give him that.

“You know, I've been meaning to tell you about these gifts,” he murmurs before nudging one of the boxes with the toe of his shoe. “It isn't safe, leaving them by the window like this. With the curtain open, anyone can see in.”

Like I care about that right now. “Maybe they'll see this, too.” In one swift motion, I pull off my sweater, then drop my jeans in the next breath.

“So that's how it's going to be?” He arches an eyebrow. “You know how I feel about this kind of thing.”

“Yeah, I know how you feel about it.” I drop to my knees in front of him and work on his belt, then his fly. “But I know how you feel about this, too.” I pull him free of his shorts and immediately run my tongue around the ridge of his head. He was already thickening, and growing, but now he’s hard as a rock. I plunge down on him without another word, taking all of him, my pussy moistening at the sound of his soft groans.

“So nice.” He sighs, stroking my hair. “Somebody’s eager. Were you aching to do this? Did you want to suck my dick as much as I want to be inside you?”

I grunt my agreement, my head bobbing, fondling his balls with one hand while sliding the other up under his shirt. My fingers dance along the topography of his abs and chest, the muscles so finely chiseled they almost feel unreal. He’s so beautiful. How can anything so beautiful want me?

“Holy fuck. I should’ve let you do this before.” His legs shake a little, but he remains upright, though it’s clear from the way he pants for air he’s coming close to the finish. I slow my pace, easing up on the pressure from my lips, which only makes him groan in frustration. I can’t help but laugh a little at the sound—now he has to deal with being at my mercy, at least for a little while.

I know better than to think it will last long. “That’s enough of that,” he mutters, and he doesn’t sound happy about it as he withdraws from my mouth. “Shit. That was too good.”

“Too good? I didn’t know there was such a thing.”

“Neither did I, until now.” He strokes my hair again, smiling down at me, and I can’t pretend the sight and feel of it doesn’t fill me with a pleasure deeper than anything physical. I’ve pleased him, and it pleases me.

“Now. Let’s talk about picking up where we left off the other night.” With his hands on my shoulders, he presses down, and I lie back on the floor, my head almost under the tree. It’s sort of surreal, lying here, watching him undress before he sinks to his knees between my spread thighs. “I’m pretty sure I promised to eat your pussy.”

“That was a promise?”

“It was to me. I take that sort of thing very seriously.”

“As you should,” I can’t help but whisper with a giggle.

The feel of his coarse scruff against my inner thighs turns my giggle into a moan. I close my eyes, disconnecting from everything but the feel of him. The sound of his breathing, the way his breath hits my skin and makes me shiver.

Instead of pulling my panties off all at once, he teases me, running his tongue along the edge of the fabric, making heat race through me but refusing to give me what I need most. On and on it goes until I’m whimpering and practically humping his face, desperate for relief.

“What did I tell you about that before?” He lifts his head before pushing himself up on his knees and scowling down at me.

“Please!” I don’t care that I’m begging. I don’t care that he knows he pretty much owns me because it’s the truth. He knew it before I did. He owns my body. He owns my pleasure.

“Please, what?”

“You know what.”

“I want to hear you say it.” The lights from the tree play across his handsome features, making him look even more like a work of art than ever. But it’s sheer wickedness that shines in his eyes that gets me. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to make me come.”

“Good girl. See? That wasn’t so hard. Next time, use your words.” He flashes a naughty grin before sliding my panties down, and I could weep with joy.

He can try all he wants, but he can’t hide how weak he is for me. His gaze drops to my pussy, eyes narrowing, and his tongue dips out onto his full bottom lip. “Fuck me, I could jerk off just looking at you like this. Splayed out under the tree like a wanton slut, as a gift meant only for me to unwrap.”

Taking himself into his hand, he strokes his cock like he's considering finishing himself off that way. Not that I would mind. It would actually be pretty hot.

Thankfully, he's intent on finishing the job he started, and I let out both a yelp of surprise and pleasure as he buried his face against my pussy. Like a wild animal surviving on only basic instinct, he grunts, and growls. Like the very smell and taste of me leaves him unhinged.

That alone intensifies my arousal. It also doesn't hurt that the man knows what he's doing, driving me to the brink of insanity with every skillful lap and dip of his tongue inside my channel. I lift my hips, silently begging for more, and he takes the hint as he replaces his tongue with his fingers, using two at a time to massage me from the inside while focusing that magic tongue of his on my clit.

"Oh, god, yes. Just like that." The pleasure he gives me is magical and sends lightning bolts racing through me, lighting me up and setting me on fire. My gaze becomes hazy, blurry, my attention drilling down to that one single part of my body and what he's doing to it, to me.

My muscles tighten as my entire purpose in life becomes reaching my orgasm. Nothing else matters, and it's so close, racing through my veins, sending me higher and closer, so close. I bite my lip to stifle a scream of pleasure as the blistering heat roars inside me, and the sounds of him indulging himself like I'm some incredible gift pushes me to the very edge. Light sparks behind my eyes and goosebumps cover every inch of my flesh as the world explodes in a blinding flash of light.

"Yes! Oh, god, I'm coming, yes!" My legs close around his head, squeezing hard while I ride it out, writhing, hips bucking, and my chest heaving as I fight to breathe through the mind-numbing bliss he continues to create with his fingers still working inside me, the pressure increasing even as I ride out my high.

Instead of falling off, it goes on, dragging out until I'm afraid I'm going to shatter into a million pieces, like I'll fall

apart if this goes a second longer, while at the same time, I'd kill him if he stopped.

Eventually, though, it becomes too much. I spread my legs and pry his mouth from my center. "I can't take anymore," I gasp. "There are limits. Even for me." I fall back with a sigh, staring up at the twinkling lights reflected off so many shining ornaments.

"I see I need to teach you a lesson since you still think you're calling the shots here." I hardly have it in me to snort in response—I'm weak, breathless, and dizzy. I don't realize he's going through my wrapping tools until he suddenly leans over me with a spool of ribbon in one hand.

"What are you doing?" My already racing heart picks up speed again.

"Teaching you a lesson."

"How? What—"

"Ask one more question, and I will shove your panties into your mouth." Not only do I sort of hate that idea, I believe he'll do it. Therefore, there's nothing more for me to do but give in while he winds the ribbon around the base of the tree before wrapping it around my wrists, tying them together over my head.

"Now. Make a move when you shouldn't, and you're bringing the whole fucking tree down on the both of us." He leans down, brushing his nose against mine while wearing a sinfully wicked grin. "Guess you'll have to learn to be very still; otherwise, we're going to have a mess to clean up."

He's insane. That has to be it. The slightest tug and a six-foot artificial tree will come down on us or at least knock half the ornaments off. The idea of lying here naked around a bunch of broken glass doesn't thrill me, but that's the point. He wants total control, and now I have no option but to give it to him.

Any type of complaint slips from my mind when he takes his dripping cock into his hand, sliding it through my wetness, and I'm wet, embarrassingly wet. I bite my lip at the profound

sensation, the way my body so eagerly accepts what he so willingly gives. Just like that, I'm hungry, starving for him. And did I mention that I'm completely at his mercy?

"Be a good girl, now." He punctuates the words, the mushroom head of his cock brushes against my entrance, and I lift my hips, begging him to enter me.

"Please..." My lips tremble, and all I can think about is him sinking deep inside me. Fucking me until I can't think about or feel anything but him. Gritting his teeth, a feral look flashes in his blue eyes, and with one thrust, he enters me, his balls press firmly against me, and we both sigh in unison. "There is nowhere I'd rather be than inside you."

There's nothing for me to say—besides, the fulfillment of him moving inside me sweeps away all rational thinking.

"Oh, fuck..." The words spill from my lips, my pleasure, my need, all while fighting hard to stay still when I want nothing more than to touch him, to hold him. I want to pull him close and never let him go. "Oh, god!!" I whimper.

He leans over me, his palms resting on either side of my head. "Fucking Christ. This pussy, it's so tight and perfect, and goddamn. You're so beautiful. An angel, absolute perfection."

And because he can't leave a compliment where it is. "I should leave you like this and take pictures."

The idea—and the possibility of him making good on it—makes me jump a little before I can stop myself. The tree shakes, a soft tinkling sound filling the air as ornaments tap against each other. "Careful," he whispers, laughing at my frustration while still thrusting. His hips piston forward, and he picks up his pace like the idea of humiliating me makes him harder.

I can't pretend I don't like it, any more than I can pretend I don't feel what he's doing to me, the way the friction as he grinds against my clit puts me right back where I was before, back to where my body is straining, with an almost desperate need for relief.

“Do you want to come?” he grits out, his brow furrowed in concentration.

“Yes... yes, please...”

“Who do you belong to? Tell me,” he growls before slamming into me, his thrust powerful enough to move me across the floor.

“You!” I squeal, his cock head pressing against the back of my channel. “Only you.”

That satisfies him enough that he pushes up onto his knees and takes my hips into his hands, his fingers dig into my flesh, and he lifts me with ease, angling my body perfectly before pounding into me in a flurry of hard, sharp thrusts. My eyes move over his tightening muscles, his clenched jaw, and the beads of sweat that form on his forehead. His gaze is wild and animalistic, and he fucks me like he hates me but never wants to let me go. The veins in his neck bulge and his grip on my hips tightens.

I know he’s close to coming, and so am I. Harder than I ever have before.

“I can feel you tightening around me. Is that tight pussy going to cream on my cock?” Oh, god, does this man have a filthy mouth.

“Yes! I’m close,” I confess, and it’s then he touches that special spot at the back of my channel.

“You’re my little Christmas slut, and you’re going to come for me, aren’t you? I can feel it.”

I’m a bomb exploding, his filthy mouth along with the piston of his hips. Tightening around him, all I can do is give myself over to the ecstasy of falling apart. A whimper escapes my lips as he continues thrusting harder and faster, it seems, riding my orgasm out and using it to reach his own. One. Two. Three. That’s how many thrusts he gives before tilting his head back, exposing his throat, as he crumbles to pieces, his warm seed spilling out inside me. Holy shit, was that the hottest thing I ever experienced.

After a moment, he looks down at me, his eyes hazy, a slight uptilt in his lips. He looks like I want to fuck him again, and that's dangerous. We're both sweaty, our chests rising and falling rapidly. Reaching for my wrist, he unties me. "I'm not crazy," he assures me. "I would have let you go if things got dangerous."

"Now you tell me." The thing is, I know he would have. He wouldn't have let me get hurt.

He lies down beside me and draws me into his arms. This is the best part of the entire evening, well, I mean, the orgasms were nice too, but this is the one thing we haven't done yet. Cuddle, and Mr. Grumpy doesn't seem like this is something he does often, so I'll take it where I can get it. He holds me to his chest, stroking my back while I rest my cheek against his thundering heartbeat. This is what my soul craves most.

Maybe it's the feeling of being connected so deeply that makes me take a chance. "Tomorrow's Christmas Eve."

"Yes, it is."

"You know, if you don't have anything else to do, I host an open house every year. It's nothing big, but it's a few hours where neighbors can come in and out, share some food, and exchange gifts. No pressure, but it would mean a lot if you were here for at least a little while."

His hand goes still in the center of my back while the rest of him stiffens. I think he might even be holding his breath, but I'm not sure. *Damn it.* When will it ever be safe for me to ask something like this? Will there ever be a time, or will he only ever be a Grinch?

"Okay," he groans, lighting up my heart with one simple word. "Just don't think I'm going to put on a Santa suit or anything like that. I have my limits."

"I wouldn't even dare ask that, although I can be very persuasive when I need to be," I smirk, and I can see the smile in his eyes though it doesn't reach his lips.

"I'll take you up on that but be warned. I, myself, can be very persuasive. A little tongue and cock, and I'll have you

rethinking everything.”

I giggle, thinking, he’s not lying, is he?

LUKA

I'M NOT SURE WHAT I EXPECTED. SOMETHING CHEESY AND corny. Too many probing questions. The need to consume as much liquor as humanly possible to dull the boredom and the strain of having to play nice in front of a bunch of people I don't give a shit about.

In reality, it's not quite that bad. Nobody would ever call me a friendly or gregarious person, even on my best day. Still, I manage to put on a pleasant expression for Noelle's sake as she bustles around, greeting new guests and encouraging everyone to eat while handing out gifts she had wrapped and tucked under the tree.

At one point, we exchange a glance, and I know what she's thinking. If they only knew what we were doing while surrounded by those gifts just last night and how close she came to destroying that very tree, they're all standing around admiring.

There's only one thing missing from this event, and I can feel it in my chest, a barbed wire digging into the sensitive flesh. Looking at her from an outsider's perspective, there's no way of knowing she belongs to me, and I want them to understand that in every single way possible, she is mine. That she is not to be touched or looked at or anything. Sure, that bastard down the street knows better than to show his bruised face here, but who's to say there aren't others with ideas about their gorgeous, sinfully hot neighbor? The very idea threatens to destroy my attempt at playing nice for her sake. I don't

think she understands the lengths I'll go to keep her, and that's even terrifying for me to admit.

Which means hours of keeping my hands to myself when what I need is to feel her, to sink my nose into the crook of her neck and smell her, to pull her tight to my side, leaving not even an inch between us.

“Won't it be more fun to have a secret nobody else knows about?” she asked this morning, and I suppose she has a point, even if I'd much rather the whole world know.

Even if I'd rather she walk around heavily pregnant with my child, a symbol of her belonging to me, and believe me, if I have my way, she will by this time next year.

As it is, they won't know about us unless she announces it, which she doesn't—I appreciate that since it would only lead to the sort of questions, I would rather not answer today or ever.

Eventually, I know I'll have to. She's too social for things to go any other way. And she is loved; that much is clear. Adored by her neighbors and friends. What are the odds of a man like me finding not one but two such women in my lifetime? And just like Christine, she balances me out. She gives me a reason to step out of the darkness for a little while and let the light shine on my face.

Still, I can't pretend it isn't a relief when the last of the guests leave at four o'clock, the ending point of her open house. Once she closes the door and turns around, leaning against it, she drags the back of her hand across her forehead. “As much as I love doing this, it can be exhausting.”

“I would never know you were exhausted if you hadn't said it.” No, she's glowing in a way that has nothing to do with the tree she stands beside—cheeks flushed, eyes sparkling with so much joy she could drown someone in it.

“Good. I didn't want anybody to know.” She raises an eyebrow at me on her way to the kitchen. “Granted, I've never had anybody exhaust me the way you do.”

“I hope you don’t expect an apology because you aren’t getting one.”

“I didn’t expect one.”

I’ve been waiting all day to pull her into my arms and bury my face in her hair while burying my cock in other places, but she skitters away before I can get hold of her. She’s a fucking temptation to my body and mind.

“No, no. There’s one more gift, and it’s for you.”

“For me?”

“That’s what I said.” She nods to a stack of containers on the counter. “Pop the rest of these leftovers into the fridge while I go upstairs to grab it.”

I shouldn’t be surprised. She’s one of those rare people that seems to take actual pleasure in giving gifts. Too many people treat it like one more task to get through. I have to admit if only to myself, that I’ve been one of those people in the past.

Now, however, having someone worth shopping for again is a game changer.

I’m munching on one of her sugar cookies when I hear her footsteps on the stairs. I turn away from the front window, watching the snow come down, expecting to find her carrying a box.

Instead, she’s wearing nothing but a scrap of sheer white fabric that barely covers her tits and pussy, with a wide red ribbon wrapped around her waist, tied in a big bow.

I’m floored by the sight of her, not to mention the very recent memory of her dressed up like a manic Christmas elf—complete with a bell at the end of the hat she insisted on wearing. She wasn’t even the only one dressed that way.

Now, look at her. A wet dream made a reality, her blonde waves cascading over her shoulders and down her chest, her pink nipples stand out against the sheer material. As she walks down the stairs, her pussy peeks out from beneath the hem. She’s such a tease, even if she doesn’t intend it.

Though judging by the devilish smile she wears, I think it's on purpose this time. "What do you think? Do you have it in you to unwrap a gift?"

"Do you really need to ask?" I meet her at the foot of the stairs, feasting my eyes on her perfect body. And to think, she's all mine.

"Well? What are you waiting for?" She shimmies, making the bow shake. "Start unwrapping me."

"If I didn't know better, I would think you want to get tied to that tree again."

She cringes. "Please, can we keep my decorations in one piece through tomorrow?" Good point. Instead of punishing her for being too eager, I take the loose piece of ribbon hanging from the bow and give it a tug, undoing the knot. I don't unwind the ribbon from around her waist. Instead, I use it to pull her along with me until I'm sitting down on the couch. Then I pull her closer until she has no choice but to straddle my lap.

"Have you been a good girl this year?" I whisper while my hands indulge in the feel of her firm, smooth thighs, and lusciously plump ass.

Looking down at me through her lashes, she digs her teeth into her lip, moaning softly before whispering her response. "Yes. Very good."

Her tits sway gently in front of me, and with a crazed need, I bury my face between them before I can stop myself. She's everything I could ever want, and there are so many ways I plan to enjoy her. "I guess you deserve a gift," I grunt, licking and nuzzling while scraping my teeth over her flesh. She lets out a small gasp, one hand on the back of my neck while her back arches, her pussy grinding against my already stiff cock.

I delve into her pussy from behind, stroking her lips while my palm rests against her ass crack. One day I'll take her beautiful ass, but for now, I want to see what she can do when I allow her to take control. I want to know just how dirty her mind is. If my good girl is really a good girl, or if something

filthier lies beneath. Because a woman doesn't come the way she does from a little breath play if there isn't a freak lurking somewhere inside.

“Tell me what to do—or do it yourself, whatever you want.”

She pulls back a little, frowning. “For real?”

“For real. As you said, you've been a good girl this year, and I'm rewarding you, so why don't you make yourself come for me? Use me as you need.” I sit back, giving her a playful grin. “But don't get any ideas. This is what you might call a Christmas miracle.”

She bites her lip, torn between excitement and apprehension. “Well?” I challenge her. “What are you waiting for? Santa Claus?”

Her cheeks flush before she lets out a laugh. “So long as you mean it, and I won't end up tied to the radiator or something else as punishment.” As she speaks, she pulls the button-down shirt free from my waistband, then makes quick work of the buttons, then slides her hands along my chest, opening the shirt and working it over my shoulders before stopping at my elbows.

I see what she's doing, and I have to give her credit for turning the tables. Like this, my movement is limited.

With an impish grin, she turns her attention to my belt, then my fly, and I have to help her by lifting my hips so she can work the jeans down around my knees, followed by my boxers. My cock stands up at attention, a glistening bead of cum at the end.

I'm not sure what she has planned, but all I can think of is sinking deep inside her, but instead of that, she slides me through her slit, working herself up and down without allowing me to penetrate her. “Oh, what the fuck did I get myself into?” I nearly whine while precum dribbles freely onto my stomach. It feels incredible, but it's a tease, so close but so far from what I truly crave.

Reaching behind, she pulls the dress over her head—my heart nearly stops when her tits fall free. “Suck them,” her words are a whisper that comes out as an order. She feeds them to me, bringing them to my mouth, and I suck the tight little peaks into my mouth, swirling my tongue around before tugging on them hard, using my teeth. Her fingers slice through my hair with desperation while she holds me tight to her breast.

Fuck, I need to touch her, but my arms are all but pinned to my sides. I said I wanted it this way, didn't I? Now, I'm about ready to tear this thing to shreds if it means indulging myself in her.

“What's this?” She pulls away, lifting herself up on her knees, robbing me of the torturous friction. I look down to find the underside of my cock glistening, along with my balls. She can pretend all she wants, but she's dripping for me. “No, you don't get to try to touch me, remember? Or else you're going to have a mighty case of blue balls.”

“Fuck, woman,” I growl. “Have a heart.”

“You said I was in control, did you not?” My head falls back as I sigh, and she can't suppress her soft laughter as she lowers herself again, grinding her pussy against me harder with every roll of her hips.

It's the most beautiful sight I've ever seen, watching her come undone. I stare, fascinated, almost forgetting the unbearable tension in favor of observing every muscle twitch, every part of her plump lips to sigh or moan or whisper my name.

“Luka,” she breathes, and my cock surges forward in response.

She moves faster and faster until she's practically bouncing up and down, driving me close to the brink of insanity as I fight against giving in and coming before I've known the pleasure of being inside her while she recovers from her orgasm.

“Let me see you come,” I growl, and her breathing quickens. “Be a good girl and come for me. Let go, shatter, baby.”

“Oh... my... Luka!” She throws her head back, her nails biting into my shoulders, and her body spasming before she slumps against me, moving slowly now, savoring every last ounce of her release. There’s a wet spot growing under me, thanks to the juices flowing so freely from her quivering cunt. I need to be inside her, now, forever.

She must sense my desperation since she takes pity on me, directing my cock to where she’s wettest, sinking down on my length in one swift motion. She arches her back again, thrusting her tits into my face, and I suckle on the diamond-hard nubs.

Her guttural moans turn into something closer to grunts—ragged, rapid, breathless, louder with every thrust as she bounces away, grinding on my base, coaxing another orgasm so close to the first. Fuck me, she’s tightening again, the pressure building around my shaft, her movements quickly going from fluid to jerky.

And I’m right there with her, so close I can taste it. Yet at the last moment, she leans back far enough that her nipple pops from between my lips—only to take my face in her hands and tilt my head backward so she can plunge her tongue into my mouth and scream out her release.

That’s all I need to let go, and soon I’m joining her, filling her with my seed until it drips down my base and out between us. “Luka...” she sighs before sagging against my chest, her head on my shoulder, her pussy still spasming around my softening cock.

All I can think is that one day soon, I’ll get her pregnant. I’ll have the pleasure of watching her swell with the life I’ve placed inside her, watching her become more fully mine while, with every breath she takes, I’m more hopelessly, devotedly hers.

For now, it’s enough for her to rest against me while she catches her breath and comes back to her senses. “All right,” I

finally whisper, chuckling. “Maybe that wasn’t so bad, but don’t get used to it.”

“I know better. Besides...” she snorts softly. “I sort of like it when you play rough with me.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“I have a very important question to ask you.” She lifts her head from my shoulder, and there’s something about her smudged makeup and tousled blonde hair that leaves me wanting to take her again. She’s innocence, and pure erotic bliss wrapped up in one perfect package.

“What’s that?”

“What do you want for Christmas?” I lift a brow, and she continues, “I mean, for real. I know it’s already Christmas Eve, but there’s still time to hit the store. I want you to have a real gift. Only I have no idea what to get you.”

Something about the sweet simplicity of it tugs at what’s left of my heart. I never had a chance against her. She was always going to find a way to knock down every last one of my defenses.

I comb sweat-dampened hair away from her forehead with my fingers, laughing gently. “Who says I need a gift? Who says what I have right here in my lap isn’t the best gift I could ever ask for?”

For some reason, she frowns like she can’t believe it. Haven’t I already shown her? “Do you mean that? You don’t have to say it if you don’t mean it.”

“I don’t say things I don’t mean. That’s one thing you need to know about me.” I take her face in my hands and look deep into her ocean-blue eyes. I could drown in them and not complain. “You are all I want. You are all I need. And if you’ll let me, I’ll treat you like the gift you are every single day.”

“Really?” she whispers as her eyes well up with tears. Fuck, I made her cry.

“Are those happy tears?”

She laughs, nodding. “Very happy. Because that was all I wanted, really. For you to say that. I mean, I would’ve bought you something too.”

“Well, shit. Maybe I should’ve asked for a snow blower.”

This time she bursts into laughter, throwing her head back as she does. “Look at you, having a sense of humor. What other secrets haven’t you shared with me yet?”

“I guess you’ll have to find out.”

She winds her arms around my neck, eyes narrowing while she gives me a playful grin. “I can hardly wait. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, sweetheart. The greatest gift I could’ve got this year,” I reply, and all I can think is how I never thought I’d find love again, yet a Christmas miracle appeared, and her name was Noelle.

HOLIDAY STALKER

Winter

If I could wish for anything, it would be for a better life. Down on my luck, and on the verge of losing my tiny studio apartment, I accept a last-minute job, helping cater for a Holiday event. The pay isn't great, but it's going to keep me from sleeping on the street this Christmas.

Warren

One look is all it takes for me to become obsessed with her. But before I can get her name or number, she is gone. I will do anything to find that woman is, and once I do, I'm never letting her go.

WINTER

THE THINGS I'LL DO TO AVOID GETTING EVICTED.

Not like taking a job as a server at a big charity event is such a terrible opportunity. It's not like the woman down at the employment agency asked me to strip at a bachelor party or, I don't know, empty porta-potties. Basically, things could be worse than serving filet mignon to rich people.

Who knows? I might even end up eating a full, hot meal for the first time in as long as I can remember. Weeks of living on ramen and cereal have left me practically swimming in the white button-down shirt I found at the back of my closet. When I step into the kitchen of the hotel hosting the event, the aroma of so much rich food hangs heavy in the air and makes my empty stomach growl audibly.

Not that anybody would hear it. I've never worked in a kitchen before, and the first thing that comes to mind as I stand in the doorway with my mouth hanging open is the opening scenes of *Saving Private Ryan*. In other words, it's brutal chaos: pans slamming onto burners, cooks shouting back and forth, open flame flaring up here and there. It's a wonder nobody singes off their eyebrows.

Dishwashers carry racks of glasses, plates are stacked, and always there's shouting, the voices overlapping, making my head ache. And the servers, like me, are already in a frenzy. I barely jump out of the way in time to avoid getting run over by a girl dressed the same as me, her hair slicked back in a bun like my blond locks are.

“Get moving!” she shouts over one shoulder, carrying a stack of empty trays on the other one.

Yeah, I’ll get moving. Right out the door.

What have I gotten myself into? Now I’m starting to regret lying about having restaurant experience. What was I supposed to do? They needed somebody to fill in tonight, and it’s either sink or swim—only sinking means getting thrown out on my ass with the few belongings I haven’t yet sold off to make ends meet.

Fake it till you make it. Isn’t that how the saying goes? I have to fake it, is all. Immediately, my eyes dart around, searching for the first person who seems like they might be willing to help me out. If I can follow their lead, I’ll get out of this in one piece. And once again, I’ll have kept the wolf from my door, at least for now.

“Get these out to your assigned tables!” A man in a white jacket claps his hands over his head before pointing down at a gleaming, stainless-steel table in front of him. On it are assembled a few dozen baskets heaped with steaming rolls whose aroma makes me feel a little dizzy. I’m way too hungry to be working around food.

Shit. We have tables assigned to us? My head swings around, bile rising in my throat as I search for a chart or a list or something, anything to give me a clue. I’m almost paralyzed with indecision and the sense of being in way over my head when my gaze lands upon a clipboard holding the layout of the ballroom. I peer down at it, searching for my name. Winter, in charge of tables twenty-five through thirty.

Gulp. No pressure or anything.

If I can fall back on one thing, it’s being a quick study. I grab one of the remaining trays that hasn’t already been loaded up and carried away, then fill it with baskets. I can’t believe all I had to do was walk in here and get started—nobody has even asked me my name. What if I can’t hack it?

I have to. There’s no other choice. It’s either this, or I’m homeless. I’ve run out of options, and this was the only job

Susan down at the office could find for me. At this time of year, parties and charity events are always going on. And I guess it's better than dressing up like an elf and taking pictures of kids sitting on Santa's lap.

With the tray balanced precariously on my shoulder—not too hard, as light as it is—I push through the swinging door leading out to the ballroom, where the other servers have already gone about placing their baskets and making sure everything looks the way it should. How will I know if it does or not? I make a point of studying tables as I pass, so I know what they're supposed to look like when I reach the ones assigned to me.

It isn't until I find my cluster of tables and begin placing bread baskets on them that I take notice of my surroundings. That's the thing about me. When I'm overwhelmed, I tend to go into complete tunnel vision, focusing solely on the most important task.

Now I have the chance to glance around, and what I find damn near floors me. "It's a big, fancy charity dinner," Susan told me over the phone. "Lots of rich people."

No kidding. But it's the room itself that takes my breath away. It would be beautiful enough on its own—I know the hotel was built at the turn of the 20th century, so the architecture and attention to detail is like nothing that would be built today. Towering ceilings, crystal chandeliers, stained glass windows, wood paneled walls, and shining floors that the city's most esteemed citizens must have danced on over the years. I'm afraid to breathe too hard in a place like this, somewhere I would never visit as a guest.

Add to that the lavish Christmas decorations, and it's like I'm a little kid again, a little breathless as I admire the trees lining the walls, all of them festively lit and hung with tinsel that shimmers as it sways whenever someone walks past. There's a river of poinsettias arranged around them, too, and garland draped on the walls, swagged across the tops of the windows. If I was a guest, I'd forget to eat, gaping at the beauty that makes my heart ache for some reason.

And the people! Men in tuxedos, women in formal gowns, some of them practically dripping diamonds as they air kiss and mingle before the meal is served. A few staff walk around carrying champagne flutes on trays that don't stay full for long. Nobody pays much attention to them—we're supposed to fade into the background, after all.

“Get moving,” one of the other servers hisses when they catch me gaping at my surroundings. I probably look like some poor hick getting her first look at how the other half lives. It only makes sense since that's exactly who I am.

It's like a dream world, and I've never felt so poor and so unworthy in all my life. Here I am, scrambling around, trying to make a bit of last-minute money to cover the rent. I'm sure some of these women dropped more money than that on having their hair done for tonight.

“Here.” I hardly notice the server before he thrusts a tray of empty champagne flutes at me. “I've got to go take a piss. Can you take these back to the bar?”

Normally, I like to be on a first-name basis with somebody before they tell me about their bladder. “Sure.” He didn't say which bar—there are two, sitting diagonally from each other on opposite ends of the room—but I guess it can't matter.

Carrying a tray of crystal is a little trickier than bread baskets, and it doesn't help that my hands are still shaking from the nerves I can't suppress. Somehow I manage to make it without tragedy striking, then unload the flutes.

“Wait!” One of the two bartenders, red-faced and frazzled, finishes filling a cluster of flutes before he begins loading them onto my tray, even though I didn't ask for any.

I strain to make my voice heard over all the commotion, enhanced by Christmas music piped in through speakers nearby. “No, I'm supposed to—”

“You're supposed to get out there and get these people what they want.”

Terrific. I guess I don't have any choice. The way these people are drinking, though, it won't take long before every

last flute is claimed. Then I can run back to the kitchen and do whatever comes next. Salad? I guess, unless rich people's dinner courses are different from the rest of the world. I wouldn't be surprised if they were.

I take hold of the tray and look up at one of the trees behind the bar, just as big and twinkly and shimmery as the rest. A glowing star at the top reminds me of the star we used to have on our tree when I was a kid. Every year, the night we set up our tree, Dad would flip the lights, and we would ooh and aah over its beauty.

Then he would tell me to make a wish on the star. "*Who knows? It might come true by Christmas.*"

What do I wish for now? It doesn't take much consideration.

I want a better life. I want security. I want to wake up in the morning without a gnawing fear in the pit of my stomach as I wonder how I'll eat that day. I want to live somewhere there's always hot water, where the radiator isn't always breaking down, and where I'm not afraid somebody will break in, thanks to the crappy lock on my door. It doesn't have to be anything big or important, just a little life where I can be happy and feel safe. That's all I want.

What a shame I'm not a little kid anymore, and I gave up on Santa Claus around the time I lost my parents.

"Well?" The shout from the bartender snaps me out of my stupidity, inspiring me to turn around with the tray.

Where I immediately crash against the chest of a tall, broad-shouldered man in a tuxedo.

It unfolds in slow motion, but I instantly know where this is going. There's no stopping it, the way the flutes wobble before tipping over. The golden liquid begins to splash over the rims as the glasses fall.

Over the rims, over the tray.

And across the jacket of the man in front of me.

So much for thinking I'd get the rent paid.

He jumps back, exclaiming in surprise and anger, his deep voice cutting through me, making me cringe harder. “How can you be so clumsy? Look what you’ve done!”

“I am so sorry, sir.” Tears sting behind my eyes as I spin around, reaching blindly for napkins while placing the tray on the bar.

“Don’t waste your time.” He yanks the clutch of napkins from my hand and tries to blot away the worst of it. I can’t believe I blew this up so spectacularly.

“Really, I’m so sorry, I didn’t—”

His head snaps up, his deep-set dark eyes blazing. The sight of them robs me of whatever was about to come out of my mouth—my tongue is tied, and I’ve forgotten every word I ever knew.

It isn’t fear freezing me in place, rendering me mute. It’s the feeling that I know him. I’ve seen him before, but that can’t be possible. Everybody here is a wealthy donor to the charity holding the event. Maybe he’s famous, and I’ve seen him online or on the news.

His eyes continue to blaze, but the rest of his face rearranges itself into something less terrifying. A very nice, classically handsome face topped with a thick head of wavy black hair. He has to be a movie star or something. Nobody this attractive could be anything else.

“Accidents happen.”

I blink rapidly. “Pardon?”

“This is nothing.” He snorts, looking down at his jacket. “It could’ve been red wine. Even then, So what? It’s just a tuxedo.”

He’s screwing with me. Loosening me up before he lands the death blow. No way did he change his tune that suddenly.

“Hey!” the bartender just about bellows. “I reloaded you. Try not to spill it this time.”

“Have a little patience,” the stranger advises him in that deep, commanding voice, glaring over my shoulder. “I’m sure

nobody will perish from lack of champagne.”

“I really should get back to work, though,” I offer, torn between wanting to thank him for his kindness and wishing I could climb him like a tree. What is it about him? Something beyond good looks—he’s not the only hot man in the world or even in the room.

It’s the way he looks at me. Like he knows me the way I feel I know him. It weakens my knees and leaves my insides feeling like red-hot lava.

His brow creases before he nods. “Of course. Wouldn’t want you to lose your job...”

“Oh. Winter.”

“Winter.” His smile is as gorgeous as the rest of him, right down to the dimple in his cheek. “I’m Warren. I’m glad we met, despite my soaked tux.” There’s laughter in his voice, though, so I can almost believe he won’t get me fired before I’ve even started.

He backs up a step, and I’m almost sorry he does, but now isn’t the time to crush on a man who’s so far beyond me he might as well live on the moon. I offer a brief, grateful smile before picking up the tray and hurrying off as safely as I can.

If I had to crash into somebody, I’m glad it was him.

WARREN

WINTER.

It suits her. The pale, unblemished skin. The almost icy blue eyes. The shining, blond hair pulled back in a stern little knot at the nape of her long, slim neck. My fingers twitch from the impulse to follow her, to unpin that knot and sink my hands into her hair. To hold her in place. To claim her with my mouth, my tongue, my touch.

She's a bulldozer, slamming into me, pushing aside everything I ever thought was important. I've known of her existence for no more than a minute or two, but the life I knew as I strolled into this ballroom is now the past. Before. Without.

It's all about her now. I take a champagne flute when it's offered to me before deciding no, something stronger is in order. "Whiskey. Double." I narrow my eyes at the bartender who spoke so rudely to my angel, gratified but not surprised when he jumps into action.

Energy hums through my body the way it always does before I stake my claim. When I see what works, I waste no time taking it. That certainty, that belief I have in myself, is what brought me to this place.

The wealthiest in a room full of the city's elite. In control of more than a dozen extremely profitable businesses that only became so profitable under my supervision. Constantly fielding requests to sit on this board or that—they want some of my magic to rub off on them.

I have a knack for cutting through bullshit, seeing through the extraneous, and getting to the heart of what matters.

That knack, those instincts, have never screamed at me the way they are now. The sound is loud enough to drown out the pointless ass-kissing conversations of everybody describing their holiday travel plans to the sound of cheesy Christmas music. It's loud enough even to drown out my pounding heart.

It's not the pounding of fear. I don't waste time with fear.

It's certainty. It's the way my body reacts when I find what's right.

“Warren Fletcher.” A honeyed voice works its way through the screaming between my ears an instant before a pair of arms wind around one of mine. The scent of a light, floral perfume gives away the identity of the woman distracting me. She considers it her signature.

When all I can do is stare at her like a stranger, she pouts her blood-red lips. “What? You're not in a friendly mood tonight?” Before I can tell her to fuck off forever, she glances at my chest. “What happened to you?”

Good question. If I only had the words to describe the sense of my life truly beginning. Finding what I was born for. Who I was born for.

“A happy accident. If you'll excuse me...” Her face falls as I extricate myself from her clinging. What did I ever see in her? A body? Pouty lips I knew would feel good around my dick? I was right about that much.

It's in the past. All of it. As of this evening, I am a new man.

Still, even as I make the pretense of mingling while always, always keeping one eye trained on the kitchen door in anticipation of my angel showing herself again, there's no forgetting the plans I made prior to meeting her. I didn't go out of my way to be here tonight because of a particular fondness for Santa Claus or champagne.

Across the room stands the man I intended to have a word with. Look at him—give the guy a red suit and a fake beard,

and Josh Crawley would be a dead ringer for St. Nick. From what I've learned of him, he wouldn't mind a line of girls waiting to sit on his lap.

Only I doubt Santa would get away with shoving his hand up the girls' skirts.

He's slime. What's worse, he's a shitty businessman. That's what I can't forgive. Born wealthy, everything's been handed to him, so he has no connection to it and doesn't care if it tanks. He'll never understand hunger beyond his cheap physical cravings.

He doesn't deserve what he has. Why shouldn't it be mine?

He can wait. It isn't like I needed to chat him up this evening, anyway. The only reason I'd planned to do so was to prove to myself whether everything I've heard about him was true. All the intel in the world can't make up for sizing a man up face-to-face. The way my head is still spinning, I doubt I would retain a word he said.

Besides, I can't take my eyes off that kitchen door. Every time it swings open, I expect to see her.

Finally, I do—and she's struggling. My chest tightens at the sight of her walking slowly, eyes wide with a tray balanced precariously upon one shoulder. One of the event organizers gets on the microphone, advising us to find our tables for the first course. I'm only partly aware of this because too much of my attention is focused on her. Where is she going? Which tables are hers?

She comes to a stop, lowering the tray to a folding stand. She's so worried, her eyes darting around like she's checking to be sure she's doing this right based on everyone else's actions. Not much in this world tugs at my heart, and I'm not certain what to do with the warmth spreading through my chest as I approach.

She does a double take when I reach her, her cheeks flushing, a tiny smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Small world."

“Fess up,” I murmur, leaning in until I’m speaking directly into her ear. The scent of her skin and hair is dizzying. “You’re new to this.”

“Is it that obvious? I really need this job to go well.”

I bite my tongue before confessing how unlikely anyone will notice the way I have because no one else is glued to her every move. “You’re doing fine. Though you do resemble a scared rabbit.”

Instead of becoming indignant, she giggles. I’d talk forever if it meant hearing that joyful, giddy sound. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

I drop into the nearest chair with no regard for whether this is my table. Who cares? As if I’d sit anywhere but where she’ll be, where I have the excuse to gaze upon her, the possibility of brushing against her as she places a plate in front of me. This is beneath her, all of it. She ought to be here at my side rather than serving food.

If anyone has a problem with me taking their seat, they’re smart enough not to show it. I make no attempt to join in with the conversation at the table, all of which is meaningless, anyway. Winter is my entire focus, my purpose. I need a minute alone with her. I need to find her after this. She’ll never serve anyone again—unless I’m in the mood for that, and it’s just the two of us. That’s another story, one which sets my dick to thickening while discreetly covered by the tablecloth.

She returns to the kitchen after clearing the salad plates, and once she disappears behind the swinging door, I allow my gaze to travel beyond there to the tables surrounding mine. Josh Crawley sits two tables over. The sight of him eyeing the kitchen door as I was only seconds ago sets off alarm bells in my head.

Everything in the world melts away, the entirety of my focus drilling down until Josh Crawley is firmly in my crosshairs. No fucking way. He will not. I’d slit his fucking throat.

“Hey there. You might want to watch yourself with that knife.” Only when the man sitting to my left nudges me do I realize there’s a steak knife clutched in my right hand.

I drop the knife when Crawley gets up from his chair, headed through the ballroom doors. I’m out of my chair, intent on following him. It’s about time someone set him straight on his true place in the world and how no one sets their sights on what’s already mine.

“Warren!” A woman I vaguely recognize as the charity’s chairwoman places herself between me and Crawley’s retreating figure. “We were hoping you would announce the final figure we raised this year.”

“Give me a minute, please.” I brush past her as politely as possible, given the circumstances. Where is he, the bastard?

The restrooms are directly across the hall from the ballroom, but that’s not where Crawley was headed. No, he’s beside the door leading into the kitchen, his back to me, one palm against the wall as he leans in. “There was nothing wrong with my food. I only said that to get your attention.”

There’s no seeing what’s between him and the wall. But I don’t need to see. I hear her. “I’m sorry, sir, but I need to get back into the kitchen.” She tries to slide past him, but he angles himself to stop her. “I have to go, sir.”

“If you tell anybody Mr. Crawley wanted to have a word with you, they’ll understand.”

Everything around me goes red while the war drums begin pounding in my head. “Crawley!” My shoes slap against the floor in time with my pounding heart. “I think the young lady told you she has a job to do.”

He’s sneering when he turns my way, squinting as if trying to place the face. “Oh, it’s you. The guy who thinks he’s going to steal my company out from under me. What, you think I don’t hear things?”

As if that matters now, with Winter trembling. The urge to hold her is almost too much to fight. “This young woman has a job to do, and you’re being an ass.”

“Why don’t you mind your own business? I’ll deal with you another time.”

That’s when he makes his mistake. That’s when he reaches out and chucks her on the chin. “I was just telling her how much I appreciate the fine job she’s doing tonight.”

“Keep your fucking hands to yourself,” I snarl, slapping his hand away from her face, making her yelp like a wounded animal.

The kitchen door swings open, and a man in a suit and a name tag joins us. *Manager*. “What is this?” He glares at Winter. “We’re plating the next course. What are you doing out here?”

“I... I mean...”

He turns away from her, looking at Josh and myself. “My apologies. Some of these kids use events like this to get friendly with our guests.”

“What can I say?” Josh asks with a grin and a shrug, the picture of affable respectability now. “I’m a sucker for a pretty face. Though you might want to be more careful about who you hire for these events.”

“Wait a minute.” I take him by the shoulder, turning him around. “You know damn well—”

“Please, gentlemen, allow me to handle this.” The manager looks Winter up and down. “Get your things and go.”

Her mouth falls open.

“This is unnecessary.” That’s nowhere near what I want or need to say.

Winter bursts into tears before disappearing through the swinging door. The manager mumbles further apologies before following her. Dammit. If I didn’t know it would end up across the front page of every newspaper by morning, I would set things right here and now. Preferably by snapping Crawley’s neck, then pissing on his dead body.

I’ll find her. I’ll set things right then.

For now, I settle for shoving Josh hard enough that he bounces off the wall. “You got that girl fired, you piece of shit. All because you can’t keep your pencil dick in your pants.”

“The fuck do you care?” he asks with a laugh, brushing himself off. “She’s nothing.”

Nothing? It’s a wonder I can speak with my teeth gritted like they are. “I plan on making you regret what you did. Every minute of the rest of your life.”

He has the nerve to roll his eyes, which has the effect of pouring gas on a fire already threatening to burn out of control. It takes a real, focused concentration to keep my hands from wrapping around his throat and squeezing until there’s one less useless piece of shit in the world.

“Talk is cheap. If I rolled over and played dead for every peasant who thinks he’s a big shot, I’d be in pretty sad shape.”

His laughter dies when a growl stirs in my chest. “Laugh while you can. You’re going to remember this as one of the last times you did.”

Destroying him was a foregone conclusion before I left home tonight.

Now? I’m going to burn his entire world down.

Don’t worry, Winter. I’ll find you.

And when I do, I’ll present Josh Crawley’s head on a silver fucking platter.

WINTER

IT WAS HARD ENOUGH, FACING THE MEMORIES OF WHAT happened a few nights ago at the party. The humiliation. The heartbreak of failure. I cried all night and some of the next morning and questioned many times why I'm even alive anymore. Not my best moment, but then none of it has been.

The call I received from Susan down at the agency gave me hope. "I'd like to see you later this morning." She wouldn't say why, but she didn't sound furious. I decided that was a good thing, then dragged myself to the shower so I'd feel like an actual human again.

The lack of hot water truly drove home my predicament.

I run a self-conscious hand over my hair after pulling off my knit hat, then take a seat across from her desk. The office is all decked out for the holiday, with red and golden shining garland hanging along the gray cubicle partitions. It doesn't do much to cheer me up, but hopefully, it'll give her a little holiday spirit.

When she heaves a sigh, lips pursed in disapproval, my heart sinks until I'm pretty sure it's in my shoes. "I wish I had better news for you, but after spending two days looking for new placement, it's clear that incident the other night works against you."

"You're sure there's nothing else you can give me?"

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do. When the last job ended so badly, and I have the complaint from the hotel in your file, how can I assign you to another job?" She takes off

her glasses to clean them on her corny Christmas sweater. “I really wish I could tell you otherwise.”

“It wasn’t my fault!”

“Believe me. I listened to the four voicemails you left.”

I wince at the memory. Maybe it was unprofessional to spill my guts, but I had to tell somebody, and I wanted her to hear my side of the story.

“I’m sure it wasn’t your fault,” she continues. “But that’s how it goes, unfortunately. I don’t usually say this to clients, but these rich bastards can ruin everything. Unfortunately, money talks. Management’s always going to believe their version of things.”

So much for that, I guess. “I see. I don’t know what I’m going to do now.”

“Have you ever considered donating plasma?” I don’t know whether to laugh or cry as I shake my head. “They’re always looking for donors, and they pay. In the meantime, I’ll see if I can find you anything.”

Before I stand, she holds up a hand. “There was something else. Someone called here looking for you.”

“For me? Did they say why?”

“They wanted your name, address, phone number—whatever I’d give them.” When I gasp, she shakes her head. “It’s our policy to never give away that information, but I did want to let you know.”

I hardly hear myself thanking her for her consideration before I stumble blindly from the office and out into the unforgiving cold of a late December day. It isn’t just the temperature that has me shivering. I’ve never felt so entirely alone, not on my worst days. There was always hope somewhere for me to cling to.

Now, all I see around me is a world hell-bent on breaking me down. Susan was right. The rich bastards always find a way to come out on top. So what if that disgusting pig was hitting on me and making me uncomfortable? So what if there

were already tears in my eyes when the manager found us? I'm not the one with money to my name, reputation, good social standing.

I'm the girl who will have to sell plasma to survive. I didn't have the heart to tell Susan I already did that this month.

Turning up the collar on my thin coat, I plunge my hands into the pockets, hunch my shoulders, and begin the walk home. The wind cuts straight through the worn-out polyester to the point where I might as well not wear one at all.

The sight of one elaborately decorated shop window after another reminds me of what a loser I am. It must be nice knowing you can afford gifts for your loved ones. It must be nice having loved ones. What happens to me now? What did I ever do to deserve this?

A cold gust of wind slams into me from behind, like a punch from Mother Nature herself. I duck between two buildings, hoping to escape the worst of it until it dies down again. The only thing that stops me from bursting into tears is knowing how much worse I'll feel with my face half-frozen.

Once the wind's roar turns to a whisper, I step out and look across the street, where a man in a Santa suit catches my attention with his ringing bell and red donation bucket. He's not what steals the breath from my lungs, though.

It's the man standing near him, a man in a bulky black coat, the hood pulled low, concealing most of his face. All I see is his mouth, and something about the hard set of his lips sets off a warning bell in my head.

I almost forgot Susan said somebody was looking for me.

My mind immediately goes to the man from the party, the one who got me fired. Oh God, no. He didn't strike me as the type who would stalk a girl who turned him down, but who knows? With my luck, that's exactly who he is.

It isn't the cold that gets me moving so fast, my feet pounding the pavement, shoulders hunched against the wind, while I do my best to pretend I don't notice him watching me.

I want so badly to look over my shoulder and see for sure, but I'm afraid I'll find him following me.

I pause at the next store, a florist shop, where poinsettias and sparkling arrangements are on display. I look them over, pretending to be interested, while stealing a quick glimpse over my shoulder in the window's reflection.

He's there, across the street, standing behind me. When I came to a stop, so did he.

Shit! What do I do now? I don't want to lead him to my apartment, that's for sure. I might as well roll out the red carpet at that point.

At least I don't feel cold anymore, not with my heart pounding and adrenaline flooding my system. Do I go to the nearest police station? Right, and what would I say? A man in a puffy coat was on the sidewalk? Hell, even if he flat-out approached me, there's the fact that he's wealthy and connected, and I am anything but. Nobody would believe me.

No, it's up to me. I have to save myself.

I move faster, almost jogging, determined to stare straight ahead rather than search for him. Besides, I know he's there. He's staring holes through me as I cross the busy street, weaving in and out of clusters of people, barely dodging a car as it turns and heads my way.

One block, two. I stop again, this time in front of a bakery—when a look at my reflection shows nothing behind me but passing traffic, relief almost knocks me to my knees. I heave a sigh, ready to laugh at myself. What was I thinking? Is this an action thriller all of a sudden? Things like that don't happen in real life.

I'm still chuckling at my overactive imagination when I look to my left, toward where I just walked—and the sight of that puffy coat freezes my laughter in my throat. He crossed the street. He's so much closer now.

I don't care if he knows I'm running from him. All that matters is the running and getting away. The light at the corner is about to turn red, but that doesn't stop me from sprinting

across, so close to a passing car that the fender brushes my coat. The driver leans on his horn, but I don't break my stride—no, in fact, I pick up speed when I realize I'm a block away from the outdoor shopping village that pops up every year at this time.

People. Lots of people. This is my chance.

Christmas lights are strung overhead, crisscrossing the empty space between two rows of stalls where handmade gifts are sold. I would normally avoid something like this since it's not like I have any money for shopping, but now it's my salvation. I can get lost in there and wait for him to give up.

Countless families are wandering around, kids asking when they can see Santa Claus. He's sitting at the far end of the village, in what's probably a heated tent, while vendors sell hot chocolate and cider. Between that and where I'm standing at the other end, there have to be two hundred people making the most of a sunny, if frigid, day.

The steam from my rapid breathing forms a cloud around my head as I look this way, that way, trying to figure out where to go. A glance over my shoulder reveals my stalker, now having crossed the street, walking my way with his hands thrust into his pockets, his head lowered.

The overlapping voices and overly loud music pushed in through speakers at seemingly every stall create a cacophony that only increases my confusion and the pounding of my heart. "Excuse me, excuse me," I gasp as I duck around one group after another, then almost knock down a pair of kids drinking from steaming paper cups.

"Watch where you're going!" somebody shouts after I rebound off the back of a tall man. I stagger but stay on my feet, whirling around to find the stalker bearing down on me with only a few people between us.

Sheer panic sends me running around a cluster of carolers singing about peace on earth, while I only want to stay alive and unhurt. I duck behind them and peer through the gaps between their bodies, waiting for him to pass. *Please, please.*

My heart nearly stops when he stops, his head turning slightly from one side to the other.

He lost me. Oh, thank God.

But it's not over yet. I can't afford to get cocky when I'm still so far from home. But if I can get out of here without him knowing it, I'll sprint the rest of the way if I have to. Right now, with my body buzzing like it is, I could probably run a marathon and not feel it.

He turns his back to the carolers, and that's my chance. I scoot along behind them, bent at the waist, before doubling back the way I came. I weave through clusters of shoppers, glancing over my shoulder whenever I can. He still hasn't moved except to turn in slow circles. Still watching for me.

"Ow! Mommy!" The pained screams of a little girl stop me short. She's wailing on her hands and knees because I knocked her down. I didn't even feel it.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" I crouch, reaching for her. "I'm so sorry. I didn't see you."

"Why don't you watch where you're going?" A red-faced woman who must be her mother helps her to her feet and looks her over. "You're fine. Come on, let's go get you some hot chocolate."

"I really am sorry." My words fall on deaf ears, so I stand and look over my shoulder.

He's gone. He must have kept going. Maybe he gave up.

I should know better by now.

Like a snake striking, an arm shoots out from between the stalls to my left, and a gloved hand closes around my wrist. I don't have time to scream before he pulls hard, almost knocking me off my feet as he drags me away from everybody else.

I crash against the body beneath that coat—hard, unforgiving, but it shakes me out of my shock, and finally, I draw enough breath to scream.

A scream that goes nowhere once his other hand clamps over my mouth.

This is it. This is how I die. Locked in shadow with the man behind me, the man clutching me to him, watching dozens of happy people passing in front of me while only a few feet away, I'm in the grip of a stalker. Their happy laughter rings in my ears.

It's the last thing I hear before slipping into darkness.

WARREN

SHE'S PERFECT. HEAD TO TOE, EVERY INCH OF HER.

I can hardly hold myself still, sitting in this chair by the side of the bed, where I've been ever since I finished dressing her. The cheap, threadbare clothes in which I found her were entirely unworthy of her.

Now, she looks the way she should, wearing the cream-colored satin nightgown I chose for her when I shopped for the few essentials I knew she'd need once I brought her home. We can always fill out her wardrobe together now that I have her here.

There are so many things for us to do. So many experiences I can't wait to show her. The past few days have gnawed at me. Every minute spent away from her, a minute of sheer torture threatening to tear my soul to shreds. She has no idea the number of phone calls I placed in hopes of tracking her down until, finally, there was no choice but to wait for her at the employment agency downtown. Somehow, I knew she'd show up.

I would do it all again, even the sensation of my feet slowly going numb as I stood in the cold, willing her to arrive.

But that's not going to happen because she's here. "I'm never letting you go," I whisper, stroking her golden locks, fanned across the satin pillowcase. I can't help but feast my eyes on her again. The satin molds itself to her lush curves, begging to be stroked.

Either my touch or my words stir her from unconsciousness. My heart catches, my entire body going still in anticipation. This is it. Like sitting at the top of the first hill of a roller coaster, anticipating the rush of what's to come.

Slowly, she opens those startling eyes of hers. I've never known anticipation like I feel now, waiting for her to put everything together. She stares at the ceiling, her gaze moving across it and toward the window. Her smooth forehead creases—confusion? Concern?—before she finally turns her head my way.

When our eyes meet, my heart threatens to burst from my chest. I have waited forever for this woman.

This woman who frowns as recognition kicks in. “You? I thought... What’s happening?”

“You remember me.”

“Yeah, you’re the guy who didn’t speak up for me the other night.”

“I’m the man who had no choice but to let things unfold as they did.” Granted, not what I expected her first reaction to be, but I’m willing to accept it. She’s confused, and I’m sure the chloroform I gave her after she’d already fainted has left her groggy.

“Where am I?” In the same breath, she asks, “What am I wearing?”

Immediately, she attempts to sit up as if she’s going anywhere. I almost feel sorry for her, fighting to understand what to me is so plainly obvious.

“You’re in my home. It took me all this time to track you down. The woman at the employment agency wouldn’t give an inch.”

I can practically see the wheels turning in her head as she works this out. “You were the one looking for me. Why? I didn’t do anything to you.”

“Do you think this is all because you offended me somehow? As if I would go to that sort of trouble over some

perceived slight.”

“Then what is it? You feel bad for leaving me hanging?”

“I do wish you wouldn’t describe it that way. Believe me, it’s best for both of us that I let him get away with it. Unless you feel like being part of a scandal. It was for your protection.”

She gulps, eyes still moving this way and that. There’s a panic in them I don’t particularly enjoy seeing. “We have nothing to worry about,” I insist. “You’re safe now.”

“You dressed me? You took my clothes off and dressed me?” By the time she’s finished the question, her voice is shrill with panic.

“Rest assured, that’s not how I operate. I changed you into something more comfortable. That’s it.”

“Thank you.” She doesn’t sound particularly grateful, but I’ll also chalk that up to confusion. If there’s any hope of building a life together, I need to learn to be forgiving, a skill I’ve never exactly mastered.

Her long, tapered fingers toy with the edge of the blanket covering her legs. “So you brought me here? That was the game plan?”

“I would’ve told you I’d come to rescue you, but you kept running away. Why did you do that?”

“Rescuing me? From what?”

My disbelieving laughter does nothing to smooth the worry lines between her brows. “From what? What do you think? Your life. Your old life. That’s in the past now.”

“So... I’m sorry, I’m trying to understand.” She’s breathing fast, chest heaving, her face going red. Did I use too much chloroform? Instantly, I reach for the wastebasket and draw it close just in case. This is too much for her. But I don’t know how to take it slow.

I saw what I wanted, and I took it. End of story.

“I’ll explain it to you,” I murmur, speaking slowly. Anything, so long as she calms down. “You’re going to live here now, with me. You don’t ever have to worry about anything ever again. Not some stupid, pointless job where you’ll be unappreciated and at the mercy of men like that pig at the hotel. No scrambling around, no debasing yourself to make ends meet. The world is yours. There’s so much I want to give you.”

Who am I? I hadn’t planned that little speech—if I had, it wouldn’t have been so awkward and stilted. But it came from truth.

“And I don’t get a choice?”

“Why would you choose otherwise?”

“That’s not the point. You don’t bring somebody to your house—unconscious, by the way—and expect them to be grateful when they tell you your life isn’t your own anymore. I mean, what, am I your sex slave now?” Her chest heaves in silent sobs. As if the idea is the worst she can imagine.

I can’t help but recoil from the ugliness her words suggest. “Why would you say that? That’s beneath you. Both of us, really.”

Her body sags, her eyes closing for a moment before slowly opening. “I’m sorry. I’m dizzy, and I don’t feel well. I’m thirsty, too.” She touches her hand to her slim, flushed throat. “Can I have some water?”

“Of course. You stay right there. I don’t want you hurting yourself if you feel faint.” I push the chair back from the bed and stand, then go to the door. “You’ll see after a little rest and a little more time.”

Does she hear me? I don’t know.

But I would bet against it since she flies by me in a blur of cream-colored satin the instant I opened the door. The gown billows behind her while she pinwheels her arms, feet flying over the wood floor, head swinging back and forth while she searches for a way out.

A part of me wants to let her go, to see if she honestly believes she'll get away in nothing but a satin nightgown and bare feet. She has no idea where we are or that we're surrounded by woods in all directions for at least a mile.

No, that would be cruel, and I'm not a cruel man.

But it isn't only kindness that leaves me grabbing her before she reaches the top of the stairs, sliding an arm around her waist and lifting her off her feet with all the effort it takes to lift a feather.

How dare she?

"No! No, please! Let me go!" Her shrieks echo through the otherwise empty house, shrieks tinged with terror she has no business feeling.

"After all the trouble I've gone through, and this is how you thank me?"

"Please!" Shrieks turn to sobs by the time we reach the end of the hall again, where I place her on her feet beside the bed. Instantly she turns, fists pounding my chest.

It's almost cute how she thinks she'll hurt me when I hardly feel it. I take hold of her fists, which leaves her kicking my shins instead. I might even be proud of her if it was anyone but me she was fighting. The little wildcat.

When she lifts her arm and brings mine with it so she can sink her teeth into my flesh, my already thin patience snaps, and everything in front of me goes red.

"Is this how you like it?" I snarl, hauling her in close. Her body shakes against mine, tear-filled eyes staring up at me. "You want to play rough? It so happens I excel at that."

Releasing her wrists, I throw her to the bed hard enough that she nearly bounces off. "You don't like your nightgown?" My fingers close over the delicate satin an instant before I tear it.

She goes still all at once, her gasp almost as loud as the sound of ripped fabric. By the time I've finished, the gown is slit from bottom to top, bearing her trembling body to me. Fear

has tightened her nipples and caused her tits to heave, and God help me, I can't help but take hold of one and squeeze until she yelps.

"It didn't have to be this way." She doesn't fight this time as I strip her free of the gown and use it to tie her wrists to the heavy, wooden headboard. She settles for weeping quietly, shuddering when I cinch the torn satin.

"Please." Tears roll down her flushed cheeks, her body shaking hard enough to rattle the bedframe. "Don't hurt me. I know you're a nice person. You were so nice to me at the party."

Is that who she thinks I am? Some maniac she needs to flatter into sparing her? Knowing that only leaves me gritting my teeth against the diatribe I'd love to let loose. My body is all but vibrating in rage at being misunderstood and underestimated.

All but rejected.

There's something else, something I can't ignore. Her shaking, naked body, gleaming in the golden, midafternoon sunshine streaming through the windows beside the bed. Practically begging to be touched. Explored. Used for my pleasure.

My cock stirs to life while I stand over her. High-pitched whimpers have replaced her sobs, which makes her all the more appealing. Knowing how utterly under my control she is. Her life is mine.

I'm lowering my zipper before I know it. She jumps, feet sliding along the sheets like she wants to run. "Please, please, I'm sorry!" Her words fall on deaf ears. I'm too far gone now, lost in the promise of release. The past few days of thinking, imagining, and fantasizing have left my balls heavy, aching for relief.

"It doesn't have to be this way." I free myself and take a few strokes, eyes glued to her tits. Reaching out, I flick her nipples with my fingertips, gratified when she shudders with a

moan that sounds like it comes from dismay. Her body knows better, though, and she can't fight her reaction.

Fuck, what I want to do to her.

"You're lucky I'm a decent man," I mutter, stroking faster, my breath quickening while my free hand travels down the flat plane of her stomach. "I could hurt you now, if only because you tried to hurt me."

"I-I was only scared." She's barely whispering, her body as tight as a coiled spring.

"The only thing you should be afraid of is me abandoning you now since I'm all you have." When she won't part her legs, I simply shove my hand between them to cup her bare pussy. She cries out, biting her lip, fresh tears springing to her eyes.

"What's this?" I grunt, my strokes quickening once I find the treasure between her plump lips. "Getting wet for me?" Wet and smooth and hot, promising blissful oblivion. How I long to sink in deep, to forget everything in favor of memorizing her from the inside out. To bring her pleasure beyond her wildest dreams and hold her as she comes down from the dizzying height of ecstasy.

The mental images my desires bring to life leave precum dribbling onto my fingers. I use it, quickening my pace and sinking into the helplessness of my need. She does this to me. No one else has ever reduced me to this level of weakness.

There's nothing to do but give in, allowing the rush to come over me all at once. "Fuck... Winter... oh, yes..." I barely aim in time to explode across her creamy skin, painting it with one thick spurt after another. Pouring my need onto her, an offering of my undying devotion. Proof of the power she has over me.

And when it's over, and I can think clearly again, swaying slightly from the force of my release, her silent sobs add to my gratification. The score has been set. She knows now who's in control.

And fuck if she isn't the most ravishing thing I've ever set eyes on. Helpless, breathless, trembling. Wearing my cum. I ought to take a picture, but I'm not a heartless prick.

"Wait!" There's life in her voice once again when I turn away and head for the door while tucking myself into my pants. "You're leaving me like this?"

"This is for the best," I assure her as I step into the hall. "Trust me."

The closing of the door cuts off her breathless cry.

WINTER

WHAT DO I DO NOW?

There I was, thinking for the first few seconds after recognizing my captor that I was safe. Like if anybody had to kidnap me, he'd be the safest bet. I could laugh at myself now for being so naïve.

I'm in the hands of a maniac. He's out of his mind. Acting like I'm supposed to be happy about this? Tied to his bed, naked, unable to leave?

But he seemed so nice at the party. Like an actual, genuinely decent person. I can almost believe he didn't start trouble with management because it would make things awkward for me, and I guess he didn't have any way to get in touch.

Though it's not like that excuses what he's done.

Out of all the girls in the world, why would he do this to me? He seemed offended when I mentioned being a sex slave, but he can say anything he wants. He can pretend to be offended. Hell, he might actually be genuinely offended, for all I know.

But in the end, it doesn't matter. It's like buying a bag of chips and promising myself I'll only eat a few at a time. Obviously, there's going to come a moment when I break down and empty the whole damn bag while sitting in front of the TV.

It doesn't matter what my original intentions were. Eventually, everybody's self-control has a breaking point.

And considering he's already stripped me naked, tied me to his bed, and jerked off on me, I'd say his self-control is pretty thin.

He seemed so normal, too. Am I that bad a judge of character?

No point blaming myself. I need to think.

This is an extremely nice house from what I've seen so far, including my escape attempt. I'm not saying nice compared to my IKEA furniture, either. Nice by anybody's standards. A big, solid bed, buttery-soft sheets and blankets under me, an enormous closet to my right, and a marble bathroom to my left. Both doors are open so I can get a feel for the level of luxury this man lives in.

For Pete's sake, the closet looks like an upscale men's store. High ceilings with intricate molding, curtains at the windows that look like they could be silk. And a massive TV hanging across from the foot of the bed, underneath which is a fireplace.

I imagine curling up in bed like this, with a fire going on a cold night, would be pretty close to heaven.

If it was my choice to be here. That's a big caveat.

I don't know where I am geographically. I don't see a clock nearby, but the light coming through the window has that warm, amber glow that tells me it's late afternoon. It was late morning when I went to the employment agency. How long was I out? How much of the time was spent in travel?

I don't know, but I can find out. I just have to be careful, is all. If this guy is as wealthy as I suspect, he must have at least a couple of brain cells working. And I'm sure he'll be looking for any signs of a scheme now that I made a run for it.

The first order of business has to be getting him to let me wash up, then get dressed. I'm not going to stay naked all the time... or am I?

Nausea churns in my gut, and the only thing keeping me from letting go is the thought of how disgusting it would be, covered in not only a stranger's cum, but my own vomit.

Maybe I'd get especially lucky, and it would drip down and puddle under me. The cherry on top of a shit sundae.

Click!

The turning of the doorknob fills me with dread, making my already chilled skin pebble with goose bumps, and my legs clamp shut before I have the conscious thought to close them. *Please, please, don't let him hurt me. I'll do anything. I'll devote my life to the needy and even become a nun or something. I'd have to convert, but no big deal. Just please, God, don't let him hurt me.*

He's shamefaced, sheepish, and barely able to meet my gaze. "That was rude of me. And I'm sure it must have frightened you."

Does he have a fucking split personality? The audacity of coming in here and acting like it was all one big misunderstanding. *Oops, I accidentally spilled jizz all over your stomach while you were tied to my bed. These things happen.*

No harm in being honest. "It scared me."

He gives me the once-over and grimaces. Now that he's out of that coat, his muscular body is better displayed in a gray cable knit sweater that outlines his thick shoulders and arms. Not to mention his chest—I'm already familiar with its size and firmness.

"You need a bath. I'll draw one for you." Yet I notice he deliberately leaves me tied up while he does so. I can't blame him, though it would be pretty stupid of me to run while I'm naked. Still, he's being nice. I might be able to talk some sense to him.

It isn't long before the sound of running water turns to silence. I see him in there, bending over the tub, turning the taps before taking a few towels from a well-stocked closet. "I have a few other things for you—pajamas, sweats. I figured they would be forgiving since I don't know your size."

"Thank you." How insane is this? Thanking him when he kidnapped me. It's almost enough to bring tears to my eyes,

but I fight them back. I'm not going to give in to emotion when trying to save my own life.

And I thought I had problems before this?

Relief doesn't even begin to describe the feeling when he unties me, then leads me to the bathroom while I rub life back into my wrists and hands. "Thank you," I murmur again. "I can't remember the last time I had enough hot water to fill a tub." *That's right. Be quiet and very grateful.*

A warm smile transforms his already handsome face into something breathtaking. "You're welcome. It's nothing. From now on, you're going to have everything you need."

There he goes, sticking a dagger in my heart and souring the idea of a hot bath.

He sours it even worse by taking a seat on the edge of the tub after extending a hand to help me in. The tub is deep, the water up to my knees before I sit. I'm glad for the bubbles that cover me up. He's seen me naked, but that doesn't mean I have to be on display all the time.

"Once you're finished, I'll get you something to eat." He's not going anywhere. Dammit. I was hoping to relax and get my head on straight, but he needs to watch me. I don't think it's to make sure I stay put, either. Not when his eyes are half-narrowed, and his nostrils flare when his breathing picks up. And he didn't bring me here just for sex? I'm finding it hard to believe.

"I am pretty hungry," I admit. The water is so nice. If I could only enjoy it.

"You won't have to worry about that anymore. You won't have to worry about anything." His eyes soften, and I can almost believe he's the man I met at the hotel.

I might as well go for it. What's the worst he could do if he gets upset? Okay, considering I'm sitting in water, that might not be the best question. But we need to talk about this. "You're telling me you expect me to stay here with you all the time? Forever?"

"Yes. That's it."

“What about my life?”

“What life?” My eyelids flutter as I try to process this, and he must see where he went wrong. “Let’s be honest. You didn’t have much of a life. Deep in debt, unable to pay your rent. You were on the verge of being evicted on New Year’s Day.”

The water feels cold all of a sudden. “How did you know that?”

“You were carrying your wallet when I caught up to you.” He lifts a thick shoulder. “I ran your information while you were sleeping.”

And I thought I felt violated before. I can’t keep from trembling, though I’m trying my best to hide my true feelings. Like the way I want to jump out of this tub and claw his eyes out and maybe hold him under the water.

“I’m telling you, Winter. All your troubles are over. Whatever you want—a car, clothes, travel, hobbies. They’re all yours for the taking.” He leans in conspiratorially. “No more having to put up with assholes like Josh Crawley. You can tell them all to get fucked.”

Alright, that sounds tempting. But at the expense of my freedom? “I’m used to being able to make my own choices.”

“I’d think you’d be happy to hand all that over to someone else—and don’t get me wrong, it isn’t as if I’ll decide what you wear and who you get to spend time with. So long as they aren’t men,” he adds, his voice going a little darker with deeper meaning.

I need to do something so I don’t have to look at him and show how horrible this makes me feel. Washing up is the only option, so I do that as quickly as possible.

“You seem unhappy.”

The guy’s a genius, isn’t he? “I didn’t get a say in any of this. Sorry if I need time to adjust.” That’s by far the nicest thing that comes to mind. He doesn’t want to hear the rest of what I’m thinking.

“You’ll see.” He stands and unfolds a huge, fluffy bath sheet. “Once you get used to being taken care of, it’ll be clear this was for the best. Soon, you won’t be able to remember how bad things were when we met.”

Somehow, I doubt it.

I also doubt he’ll let me sit here forever, so I stand and use the handheld tub attachment to rinse my skin before stepping out, where he wraps me in the enormous towel. The man has no connection to reality. How am I supposed to get through to somebody so deep in denial?

What is the rest of my life going to look like?

“What’s the matter?” he murmurs when I snifle. I can’t help it—no matter how I fight it, the tightness in my chest has to loosen somehow, and this is how my body’s chosen to do it.

“I didn’t ask for this.” I can barely whisper from shaking so hard, and it’s probably a mistake to tell the truth, but it hurts even worse to pretend.

“You didn’t have to.” His hands move over me with the towel between them and my skin. “I knew the moment I set eyes on you that this is where you belong.”

He turns me in place, scowling down at what must be my red face and swollen eyes. “Why is it so impossible to get through to you? You’re young, but you didn’t strike me as stupid.”

“I’m not stupid.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m not, dammit.” When his eyes widen, I wish I could take it back. This is not a man to push too far.

And I think I have.

His already dark eyes go black, the hands that were so gentle a moment ago now tightening around my shoulders. “I’m not so sure about that.” He pushes me hard, backing me out of the room with my feet slipping on the marble, into the bedroom. I land on the bed with a thud, my heart pounding, a scream threatening to burst out of me.

Only instead of tying me down like he did before, he drops to his knees and spreads my legs. The more I try to keep them closed, the more determined he is about parting them. “Don’t you know better by now?”

He’s right. I do. I know there’s no point in fighting. He’s going to take what he wants.

The scruff on his cheeks is rough against my inner thighs, in a good way. I might even enjoy it if the circumstances were different. “Is this what I have to do to show you what you mean to me?”

I can barely hold back a whimper of... what? Anger? Dismay?

Arousal? Because here’s the thing—stroking my legs, pressing his lips to my inner thighs, lapping at them— what he’s doing to me feels good. All I can do is lie here, staring at the ceiling, questioning everything I thought I knew about myself when telltale heat spreads through my core, moistening my pussy.

His throaty chuckle tells me he notices the change. “At least some part of you knows what’s best for it.”

My body freezes up when he parts my lips with his fingers, but dammit, I can’t bring myself to tell him to stop. Not when his breath feels so exquisite against my sensitive flesh.

His ragged breathing betrays his excitement. “So pretty. Pink and fresh and sweet.” His thumb circles my clit, and, God help me, there’s no silencing the moan that stirs deep in my chest. I’m too weak. I don’t stand a chance when he’s determined to break me down with his skillful touch.

“Don’t be stubborn,” he mutters, and even the tiny vibrations from his lips make my toes curl. “Admit what you want. Take it. It’s yours. I’m yours.” I barely register what he’s saying when the way he plays with me leaves me panting, my traitorous body straining against his tongue as he swirls it through my slickness.

He’s right. My body knows what it wants; what it wants more than anything right now is pleasure. Release.

The flat of his tongue travels the length of my slit, delving in deep, parting my inner folds, and invading my entrance, pushing in deep. When I seize up, my back arching against this new burst of sensation, he rewards me by slowly, rhythmically fucking me, going as deep as his tongue can reach.

His greedy little noises, his grunts and moans, touch an even deeper place inside me. They bring me to life, waking me up to something more intense, darker than mere pleasure. Hearing him, the way he clearly gets off on tasting me. The word *erotic* isn't one I've ever used when it comes to myself, but it's the word that comes to mind as I begin to writhe because I can't help it, I can't stay still, this feels too good to hold back.

He chuckles against me when I lift my hips, rolling them, and he responds by withdrawing from my cunt—only to replace his tongue with one finger, then two. Now he can go deeper. Now he can stroke my walls while using his tongue on the bundle of nerves threatening to kill me here and now. It's aching, pulsing, demanding.

Little by little, one stroke at a time, he strips me of my resolve, of any ounce of strength I had against what is so clearly unfolding. I'm helpless, moaning with abandon now, the pleasure intensifying with every skillful, deliberate lick, with every pressing of his fingers against my inner walls. My head rolls from side to side as an unintelligible string of moans pours out of me.

The pressure builds and builds, my hips bucking frantically, hands sliding over the satin sheets, pleasure flooding my system. It's coming, I know it is, I feel it, and as much as a small part of me still doesn't want to give him my orgasm, a much bigger part of me needs to. Right now.

“Oh God,” I moan, my body tensing, my legs closing around his head. When he clamps his lips around my clit and sucks it up between them, that's it. I'm gone.

My hips shoot up from the bed while my thighs clamp tight around his head as I scream it out—bliss, yes, relief, release.

But there's more, too, so much more. Everything that's inside me. Confusion, anger, frustration with myself and with him and the situation, all of it pours out of me as the waves of bliss roll on and on until, finally, I'm left sinking into deep, dark oblivion

And I welcome it. I welcome the escape, however brief it may be.

His low chuckle rumbles through me, his mouth still locked onto my pussy. Now he slowly, carefully licks me clean, swirling his tongue around like he wants to catch every last drop, moaning like he's consuming a delicacy he's craved for far too long. Is this for real? Does he truly feel that way?

Why me?

That question lingers longest, still with me when I open my eyes, and the world comes rushing back. My cheeks are damp with tears I didn't realize were falling. Now I know what it must feel like to live through a tornado because that's how I feel. Like my whole world has been shaken up and I don't know where to start putting it back together.

"See?" He lifts his head, wearing a shit-eating grin. If the word self-satisfied had a physical form, he'd be it. "Once you get out of your own way, you know what you want. All you have to do now is take it."

I'm too ashamed and confused to do anything but close my eyes and turn my face away. He leaves me like that, letting out a knowing little chuckle as he walks toward the door. "Why don't you rest while I get you something to eat? And drink—your throat must be sore from all that screaming."

He didn't have to sound so smug about it. Like this is exactly how he knew it would go.

"And by the way." The teasing note is gone from his voice now. "Your apartment is gone. Your few possessions are gone. It's time to start building a new life."

At least I manage to wait until he's out of the room before I start crying again.

WARREN

“TODAY?” WINTER’S EYEBROWS SHOOT UP IN SURPRISE AT MY announcement. “You want to go to the mall today, of all days?”

“Why not?”

“It’s Christmas Eve,” she reminds me as if I had forgotten.

“What about it?” The fact is, she’s taking longer to warm up to our arrangement than I expected. I’m not a fool. I knew it would take her a little bit of time to adjust, but it’s been three days, and I can barely get her to say more than two words at a time.

She does seem to like the Christmas decorations in the house, though—she sits by the tree for hours, sometimes simply staring at it while wearing a wistful expression. I thought a trip to the mall might brighten her spirits, not to mention confirming I meant it when I said I would take care of her. That she can have everything she wants. The world is hers for the taking.

“But what about...” Her mouth clamps shut, but it’s too late. I know what she’s thinking. She can’t hide anything from me, which she’ll figure out soon enough.

“I sent your old clothes out with my laundry.” I place the stack of neatly folded items on the bed. “Get dressed. As for whether this is safe, let me remind you that you have nowhere else to go, and even if you were to find a security guard in the mood to do his job, who would they believe?”

She winces, and I'm sorry for saying it, but it's the truth. The sooner she figures it out, the easier it will be for both of us.

It kills me a little that she's still thinking this way. About escape. What more can I give her? If I went from the verge of eviction to a mansion and the adoration of someone willing to give me everything, I doubt I'd consider running away.

I lead her to the Mercedes and ensure she's securely strapped in before taking my place behind the wheel. "When was the last time you went shopping without checking the price tags?"

"I think it was so long ago, I didn't know what price tags actually meant," she admits with a snort.

"That ends now." She only nods slowly, staring out the windshield. If this trip isn't enough to convince her how serious I am, I do have one final trick up my sleeve. That's her Christmas gift, one she's entirely unaware of.

Naturally, I imagined the mall being busy today, and I make a mental note to keep a tight hold on her in case she gets any big ideas. This is no everyday mall, anyway. "Would you believe it if I told you I own the place? Or rather, the company that owns the place?"

"Really?"

"Everyone told me it was a useless purchase." I get out of the car, then help her out, taking her hand and walking beside her to the door of one of the mall's many high-end shops. "I mean, malls are going the way of the dodo anymore. What too many people forget is shoppers want an experience."

And stepping through the doors and into a veritable wonderland is an experience. Winter stops short, her mouth falling open as she takes in the elaborate décor I insisted all of the stores adopt, overriding the advice from their corporate offices. Lavish trees, swags of evergreen boughs, and golden stars galore. "It's beautiful."

"And it's your playground. Not just this store, either." I figured this was the best place to start, a department store

where she could find just about everything she needed. Her eyes widen as we stroll through the lingerie section, and I find her casually checking price tags as we pass.

“I told you. You don’t have to worry about that. You see it, you like it, it fits? It’s yours.”

“You don’t really mean that.”

“Don’t tell me what I don’t mean. I just told you I own this mall. You think I can’t afford a shopping spree at Neiman Marcus?”

After a few minutes, she loosens up, reluctantly pulling a few items from the racks and holding them up against herself, biting her lip. I watch with amusement while knowing deep down inside, she’s as excited as any reasonable person would be at the idea of having free rein.

Before long, a shopper’s assistant carries items to a dressing room for Winter to try on while a small stack of shoeboxes waits for us at the cash register. Everything she picks up makes her think of two more items she needs. I’m not about to stop her when she can’t stop smiling.

“We’ll have a nice dinner at home tonight.” I nod toward the section containing ladies’ dresses and formalwear. “Pick out something pretty for yourself. Whatever you want.”

She heads in that direction, and I can tell she’s simply itching to check the prices but manages to hold herself back in favor of perusing the different styles. “What do you like? I want to wear something you’ll like.”

“I’d like you in absolutely nothing.” The flush that colors her cheeks and how she averts her eyes tell me that wasn’t the right thing to say. I can’t let frustration get the better of me now. She’ll come around. She has no choice.

“What about this?” I ask, choosing a dress at random. Now that I take a serious look at it, it seems like it would suit her. The shining silver fabric will flow over her like liquid metal.

“That’s beautiful.” She reaches for it, testing the softness, before finding her size. “I’d like to try this on if that’s okay.”

“Of course, it is.” I begin to follow her to the dressing room—and when she notices, she stops short.

“You’re coming in with me?” Her eyes dart back and forth, her voice a shocked whisper.

“What do you think?”

“I think the people who work here might think that’s weird.”

“I don’t think they’ll care—and I know I don’t.”

When I try to nudge her forward, she bites her lip, still looking around. “I think I have to go to the bathroom.”

“You think?” I take one step closer, looming over her. “Or you thought you’d be able to get out of here without me?”

“No, that’s not it!” Her flushed cheeks and the fact that she won’t meet my gaze tell me otherwise.

Everything around me goes red. What do I have to do? How many hoops does she expect me to jump through? “Come here.” With my hand around her elbow, she doesn’t have much choice but to fall in line. A couple of the stalls are occupied, but the doors are closed. Nobody notices me dragging the panicked, trembling girl holding the silver dress into the room awaiting her.

“I’m sorry—” I cut her off with a hand over her mouth once the door is locked behind us. Her eyes fly open wide, and her body goes stiff with fear once I’ve pushed her up against the wall.

“Why do you keep pushing me?” I ask in a tight whisper, aware we aren’t strictly alone. “Have I done anything but try to make you happy? What will it take to show you how serious I am?”

The strangled cries behind my hand tell me she’s no closer to calming down than before. Rather than remove it, I thrust the other beneath her thin sweater, using my body to hold her in place.

She wriggles against me, arms caught between us. The girl is helpless. How far do I need to go before she understands

that?

“Keep trying to fight.” My fingers work beneath her bra cup, where I find her already tight nipple and pinch until tears fill her eyes. “It turns me on. And you’ll be the one who’s embarrassed if anybody finds us. I have too much money to give a fuck.”

The fight drains from her as the truth of this sinks in.

That’s not what makes my cock stand at attention. It’s the way she’s begun to melt into my touch. The way she shivers when I lower my head to run my lips over her throat. Fuck, she smells like cotton candy and vanilla. Good enough to eat.

Not a bad idea, but I’m not in the mood to play. She’s pushed me too far. Eating her pussy would be the same as rewarding her for defying me—the girl nearly drowned me the first time, she came so hard. Now isn’t the time to show her all the toe-curling things I can do to her body.

Though I expect her toes to curl, just the same.

“Now, here’s what’s going to happen.” I slide my hand down the length of her torso before moving down to take hold of her ass and yank her close. The bulge between our bodies leaves no room for doubt.

The same goes for her sharp gasp when I rub myself against her. “I’m going to fuck you. Here, in this dressing room. And you are going to stay very, very quiet, or else we’ll be discovered, and this will become a Christmas you’ll never forget, but not for a nice reason. Got it?”

I don’t give her a chance to answer, not that it matters. She doesn’t exactly get a say in this.

A woman walks past on the other side of the door while another starts a conversation on her cell. I, meanwhile, lift my hand from Winter’s mouth and thrust my tongue between her lips. She tastes even better than she smells, sweet enough that I could be satisfied doing nothing but kiss her all day, all night. Every inch of her is something to be indulged in, appreciated, and worshiped thoroughly.

She's panting for air by the time I lift my head again, her eyes half-closed, her expression dazed. I've got her where I want her, even if she refuses to admit it. "First, you're going to show me how sorry you are for rejecting my generosity." By the time she understands what I'm doing, I've already pushed her halfway to her knees.

It's no use fighting—she's no match for my strength. "But—" She cuts a brief, terrified look toward the door. It's the kind that ends a foot above the floor, meaning anyone who pays attention will see someone kneeling in front of a pair of feet. It wouldn't take a rocket scientist to put two and two together.

As if I care. "You should've thought of that." My cock is aching to be free, especially now that she's so utterly at my mercy, clearly afraid of what happens if we're caught. Never breaking eye contact, I lower my zipper and slowly free myself.

"Now." With one hand on the back of her head, I hold her still while feeding her my bulging head. "You're going to be a good girl and suck this until I'm satisfied." I drag the tip over her lips, and the sight of it alone is almost enough to make my knees buckle.

Yet it's when I pull her head forward and give her no choice but to part her lips and accept me, I have to struggle against a deep moan. She's here, exactly where I fantasized about having her: on her knees, completely at my mercy, with no choice but to pleasure me.

She's struggling, though, hands batting my thighs when I drive myself deep into her mouth and bump the back of her throat. I'm not particularly in the mood for kindness, leaving me to ignore her panicked attempts at making me back off in favor of pushing even deeper until she gags and convulses.

This is what she deserves after what she did.

A single moment of eye contact when I slam against her throat again tells me she understands. I don't need to speak the words aloud. This is her punishment, right down to the tears

rolling down her cheeks. Having her face fucked as if she means nothing. Being used for my pleasure.

And this is pleasurable, oh, yes. “Good girl,” I breathe, closing my eyes and allowing myself the luxury of focusing on the feel of her lips around me, her tongue sweeping along the underside of my shaft, the increased pressure in response to my increasingly rapid thrusts. Her choked cries of panic only egg me on, giving me no choice but to hold her head tighter than ever and treat her to a flurry of punishing strokes that make her face go red and her eyes bulge.

I’m losing myself.

I’m already lost.

And if this doesn’t stop, I’m going to come. There’s no helping my regretful moan as I fall free of her swollen lips, glistening with her saliva. I haul her to her feet when it’s clear she’s too dazed to do it on her own. The girl looks like she has no idea which way is up—panting for air, even leaning into me.

Her tits heave against my chest in time with her ragged, strangled breathing. Our breath mingles between us, hot, while I work her jeans down to her ankles.

It’s when she kicks off her shoes that she reveals her true feelings. She’s not fighting anymore. No, she’s making it easier. I doubt she’s doing it to make me happy.

She wants this. Her heart is racing not because she wants to fight but because she wants to fuck. She wants to come, and she knows I can make that happen. Probably better than anyone ever has.

This is a first for me, taking a woman against a wall in a dressing room. I can’t pretend public play is something I’m familiar with. No matter what I’ve told Winter, I don’t make a habit of getting my name in the tabloids. I have to be careful.

She makes me want to throw caution to the wind. And damn, the hint of danger really does heat things up. We could be discovered at any time—I locked the door, but one of the staff could unlock it if they thought it was necessary. By the

time my fingers probe Winter's hot pussy and come back nearly dripping wet, I'm so hard it hurts.

"You're soaked." She lowers her gaze, embarrassed, but her eyes meet mine again when I give her pussy a sharp little slap. "Naughty girl. If I didn't know better, I'd think you like this."

"Please..."

"Shh..." I warn when she whimpers, helpless to hide her excitement. "Don't want to get caught."

I could cry with relief once I drag my head between her slick lips. I can imagine them glistening and how delicious they'd be under my tongue. She'd writhe the way she was writhing against me now, sawing her hips back and forth like she was possessed, the friction against her clit already enough to make her eyes roll back.

But when I find her entrance and push forward, her body goes still, her sharp gasp ringing in my ears. I go still, too, almost afraid I hurt her.

I only possess so much self-control, and oh fuck, she's tight. I work my way out an inch or two before working back in again, fighting the impulse to come all at once. To fill her with my seed, mark her as mine, claim her forever. To set the rules, once and for all.

Instead, I wait for her to relax a little rather than giving her greedy pussy what it clearly craves. Now it's easier to move, and I do, moving her along with me. She slides up and down the wall with every deep stroke, her arms around my shoulders, legs wrapped around my hips.

"If I didn't know better," I whisper, my mouth nearly touching hers, "I'd think you wanted this all along." She closes her eyes and turns her face away, so I settle for running my lips and tongue over her throat.

Let her pretend all she wants. Every thrust undoes her will a little more, bringing her a little closer to me, to where I need her to be. I know her resolve is about to shatter, and the

thought leaves me pounding her pussy until she buries her face in my neck and moans.

The sound, the tightening of her tunnel, the danger we're in—it all comes together and leaves me barely hanging on by a thread, holding on only for her sake, wanting her to come with me. And she's so fucking close, practically snapping my cock off as she approaches the inevitable.

I'm close to grunting in pain when she tightens unbearably, then coats my cock and balls in a flood of warmth that sends me over the edge. A few deep, hard thrusts and I'm gone, lost in the sweet rush of release.

For a single, breathless moment, there's nothing in the world but the two of us. The rest of the world? What does it matter? I wouldn't care if we did get caught, wrapped up in each other, both of us grunting and panting like animals as we come down from the dizzying height of pleasure.

I knew it would be good. I didn't know it would be this good.

Slowly, reluctantly, I pull out. The thought that she might become pregnant from this is a thrill I couldn't have predicted. My chest swells in pride at the very idea. Talk about the ultimate claim.

"Now. Let's get your things together, pay, and get out of here." No, she didn't try on a single thing, but what's the difference? It's not like I can't afford to buy more. "Will you be a good girl and cooperate?"

"Yes." She pulls up her jeans, buttons them, then checks out her flushed, ruffled reflection in the mirror. Mine, all mine. I'm already looking forward to taking her again. This time, I'll have her suck me first. The idea makes me smile—and my smile widens when I catch her checking me out in the mirror.

"Are you ready?"

"Mm-hmm." She won't look me in the eye. Because I've fucked her into submission or because she's ashamed over drenching my dick like she did? As long as I live, I'll carry

with me the memory of making her fall to pieces in spite of herself.

“Try not to look so guilty,” I murmur before peering out, the door open a crack. The coast is clear. “Okay. Let’s go.”

She’s like a different person.

Nobody looking at her now would know what I know, that my cum is leaking from her pussy even as our purchases are rung up. That I’ve claimed her, finally. Fully.

There’s something more, something I doubt Winter would admit under threat of death. It’s no less true, though, for all her denial.

She loved every second of it.

WINTER

AS SOON AS WE'RE BACK AT THE HOUSE, I TAKE MY BAGS AND head upstairs without saying a word to Warren. I don't know what to say, anyway. It's like he can't help but come up with new ways to make me question myself.

"Dinner is at seven thirty," he calls after me. You'd never know what he just did. I don't even get an apology.

I should hate him after what he did back there in that dressing room. It was humiliating and scary at times. Yet one more reminder of his control over me, how what I want doesn't matter.

But in the end, it was the same as before, when he went down on me. I wanted him, wanted what he was giving me. It was torture not being able to scream out how good it felt and how much I loved it.

This is not who I thought I was. What else do I not know about myself?

I can't think about anything right now but how much I want to get in the bathtub and scrub myself clean, though I doubt there's enough soap in the world strong enough to clean my conscience. I should not want this. I shouldn't crave his touch.

Yet as I fill the tub and strip off my clothes, all I can remember is the thrill of it. How hard I came.

How I can't wait until it happens again and again.

I can't make sense of this. On the one hand, as I slide into the tub and surround myself with bubbles, I think back on the man I met at the hotel and how kind he was, that instant attraction I felt. That attraction is still there. I can't deny it. Something about the chemistry between us and what happens when he touches me is special. I know it.

If only he didn't go about things this way. That's the problem. This could all be different if he had pursued me instead of kidnapping me. There wouldn't be this lingering sense of wrongness. I wouldn't still feel like I have to hold myself back. I could let myself enjoy without the crippling sense of guilt like I'm betraying myself.

Instead of enjoying it almost against my will, like I did back at the store.

I close my eyes and lean back, a towel folded behind my head, and lose myself in the memory. The vague soreness between my legs leaves me thinking back to how hard he took me, relentless, like every stroke was a reminder of who I belong to. What I was meant for, and how hopeless it is to fight what's inevitable.

I sigh, hands sliding over my soapy breasts, while a familiar tingling sensation begins building in my pussy. I tease myself a little, playing with my nipples the way Warren did. When I close my eyes, I can almost imagine it's him, his hands, his touch sending delicious shivers through me with every caress.

But he didn't stop there, did he? And I don't plan to, either, slipping my right hand under the water, trailing it down my stomach, stroking my inner thighs. A soft sigh escapes my parted lips and echoes through the room before it's replaced with a sharp gasp at even the briefest brush against my swollen lips. I'm already so heated.

Just like he did it, I circle my clit, pinching my nipple with the other hand and barely stifling a moan. He knows exactly what will make me feel good, doesn't he? Just how to touch me. Just where.

When I briefly open my eyes and land on the handheld attachment, a new idea takes root. It only takes a moment to figure out how to work it, and in no time, there's a strong, steady jet shooting from the center of the round head.

I dip it into the water, spreading my legs wider, placing that jet directly against my clit. Immediately, fireworks explode behind my eyelids. I was close as it was, but this is beyond anything I've ever been able to achieve with my fingers alone.

"Warren..." I moan, seeing him in front of me, imagining it's his tongue, his fingers, the blissful sensations stretching out until I don't know if I'm coming again or if I never stopped. My body is so hungry, starved for so long of satisfaction, of pleasure. It was never something I could afford to think about.

Now, there's nothing for me to do but sit in this tub and make myself come over and over, replaying every moment of our dressing room encounter. My skin's flushed, my breathing rapid and ragged. So dirty, so wrong—but there's no pretending my body doesn't respond to the memory.

My fingers are no replacement for Warren's monster of a dick, but I remember what he did with his fingers the first day I was here and mimic the way he curled them, stroking me. Is this my G-spot? All I know is the sensations climb to an almost unbearable intensity. It's almost scary, and my instinct is to stop, but something deeper makes me go on. I have to trust myself.

"Oh yes," I whisper when I can't hold it in anymore, working my clit with my other hand while I plunge deeper, deeper inside myself, massaging my wall. The rest of my body goes still, like every ounce of my focus is trained on the unbearable sweet sensations.

"*Come for me.*" I hear him in my head, and I moan in response as if he's here with me, and there's no choice but to do just that.

I give myself over to it, and it hits me hard, slamming into me with all the force of a hurricane, shaking my body and soul

until there's nothing left to do but whimper and tremble and ride out the waves as long as I can, extending it with the help of the high-pressure jet against my nipples while I rub my lips, hips jerking spasmodically as one aftershock after another rolls over me.

Finally, it's too much. I sigh in sheer contentment, the thrill still fresh, a deep sense of satisfaction starting from my very soul and working its way through me.

I'm not crazy. I know what Warren did is technically wrong, that I shouldn't want him and shouldn't be grateful for every experience he's given me. Well, beyond scaring me shitless during the whole stalking thing.

But now I know I can forgive him for that because look at what he's given me. Not just incredible sex, but freedom. Freedom to explore myself without fear. Freedom to live the sort of life I never imagined possible. No more ducking the landlord, no more robbing Peter to pay Paul and just barely scraping by. From the very beginning, he saw something in me that he liked. That he wanted. I can't pretend I didn't feel the same about him, but as far as I was concerned, he was about as accessible as a mansion like the one I'm in now, as going on a no-holds-barred shopping spree in a store I would never have stepped foot in prior to today.

Now that I know what's real and that he doesn't want to hurt me—he only wants me to be happy—I can see things through different eyes.

I know what I want now. I want more of this. More pleasure, more freedom. I want what only he can give me.

It's all so clear.

Once my body is a little less shaky, and there's a better chance of being able to get out of the tub without falling over, I rinse myself off and step out feeling like a brand-new woman. This is more than simply the effect of a startlingly strong orgasm... though that didn't hurt.

This is clarity for the first time in my life. Knowing exactly what I want and how to get it.

He wants to have a special Christmas Eve dinner tonight?
Then that's exactly what we'll have.

I eye the bags in the bedroom as I dry off, a wicked smile
touching my lips.

I hope he's ready for it.

WARREN

“THANKS FOR SENDING THAT INFORMATION OVER.” I GLANCE out the door to my study, making sure Winter is nowhere around. I don’t want to ruin the surprise. “And as you know, I’ll show my appreciation in your holiday bonus.”

I’m damn near elated when I end the call with my assistant. It isn’t that I didn’t trust things would go well, but I wanted to be sure before I presented Winter’s gift that everything was in place. I wouldn’t want to get her hopes up prematurely.

Everything is set for dinner. I do wish I could trust her enough to take her out, but I’ve never had a bad experience with the company I called in for our private meal. Frankly, it isn’t the food I’m most interested in, anyway. All I want is to spend every minute with her, no matter what we’re doing.

Who am I kidding? After what was supposed to be punishment turned into the two of us using each other in that dressing room, all I want is more of her body. I always knew it would be good once we fucked, but I had no idea. Not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined it being like that. Beyond hot, beyond thrilling and satisfying. It was almost like fucking for the first time, a completely new experience thanks to the joy of witnessing her come alive in my hands as I moved inside her.

There I was, imagining I’d open her world, wake her up to new experiences. She’s doing the same for me, giving me a new appreciation for just about every aspect of life.

She was adamant about being left alone to get ready, and now I'm waiting while our dinner keeps warm in the oven. My anticipation is unbearable but in the best way. Like the anticipation of waiting for Christmas morning.

It's seven-thirty on the dot when her footsteps echo downstairs. I finish pouring wine for the two of us in the dining room, then turn, holding the glasses, prepared to offer her one.

A mistake, since the sight of her leaves me close to dropping both. I have to put them down, or else I'll do just that.

"Do I look alright?" The uncertainty in her voice is touching and charming. And completely unnecessary. I knew the silver dress would be perfect for her, and it is, setting off her icy beauty to perfection while displaying her perfect body like it was made solely for her. She tucks a strand of golden hair behind one ear, offering a shy grin.

I finally realize she's waiting for an answer while I've been standing here in mute admiration. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"You're just saying that."

"Winter, you need to know something about me. I never just say anything. You're enough to take my breath away."

She's never more beautiful than when she blushes. "Well, you bought the dress."

"But it's all about the way you wear it." And the way I cannot wait to take it off her, but that will come in due time. "Please, have a drink with me."

"It smells amazing in the kitchen." She accepts the wine, and her hand trembles a bit when she does.

"Are you still afraid of me?" I hold my breath, waiting for the answer.

"No. Really," she insists at my skeptical look. "No, I'm not scared. And if I'm nervous, it's in a good way."

"For what reason?"

“I wanted to apologize for trying to run off on you earlier. That was wrong, and I’m not just saying it. I mean it. I’ll never do that again.”

The frank sincerity in the way she says it gives me hope. “You mean it?”

“I’m not going to pretend it wasn’t fun getting punished.” Her eyes sparkle, and God, it does something to me. She awakens every possessive, protective instinct I have, just as she did when I first set eyes on her. When I knew she was something special.

“I only want to make you happy. I’ll devote my life to it, if you’ll let me.”

“I’ll let you.” Even in heels, she has to stand on tiptoe to give me a soft, sweet kiss that threatens to make me forget all about dinner in favor of taking her upstairs—or right here in the dining room. She’s smiling when she pulls away and drops down to her normal height. “I’m yours.”

My heart is so full, I hardly know what to do. Is this what I’ve been missing out on all this time? The give and take? Because I see now it isn’t only about what I can do for her. It’s about the joy of her accepting what I want so much to give. I finally get it. And that’s her gift to me, one I know I’ll take with me the rest of my life.

Yet there are other, just as pleasurable gifts. “I have something for you. I was going to wait until tomorrow morning, but I can’t. I’m looking forward to it too much to wait any longer.”

“You already gave me so much today.”

“This is a different sort of gift.”

“I can’t imagine anything to top all of this.” Her big blue eyes take in the lavishly decorated dining room. In keeping with the rest of the house, there’s a sparkling tree in one corner that’s bright enough to nearly light the entire room without the help of the overhead chandelier.

It’s foreign to me. Warmth I eschewed before now. Before her.

I never had a reason to decorate or to commemorate the holiday.

She turns to me, wearing a sly look. “Did you put up all these decorations yourself?”

“The truth?”

“Please.”

She giggles when I shake my head. “No. I don’t normally decorate the house for the holidays. It’s only me, after all, and I’m usually busy with travel, anyway. This year’s...”

I look up at the shining monstrosity and am unable to hold back a smile. “It seemed appropriate. I had something to celebrate, finally.”

“I’m honored, really.”

“You honor me.”

The beginnings of a sly grin stir at the corners of her pink, glossy lips. “Okay, the suspense is killing me. What’s this gift you were talking about?”

I dip a hand into my back pocket and pull out my phone, where the articles my assistant sent await her to read. “I made a promise to a certain someone the night we met. Mind you, I had already planned to work my magic and take his company before that night ever came, but his actions made me more determined than ever. I wasn’t going to stop at taking his company. I decided to destroy him.”

She takes the phone from me, frowning as she reads. “I don’t understand. Disgraced CEO arrested on charges of fraud?”

“Your friend from the party. Josh Crawley.” I scroll down until I reach another pertinent quote in the article. “As you can see, he’s not doing so well. Turns out a little digging uncovered a lot of improprieties by Mr. Crawley. I figured I would get him on buried sexual assault allegations or something like that, but it was actually much easier. He didn’t cover his tracks very well. And I have very good accountants who know what to look for.”

“He’s going to prison?” she whispers, her eyes perfectly round as she skims the article. “Seriously?”

“Once he goes to trial, I’m certain of it. The law doesn’t take kindly to embezzlers. But then again, what’s he got to live for right now? I took his business, as well.”

“Just like that?”

“Like I said, I had the pieces in place. You added incentive, is all.”

“You did this because of me?”

“That’s my point. This is barely scratching the surface of what I would do for you.” I gently remove the phone from her grasp, bringing her attention back to me. Fuck, she is the most beautiful creature ever born. I never thought I would know joy like this, the simple joy of making someone happy, caring for and protecting them. “I would bring you the heads of your enemies on a silver platter if you asked. That man hurt you, and he did it with impunity. Now, he’ll have a nice, long prison stint to think it over.”

I take her face in my hands, marveling at her softness, the luscious scent of her hair, her sparkling blue eyes. She glows in the lights from the tree—but it’s inside her, as well. That certain something that makes her unique. The beauty she holds inside, radiating from her and knocking me to my knees.

“Is there anybody else whose life you need me to ruin? I could get addicted to it.” I am already addicted to her.

She laughs softly as if in disbelief. “I don’t know what to say. Is it wrong that I’m really, really happy?”

“That’s how I hoped you’d be. For the record, I plan on renaming the company, as well. The name Winter comes to mind.” Her gasp makes me laugh. “What, too heavy-handed? Naming the company after you?”

“Are you kidding?” She throws her arms around my neck, laughing, and I’m laughing as I wind my arms around her slim waist and pull her close.

“Anything for you,” I whisper in her ear before skimming the lobe with my lips. “Anything, always.”

“Anything?” She pulls back a little, and I think I could learn to love that devilish smile she wears. “So you wouldn’t mind if we left dinner in the oven for a little while longer?”

She said the magic words. Now my cock is intensely interested. “What did you have in mind?” I murmur while he comes to life in anticipation.

“What do you think?” She reaches down, sliding a hand between us, and cups me.

I can’t help but groan at her touch. We’ll have so much fun together—and right now, I don’t care whether we ever eat dinner. “If that’s the way you thank me, remind me to ruin anybody who’s ever wronged you.”

“And he was very, very nasty.” The pressure she applies is enough to make me groan. “I have a lot to thank you for.”

“And you are very, very good at showing your gratitude, aren’t you?” She purrs like a kitten when I run a hand over her silky hair. “My good girl. Which room do you want to christen first?”

“This is a very big house,” she points out with a giggle, squeezing me a little.

“Hell, we have all night.” And the rest of our lives. “Though if you don’t stop teasing me like that, it’s going to end a lot sooner than either of us wants.”

“You don’t want me to touch you?” Her lower lip juts out in a pout that, for some reason, goes straight to my already rock-hard cock, making it twitch and strain behind my zipper. She doesn’t need to put a finger on me. All I need is a look, a pout, the scent of her hair and her skin.

“I’m always going to want your hands on me.” My hands, meanwhile, are on her hips. Gripping, pulling, holding her in place. All the better to grind against her until her breath comes in short little gasps, hot against my face.

She moves with me as I back her into the table, parting her thighs to give me room between them. “I can’t think of a more perfect appetizer than what you have between these legs of yours.” I could live on the sweet, addictive nectar that flows so freely.

It’s flowing now, right now, her bald pussy lips slick and glistening once I work her dress up. No taking my time tonight. No working my way up to it. Not when I’m over the fucking moon now that she’s fully in this with me. Eagerly accepting my devotion.

“Greedy girl,” I mutter when she leans back, bearing her weight on her palms. I’d swear she wiggles a little. Enticing me. “Spread them wider. I want to see all of you.”

She’s pink and shining, her clit peeking out from beneath its hood. The lives I would destroy if it meant ownership of this pussy. The worlds I would burn to the ground. “Such a pretty pussy. Is it going to soak my face?”

“Only if you eat it right.” A devilish grin flashes over her angelic face, glowing in the light from the tree. She’s an angel. A naughty little angel, driving me wild with the sight and scent of her.

“I suppose I’ll have to do my best.” I lower myself to my knees, now at eye level with her pulsing hole. Every tremor of those muscles sends fresh juice oozing from her, running down her crack and already soaking into the tablecloth beneath her. I’m almost jealous of a tablecloth, catching what my tongue so desperately craves.

I’ll be damned if I let another drop go to waste.

“Oh... yes...” The throb of gratitude in her voice makes me want to give her so much more than a simple lap over her seam. She thinks that’s good? I bury my face in her in reply, driving my tongue deep inside her pulsing tunnel, digging out her sweet cream. Greedy, hungry, and driven onward by every deep moan.

“Give me more,” I urge, only lifting my mouth from her long enough to growl those three syllables before plunging

down once again. Feasting like the starving man I am. Starved for so long—of taste, of touch, of the satisfaction that only comes from giving.

Not typically the sort of giving one thinks of at this time of year, but it's a potent form of generosity just the same.

No one has ever been as worthy as the woman now writhing beneath me, gripping the edge of the table like she's afraid she'll fall off. A perfect angel. My angel, coming undone a little at a time. All thanks to me.

“Warren... oh, my God, yes...”

“Talk to me.” The two digits I slide into her wet heat make her back arch enticingly, tits thrust into the air. “Tell me how it feels.”

When I wrap my lips around her little clit, she nearly howls. “Oh, yes! So good. Suck it. Use your tongue.”

Holy fuck, I need to get a recording of her. It's one thing to think about her and remember how good it is, how she tastes and smells and feels. But nothing in this world could've prepared me for the way she sounds when she talks like this.

I do as I'm told, flicking the tip with my tongue while sucking as hard as I dare. Her hips buck wildly—I'm lucky I don't end up with a broken nose—but I manage to hold on while my cock drips enough to spread a wet spot across the front of my pants. I need to bury myself in her, but only once she's come. So she's rippling and pulsing once I drive in deep.

“Warren... Warren...” she nearly sobs. “Fuck me. Harder. I'm gonna come...!”

And then she does, letting out a high-pitched howl that rolls through me like a shock wave. The pride it inspires is like nothing I've ever known. The ability to tear her apart this way... it makes me feel like a king. Or at least like a lucky son of a bitch.

A lucky son of a bitch who waits until she's no longer screaming before withdrawing my fingers and inserting them into my mouth to savor every last bit. She opens her eyes, which widen in obvious pleasure at the sight of me enjoying

her. “I taste that good to you?” she finally whispers, still breathless and dazed.

“You are the sweetest thing that’s ever crossed my tongue.” I stand, working my belt and fly with trembling hands, my eyes glued to her pussy. “I’ll never get enough.”

We both gasp when I drag my head through her slit. Now she sits up partway, looking down, watching as I do. I don’t think either of us is breathing, both transfixed by the sight of my bulging head gliding through her wet folds.

Then I disappear, plunging inside where she’s still quivering. Her head falls back, mouth open, eyes closed. I reach out and yank down the top of her dress, leaving her full tits on display. Every deep thrust makes them bounce and holy shit, there’s never been anyone or anything hotter than she is right now. Lost in abandon, using and being used.

And milking my cock like both our lives depend on it.

With my arms around her thighs, I hold her still, close to me, driving myself into her again... again... shaking the table and everything on it. She cries out every time our bodies crash together, and that makes me move faster, makes me more determined to feel those muscles crush me as she comes. *What a way to go.*

“Who do you belong to?” I close a hand around her throat, and her body goes still for a moment before she responds by jerking her hips. Silently urging me to give her more. “Tell me.”

“You!” she manages to groan. “Only you!”

That’s right. Only me. Only ever me. Mine to taste, to touch, to fuck, to claim.

To love.

Yes, I love her. I love this hot, gorgeous, precious woman. Legs spread, tits bouncing, red-faced thanks to my hand clutching her throat but moving harder and faster, too, because she wants it. Because she is perfection.

I lose my rhythm toward the end, now eager to fill her with my cum, the silverware jangling in discordant music that blends with our mixed cries until she clamps down on me and my balls fairly burst, rope after rope of cum shooting out of me and into her. It's dizzying, it's ecstasy, it's everything. I have everything in the world, here and now, buried balls-deep inside this woman.

"I love you," I pant, falling against her when it's over. "I love you, Winter."

Her eyes are shining when I finally lift my head. "I love you, too," she whispers, shy suddenly. I might find it funny if it didn't feel like she just gave me the greatest Christmas gift imaginable.

Though as I shove my cum back inside her when it begins to drip out, it occurs to me there could be an even greater gift somewhere down the line. Perhaps by next Christmas, we'll have someone to spoil together.

The idea is enough to get my motor running again. "We've officially christened the dining room," I murmur, nuzzling her throat and smiling to myself at the idea of breeding her. "Where do you want to go next?"

MIDNIGHT KISSES

It's New Year's Eve and I would rather be anywhere but here,
stuck sharing a hotel room with my enemy.

Senior year of high school, he broke my heart, and I haven't
looked at him the same since.

Who cares if he's six feet tall, sexy as hell, and the CEO of the
company I just accepted a job for? I still hate him.

The silver lining—It's only one night, and then I never have to
see him again.

One night certainly can't change how I feel about him, right?

HARPER

“THEY ENDED UP COMING IN WITH AN OFFER OF TWENTY thousand more than I was hoping to negotiate for. Can you believe it? And they’re going to set me up in corporate housing until I can find something for myself. All I have to do now is come home and pack up. They want me to start the first full week of the new year.”

My hands are shaking hard enough that I’m afraid I’ll drop my phone as I stride into the lobby of the hotel where I’ll be spending the night. I splurged—a night at The Four Seasons isn’t usually something I’d ever consider, but this is New Year’s Eve, and it was tough enough to find a room in town to begin with.

You’d think this is the sort of news that would result in cheering. Instead, Mom snuffles. “So, that’s it? You’re going to be leaving us just like that?”

The customary fretful note in my mother’s voice tells me all I need to know. Not that I expected anything better—for somebody who makes a hobby of reminding me how kind she is to let me stay at home rent-free, she has a funny way of telling me whenever she has the chance of what a hassle it is to have me around long after everyone else my age has already moved out.

“It won’t be so bad,” I try to tease, dropping into a leather chair in the lobby. It’s busy, but there’s a pleasant feeling to it. Everybody’s in a hurry to either check-in or get their New Year’s partying on. It’s only mid-afternoon, but several of the

people passing by are dressed to the nines like they're on their way somewhere special.

I couldn't care less about that. Tonight, all I want to do is sleep. I haven't exactly slept well the past few nights; too nervous about this interview. Playing it out in my head like a script, rehearsing my answers to every possible question.

"You don't have me fooled," I tell her as I eye the front desk, which right now resembles a war zone. Maybe I'll wait until it calms down to get my key card. "Now you and Dad will have the whole house to yourself. You can turn my room into the library you always wanted."

"And what happens when you come back home? Where will you sleep then?"

Anyone else might assume she's talking about coming home for a visit, like over the holidays. I know better. She's convinced this is going to end in failure, that I'll get fired from my position at the firm, and I'll come home with my tail tucked between my legs. There's a big part of me that thinks that's exactly what she wants to happen. Just so she can say she was right.

"That's what air mattresses are for."

"Just promise me you won't do anything wild tonight. You don't know anybody out there."

"Since when do I ever get wild? I already told you I'm going to order room service and let everybody else ring in the new year without me." Besides, I already know my new year is going to be better than the old one and the one before that. I'm finally going to have the freedom I traded in for security. I'm grateful to my parents since, without them, I wouldn't have been able to go to school without working more than part-time.

I was able to save up a little money, too, hence this late holiday gift to myself. I could have driven the two hours home tonight—now I'm glad I didn't plan to do it since I'm at the brink of exhaustion without all that adrenaline flowing through me.

“Happy New Year,” I tell her. “And be sure to give Dad a kiss for me. I’ll see you tomorrow.” I have to end the call, or else she’ll find something else to complain about. I love her, I do, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t looking forward to only hearing her fretting and worrying over the phone instead of in person.

The front desk is still jumping, the phones ringing off the hook while guests are checking in. I’d wait it out a little longer, but I’m aching for a hot bath in the deep soaking tub. It was the photos of the tub that sold me on the hotel.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the clerk in front of me says to whoever’s on the phone. “We’re completely booked up tonight. You might try the Plaza, but last I heard, they were booked out, as well.”

At least I’ll make her job a little easier, smiling when she hangs up and turns my way. “My name is Harper Adams, and someone who works here was kind enough to stow my bag in the back room earlier. I got stuck in traffic and was late for my interview, so I didn’t have time to go up to the room.”

She looks relieved to know the issue is so easily managed. “Of course, no problem.” While I wait for her to fetch the bag, I can’t help feeling a little wistful. Part of me wishes I had something to do tonight, but this is totally new for me. I don’t have any friends here, and I wouldn’t know what to do if given the chance. Besides, I’m sure all the restaurants in town are booked solid.

She emerges with the bag and wheels it over to me. “And here’s your key card, Miss Adams,” she adds, handing over the card in an envelope with the number 812 written on the front.

“Thank you so much. And Happy New Year.”

She offers a brief smile before hurrying back to the phone, which of course, is ringing again. “I’m sorry, ma’am...” she begins, and I can’t help but heave a sigh of relief that I thought ahead and got this room before somebody else snapped it up.

To think, I’ll be living here, in the city. I’ll finally have a life. And I can be whoever I want. I don’t have to be a shy

bookworm anymore. It doesn't matter how old I get or what I do. The people back home will always see me as that girl, even now that I have a master's degree in finance and an entry-level position at a prestigious private equity firm. Even though half the reason I stayed home was to help Mom take care of Dad when he was sick. I think I've proven myself as an adult.

Forget them. This year, I'm going to start living for me.

After I sleep for at least ten hours in the king-size bed that's supposed to come with my room.

I ride the elevator alone, glad for the quiet compared to the bustling lobby. The doors slide open silently, leaving me in a carpeted hallway. My room is to the right, according to the plaque on the wall opposite. I follow the direction, eyeing the room numbers before coming to a stop at the end of the hall.

The bed is calling my name as I slide the key into the slot. The clicking of the lock is music to my ears, and I swing the heavy door open while smiling in relief. I got the job. I actually got the job. I'm going to treat myself to the most expensive room service dinner there is. I deserve it.

The room is enormous, even bigger than I expected, and tastefully decorated in shades of navy blue and white, running through the silk drapes, the bedspread, and the striped wallpaper.

My eyes wander from the elegant decor to the suitcase sitting at the foot of my king-sized bed. The TV is already on, playing some business show about the stock market.

"What the hell is this?" They gave my room to somebody else, or did they send me to the wrong one? This is 812, isn't it? I peek at the number on the door. It sure is. Plus, my card wouldn't have worked otherwise.

I'm too busy being in shock and dismay to notice the shower running in the bathroom until it actually turns off. Shit. Someone is in there. Time for me to go.

I spin around and head for the exit when the bathroom door flies open, and a tall, broad-shouldered, extremely naked

man appears.

“What the fuck?” he bellows. The menacing tone of his voice sends a shiver down my spine. “Who are you?”

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out past the giant lump in my throat. He’s naked, oh, god, and dripping water from his tanned skin and thick, black hair.

I don’t know where to look, so I take in his body one guilty glance at a time.

Huge chest.

Thick thighs.

Eight-pack abs.

And oh, god, a dick so big it could pass for a tree trunk.

I back up against the wall, my face burning with embarrassment, and my insides all fluttery. My gaze darts around as I search for a safe place to land.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he demands, ignoring my embarrassment in favor of standing in front of me with his hands on his hips. His very trim, very bare hips. “Get the hell out of my room before I call security—or the police... Unless you’re here to help me ring in the new year.”

It’s that snide little comment and the very obvious meaning behind it that makes my gaze snap up, locking with his. That’s when recognition sets in.

Those eyes. I know those eyes. Such a light gray, they’re almost silver when the light hits them the way it is now, through the window.

Eight years have passed since graduation, but right now, it feels like no more than a day since I last set sights on Colton Pierce. The boy who broke my heart.

The boy I hate more than anything in life.

COLTON

HOLY SHIT. HARPER ADAMS.

And here I was, thinking this trip was a total loss.

She's grown up—and filled out—but I would know her anywhere. Those wide, hazel eyes that look straight through me. The impossibly pouty lips. The way she blushes so easily, and her habit of tucking her dark red hair behind her ears when she's nervous.

She's doing it now, and I know in a heartbeat that she recognizes me.

“There must be some mistake.” She's not interested in acknowledging our shared history, only in our hotel arrangements. “They told me at the front desk that I had room 812.”

It's amazing she can talk, squirming like she is. “They told me the same thing. But they were pretty busy down there, so I guess—”

Before I can finish, she's already on her way to the phone, jamming her finger against the button for the front desk. She stands with her back to me, arms folded like she wants to protect herself.

Considering how my entire body reacts to her, maybe she needs protecting. I can't take my eyes off her ass, her legs, and the way she fills out her dark blue suit. Buttoned up, all business, and something about that has always turned me on. My dick twitches, and for one perverse moment, I consider staying uncovered so she can see the effect she has on me.

“I don’t understand. How can you give the same room to two different people? What are we supposed to do?” She throws a quick look over her shoulder, one full of resentment, and I can’t help but remember the girl I used to know. A bookworm, a complete nerd, somebody who took her schoolwork more seriously than anything else. And I should know since we did a project together in the spring semester of our senior year.

I wonder if she’s ever asked herself how different things could have been if she’d gone out with me instead of turning me down. She must know how well I’ve done for myself—I remember how people talk back in our hometown. There’s nothing else for them to do.

Has she wondered what life would be like if she hadn’t made that mistake?

It’s only now that I understand how it sticks in my craw. Of all people, she turned me down. Me. I didn’t have all my money then, but I was a fucking god in that school. Much more popular than anyone she’d ever been out with. If she ever dated at all.

I suppose she must’ve had an effect on me if it all comes back so easily, so clearly.

She hangs up the phone before turning partway, glancing at me before going to the window. “You’d better put something on. Somebody’s coming up to try to work this out.”

“It might not be that bad. It’s not like we’re strangers, Harper Adams.” Yes, it must still be Adams. Her left hand is empty.

She doesn’t register surprise at being recognized. “Yeah, well, that doesn’t mean I feel like sharing a room. I was sort of looking forward to spending the night by myself.” So, she’s changed physically, but that’s about it. The coldness in her voice is as familiar as the scar on my knuckles from the time I punched a wall and hit the stud underneath. She’s so far above it all, isn’t she?

Hunger stirs to life deep in my gut, and I realize I don't want to write her off, far from it.

I want to melt her down. No, I need to. She got away from me in high school, and I'm still not sure how, but she's not getting away from me tonight.

I grab one of the complimentary bathrobes, but it's too small for my frame, so instead, I settle for wrapping a towel around my waist a moment before there's a sharp knock on the door. Harper turns from the window while I open the door to reveal an extremely anxious middle-aged man.

"Mr. Pierce, I'm Thomas Ford, the hotel manager," he announces. "May I come in? We want to do everything we can to make things right."

"Be my guest." I step back to give him room. "But short of moving one of us to another room, I'm not sure how this problem can be fixed."

"Unfortunately, there are no other rooms available this evening—or anywhere else in town," he continues while I glance at an unsurprised Harper. "I can only chalk it up to how hectic things have been all week, Mr. Pierce."

"You know I spend a lot of money at your hotel."

"Yes, sir, and ordinarily, we would have given you a much larger suite, but as a last-minute reservation—"

I hold up a hand, already tired of hearing the well-practiced excuses spilling from his lips. "This is unacceptable. Do you realize how much worse this could have gone? What if it was Miss Adams in the shower while some man came wandering in here? Is this how you do business? This is how you protect your guests?"

The guy looks close to tears, wringing his hands and everything. Probably imagining lawyers and lawsuits. "We'd be happy to comp the room charge for both of you, plus free stays for the future. Otherwise, I'm afraid there's not much more I can do."

"This is ridiculous," Harper whispers, and in the dresser mirror, I see she's going through her purse to pull out her

phone. “There’s got to be somewhere else I can stay.”

“You’re fortunate neither of us is considering getting our lawyers involved.” I jerk my chin toward the door. “We’ll figure this out on our own. No thanks to you.”

“Sir, please, how can we make this right?”

“Make sure your employees don’t screw up like this in the first place.” I open the door for him and wave an arm. “Go. I’m sure you’re busy.” I make it a point to close the door harder than I need to once he’s gone while Harper taps away on her phone, grunting.

As I lean my back to the door so I can watch her grunt, growl, and mutter her way through this, I realize I’m not upset. Not even close. Was I looking forward to spending the night in town? Especially in this basic hotel room? Not even a little.

Now it looks like I’ve found just the diversion I craved without knowing I craved it.

“You’re wasting your time,” I murmur after a few minutes. “It’s New Year’s Eve. No way is there an available room anywhere. What brings you here, anyway? You’re a long way from home.”

“How would you know where home is?”

“You’re far from home if you’re staying in a hotel.”

She snickers, shaking her head, still looking down at her phone. “So you found some brain cells since high school. Good for you.”

“I’ve found more than a few. Have you heard of Pierce Equities?”

“Heard of it?” She lowers the phone, wearing a strange little smile. “I work for Pierce Equities.”

Now there was a curveball I wasn’t expecting. “You’re kidding.”

“Your father is the CEO, isn’t he? I’m sure you could find out if I was lying or not.”

“Actually, I’m the CEO now.”

Her whole body tenses, and her fingers freeze over her phone screen. “Oh... I didn’t know.”

Clearly. I’m not surprised she didn’t know. Just like I had no idea she was my employee. We’ve expanded to five offices across the country, so naturally, there’s no way I could keep track of every employee.

“How long have you... worked for me?”

“Only a couple of hours.” She finally grins for the first time since entering the room, and it lights up her face. “I’m your newest employee, Mr. Pierce, so maybe refrain from any more sexual comments. I’m sure HR wouldn’t like that.”

My employee. Fuck, that does something to me. Something that could wind up getting me sued if I’m not careful. Employees are off-limits. But she’s more than an average employee. She’s the one girl who’s ever turned me down.

I clear my throat, willing my dick to stop twitching under the towel. “Congratulations. We don’t hire just anyone.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“What brings you to town? Isn’t your main office in New York?”

“You’ve done your research.” Just not enough to know my father has retired. I flash a grin that makes her blush. “Careful. I might start thinking you like me.”

“I wanted to see whether we’d cross paths at the office.”

“Why? Afraid you couldn’t keep your hands off me?”

She still wrinkles her nose when she’s unimpressed. “If it makes you feel good to think that, be my guest.”

Now I remember why we used to joke back in the day about her pussy being made of ice. All her attitude does is make me more determined than ever to have her tonight. Repeatedly.

“Okay.” I push away from the door and relish the way she backs up a little though there’s still an entire room between us. “Let’s get down to facts. There’s nowhere for either of us to go tonight, so we might as well stay here.”

“You must be joking.”

“Do I look like I am?” I fold my arms the way she’s folded hers, the two of us staring at each other with the bed between us. A bed I plan to destroy in my quest to soak up every last bit of her. “Let’s grow up, Harper. This could be a lot worse. We could be strangers.”

I slowly and deliberately look her up and down. “I could be the wrong sort of man. Ever think of that? You lucked out.”

“You are the wrong sort of man,” she mutters, though she lifts a shoulder. “But I guess you’re right.”

“So I’ll make a deal with you. Rather than have you thrown out of this hotel after I raise hell with the staff, I’ll allow you to stay.”

Her eyes pop open wide before turning into thin slits, ready to shoot daggers in my direction. “*Allow me?*”

“I’ll even let you keep your job.” It’s a bluff, I would never fire her over this, but she doesn’t know that. I don’t even know what makes me say this. I’ve never done anything like this, and if someone had asked me an hour ago, I would have told them I never would. There’s something about Harper that brings out the worst in me. Maybe it’s the unfinished business between us or her killer body that has my brain shutting off and my dick taking over.

I’m about to tell her the truth, that it was a bad joke, and she can stay here or leave, but the way a hue of pink spreads across her face and down her chest has me pausing. She doesn’t look scared or disgusted by my indecent proposition. Beneath her shock and anger, there is something else... lust.

“You can’t—”

“I can. I always get what I want, and I want you.” The excitement I feel about this prospect eggs me on even more. I

know this is wrong, so fucking wrong, but it feels so damn right. “You’re mine for the night.”

Her head snaps back, the breath leaving her all at once. Like I punched her in the stomach. “Excuse me?”

“One night. What I say goes.” This time, when I look her up and down, she shivers slightly. Now there’s nothing in the world that could stop me from having her all over this room and anywhere else I can manage. “You do as I say, and you can keep your job.”

“You realize this is a crime, right?” Oh, I’m well aware, but she is worth the risk.

“We’re not in the office, and you have no proof. It would be your word against mine. I could always say you offered to fuck your way into a corner office. You wouldn’t be the first.”

The wheels are turning in her head. Let them turn. I know I’ve won. I didn’t get as far as I have by the age of twenty-six without the ability to talk my way into—and out of—anything I please.

Right now, I’m talking my way into her. Harper Adams. I’m going to find out for certain whether her pussy is made of ice.

Somehow, I doubt it is. She’s not icy, not under that tough exterior. That condescending attitude, the years haven’t done anything to soften. Beneath that is a volcano waiting to erupt. My mouth goes dry at the thought, and fuck, my balls are getting heavy.

“It’s your call,” I remind her in a soft voice, like a steel blade wrapped in velvet. “You want to work for me? You’ll do as I say tonight. Whatever I say. Tomorrow, we go our separate ways.”

Only an idiot would refuse me.

Harper’s many things, but an idiot isn’t one of them.

HARPER

HE HASN'T CHANGED A BIT.

No amount of money could change who he is as a person, I guess—and it shouldn't come as a surprise, but I can't help feeling a little disappointed, just the same. "I figured you would have grown up by now." Can he see how shaken up I am? I hope not.

"I've grown up. Stop stalling."

"I'm not stalling," I fire back. "But this isn't high school anymore. You can't dare somebody to do something like this and expect them to go along with it."

"This isn't a dare. It's an offer." He looks me over, his generous mouth twitching in a smirk. My heart flutters at the sight of it—he's breathtaking, always was, and probably always will be.

Only now, he's more than the devastatingly hot smartass kid I was in love with and came to hate.

"You can't say things like that just to make me uncomfortable anymore."

"Who says I was trying to? I don't say things I don't mean. We're both stuck here with nowhere else to go. You might as well enjoy it."

The thing is, I'm sure he has options. A man like him would have a private jet, right? He could fly back to New York anytime he wanted.

But he doesn't want to. He wants... no, I can't even bring myself to believe it. No way does he actually want me, any more than he did when he asked me out after we finished our project. There I was, thinking he was a decent person for a few minutes. Telling myself, I had misjudged him. I knew from the work we'd done that he wasn't the empty-headed jock I always imagined. He was hiding a brain, and a very good one.

Stupid, naive me thought I was enough to change him a little, to draw out all the good parts of him he felt like he had to hide.

And then he asked me out after we gave our presentation, only he was smirking and snickering when he did. Like it was all a big joke. I cried about it for weeks.

"You really mean it?" I ask with my heart in my throat.

"I do."

"If I don't give you what you want, you'll fire me," I say more to myself, reminding me that if I do this, it would only be because I have to, not because I want to.

"A quick call to human resources, and you're gone." How can he say it so simply? Like he doesn't care to leave me jobless.

And how can my heart race in anticipation when there is absolutely, positively, no way in the world this is going to happen? It's wrong.

Damn it, it's exciting. And what's the worst that could happen?

Am I actually entertaining this idea?

"How often are you in town?" I ask.

He chuckles at my sudden question before lifting one muscular shoulder. "Rarely. I don't normally show up in person for meetings, but I had a few things I wanted to work out in person. Otherwise, I'll dial in through Zoom if I have to dial in at all."

He tips his head to the side, chuckling again. "You want to make sure we're not going to run into each other after this?"

“What about it?” I demand, lifting my chin. “What, you think I want to bump into you after this?”

“You just might. You wouldn’t be the first woman who couldn’t forget me.”

Forget him? That would be impossible, but he doesn’t need to know that. He’s already full of himself as it is. “You’re underestimating me.”

“Am I?” Though he’s not wearing a watch, he checks his wrist. “The clock’s ticking. This offer’s only good for another thirty seconds, so you’d better make up your mind or else get ready to be kicked out on your ass.”

He quirks an eyebrow. “And there are so many other things I’d rather do to it.”

Damn him. And damn him for making me seriously consider this. What is wrong with me? I should slap him across the face, then drive straight home.

But that would mean admitting I failed, and I can’t fail. Not when I came so close to having everything I wanted.

And the more I look at his body—how can I help it?—the more reasonable the whole thing seems. Isn’t this what they call closure? It could mean getting him out of my system once and for all. Not like I’ve been obsessing over him for eight years, but let’s face it: working for his company, even if I don’t see him face-to-face, I’ll still have reminders of him. Why not have a few good memories to look back on?

I’m trying to convince myself. I can’t believe I’m actually trying to convince myself.

“You are a terrible person,” I tell him as if he didn’t already know.

“I like to see myself as persuasive.”

All I want to do is wipe that arrogant smirk off his face. Instead, I suppress an eye roll. “Fine,” I blurt out before I lose my nerve. “Okay, I accept.”

His laughter is rich, almost enough to get me to laugh along with him. “There you go, acting like you had any

choice. But fine, if that's how you want to play it, thank you for accepting." There's still humor in the way his lips twitch, but I have to ignore that, or else I'll risk ruining all of this. I can't believe I'm letting him do this to me.

Who am I kidding? I want this just as much as he does. When he narrows his eyes and purses his lips thoughtfully, just the idea of the filthy thoughts that could be running through his head right now is enough to spread warmth through my core. My pussy starts to moisten, and my nipples go hard in what I'm glad is a padded bra—he's already got me at a disadvantage. I don't need him seeing the very obvious effect he has on me.

How does he do it? He hasn't laid a finger on me, but I'm already yearning. It's like the years between then and now melt away, and I'm that nervous, shy, nerdy girl with a crush on the most unattainable boy imaginable.

The only difference is the hunger in his eyes. The way his towel shifts, and heat flares in my face when I realize why. He's getting hard. For me.

"So? What happens now?" I ask with bravado I don't feel. "What do you want from me?"

"That's what I like. Somebody who's ready to get down to business." I only blush harder, which makes him laugh. "Relax. I'm not going to ask you to do anything you won't enjoy."

So he says.

"Take off your clothes." My heart skips a beat at the sudden seriousness in his voice. Joking time is over.

"All of them?" I ask after gulping.

"You're going to take a shower. And I'm going to watch."

He wastes no time, does he?

I could still back out—no, I can't because this job means everything. It occurs to me I should have had him put something in writing, but we're past that point now. The

tension in the room is so extreme I can hardly breathe as my trembling fingers begin working the buttons on my blouse.

“Maybe take your jacket off first?” he suggests with a hint of a smile.

I hate what this man does to me. It’s like my brain flew out the window. I slide the jacket over my shoulders and down my arms before folding it in half and laying it over at the back of the desk chair. Then I return to my blouse, working it out from my waistband before opening it one button at a time.

Strange. I couldn’t have imagined the tiny thrill that runs down my spine as I watch him watching me. His eyes are glued to my every move, dropping lower and lower until I finally peel the blouse away and leave it with the jacket. Goosebumps cover my skin, but I do my best not to tremble under his lustful gaze. The skirt takes no time—I lower the zipper and let it fall to the floor, leaving me in nothing but my best black satin bra and panties. I’m so glad I wore them today.

He runs a hand over his bulge, and it twitches in response. My teeth sink into my bottom lip, and Colton groans softly. “Keep going. I didn’t tell you to stop.”

I kick off my shoes, trembling. This is it. No going back now.

I do as I’m told, getting it over with in a rush—not like I know how to be seductive, anyway, but I have to get it over with or else risk chickening out. My already tight nipples harden painfully under his gaze, and now the towel juts out in front of him like a ship’s prow.

“Turn around.” I do so, forcing myself to breathe evenly before I hyperventilate. “You are so fucking hot.”

“Don’t patronize me,” I whisper, turning around to face him again. I can hardly lift my gaze from the bedspread, I’m so embarrassed. Even if he’s turned on, that doesn’t make this any easier.

Without another word, he drops the towel, and what was already eye-poppingly big when it was soft is now almost

frighteningly huge and standing straight up. He wraps his hand around the thick shaft and makes a few strokes, his eyes glued to my breasts.

“This speaks for itself,” he assures me in a voice that’s a lot breathier than it was before. “You’re a fucking goddess.”

An interesting choice of words, one that makes my already wet pussy practically gush. I believe he means it. This insanely wealthy man who once broke my heart thinks I’m a goddess. He could have any woman he wants.

“Now go get in the shower. I want you fresh and clean tonight.” He waits while I get my things out of my suitcase, stroking himself as he watches. My heart is hammering, my stomach in knots, and I can’t believe I’m actually going through with it.

But why not? I said I wanted a new life, didn’t I? This is as good a way to usher that in as any, I guess.

He follows me into the luxurious room, where I step into the glass-walled shower and place my toiletries on a shelf. Am I dreaming? I can’t be. I feel the water under my feet from when he showered, and I hear his deep, rasping breathing on the other side of the glass partition. He perches on the edge of the tub, and the sight of him is almost enough to make me forget my nerves.

He’s beautiful, perfect, chiseled, tanned, and completely focused on me.

“Get started,” he growls. “I want you shaved smooth.”

It’s a good thing I already prefer to be smooth, or else this would take a lot longer. I turn on the water and wait until it goes warm before letting it run over me, closing my eyes, and forcing a deep breath. I can do this. I’m going to do this. All it’s going to take is forgetting who I used to be and stepping into who I want to be.

First, I wash up, pouring body wash onto a cloth before I begin to run it over my arms. “Use your hands,” he instructs. “I want to watch you touching your body.” The dark,

throbbing need in his voice makes my pulse race faster than ever.

It makes me bolder, too, allowing me the courage to put myself on display, to run my soapy hands over my neck, shoulders, and chest.

“Play with them.”

Jesus. He’s going to force me to break down every last one of my fears, isn’t he? Every last bit of my shyness.

I hold my breath as I take my breasts in my hands, squeezing a little, and soapy water sluices through my fingers. When I dare take a look at him, I find him stroking faster than before, his lips parted, his eyes glued to the soapy, glistening globes in my hands.

I lift them a little, like I’m offering them to him, and he shudders. Am I really doing this to him? I barely know myself, the girl who now soaps her hands up again, this time to slide them over her stomach and down her hips.

“Make sure your ass is nice and clean.” I take this as an instruction, turning around and bending at the waist. Holy hell, I’m actually about to do this, aren’t I? While he watches, I slide a hand between my cheeks, soaping my crack.

“Fuck, yeah,” he groans, and the almost helpless sound of it makes me move slower, my touches more deliberate now. My pussy is in agony, hot and swollen and so wet. Every stroke of my fingers leaves me wanting more.

Leaves me wishing he was the one touching me this way.

And all the while, all I can do is imagine what I would have thought back in school if anybody told me this would happen one day.

After a minute or so, I straighten up and turn around, soaping up my legs and feet, before pulling out my razor and touching up what I already shaved this morning. I save my pussy for last, my back to the wall, legs spread, crouching slightly.

He stands and steps up closer to the glass separating us. “That’s right. Get it smooth for me.”

It’s not like I didn’t think that’s where this was eventually going to go but hearing him say it out loud—that he plans on having me—makes a desperate craving explode in my core and reverberate through me until all I can do is moan softly, watching him watch me.

“Now touch yourself.” His voice is quiet, deep, shaking with need. “I want to see you play with that gorgeous pussy. Show me what you like.”

Nothing in the world could stop me because I’m hot enough that it almost hurts. I’ve never felt this way.

Like if I don’t come soon, I’ll die from it.

There is something insanely dirty about this, which is probably what leaves me hanging on the edge, just short of falling into what I know will be bliss. I run the tip of my forefinger over my clit while, with the other hand, I massage my breasts, pinching my nipples until I whimper in frustration because, god, I need to come. I need to come for him.

“Look at me.” I have no choice but to open my eyes and stare back at Colton, now rocking his hips slightly as he fucks his own fist.

“You’re gonna come with me,” he commands through gritted teeth. “You’re gonna come for me right now.”

And he’s right, I am; it hits me all at once. The tension and the throbbing and the sight of him so close to the edge all comes together at once and leaves me howling, almost afraid of the intensity of sensations that race through me, the familiar clenching of my pussy stronger than ever before, the shower spinning around me while all I can do is lean against the wall for support.

And the sight of Colton finding his own release makes it even better, drags it out, wave after wave rolling over me while I watch him shoot his cum across the glass. One, two, three, each splash runs slowly down the wall until he slows his stroking and lets his head fall back with a sigh.

Holy shit. What happens now? Funny how what seemed sensible—even necessary—a minute ago is now shocking. Why did I ever think that was a good idea? Now I have to face him. As if things weren't awkward enough.

He lifts his head, straightening his posture, and for a breathless moment, I'm sure he'll laugh at me. At how easy it was to get me to do everything he said—touching myself until I howled like an animal. I already wish I'd left the room in disgust when he made his little offer. I'd rather spend the night in my car than be laughed at now.

Only he's not laughing when he grabs a fluffy towel, opens the shower door, and hands it to me. "That was very nice. And promising," he adds, snickering as I begin drying off. "I have high hopes for the rest of the night."

"What do you want to do?" And why do I want so much for it to be plain and simple fucking? That's what I want him to say. I want him to promise mind-blowing marathon sex in that king-size bed. I want to feel him inside me. If this is only going to happen for one night, I want everything. Might as well, right?

"I have a few things in mind." He doesn't bother with a towel, strutting around naked. I guess I would, too, if I looked like him. I'm not quite as comfortable yet, so after rubbing myself dry, I close the towel around my chest.

"So long as I can get away with wearing a suit. That's really all I have with me."

I expect a scowl, but all I get is a shrug as he washes his hands at one of the two sinks. "I'll give you my card. You can go shopping wherever you want, so long as you make sure to pick something that'll look good on the town tonight. I'm thinking cocktail or nicer."

"You're offering me your credit card and telling me to go shopping? Is there a dollar limit?"

"I'm not offering. I'm giving it to you. And you're going to use it—without a limit," he adds. "I'll trust your judgment."

The only problem is, considering what I just did and am strongly considering doing again, my judgment is what I'm questioning more than anything right now.

"You have two hours," he finally announces. "I want you looking good from head to toe."

"But where are we going?"

Dread and anticipation mix in my gut when the corner of his mouth pulls upward. "Leave that to me. What, do you think I'd steer you wrong?"

It's better if I don't answer that one.

COLTON

THE PROBLEM WITH MAKING AS MUCH MONEY AS I HAVE IN AS short a period of time is a person tends to get jaded.

I've experienced things I never could have imagined back home. I've seen a lot of the world, met fascinating people, own all the toys—the cars, the jet, the townhomes, all of it.

In other words, there isn't much that can impress me anymore.

Which is why I almost laugh at myself, sitting here at the bar in the hotel, waiting for my unexpected New Year's gift to step off the elevator. I made it clear I wanted her ready to go by eight o'clock, which will give us plenty of time to have fun before midnight.

I tap my fingers against the shining wood, checking my watch, willing her to arrive while pleasant conversation goes on around me. People having drinks before going out to continue the party. I sip my bourbon, willing myself to stay calm. This is hardly the first time I've ever exercised self-control.

But damned if it isn't the most difficult.

One thing I didn't do earlier is touch her, and now my hands are aching to feel her body under them. It's not enough to watch her give herself pleasure. I need to be the one doing it.

Who could have guessed shy little Harper Adams could put on a show like the one she gave me?

Before the night is over, she's going to be doing a lot more than that.

What makes me smile to myself is knowing it won't take a lot of convincing. She might pretend she's only doing this to keep her job, but there was nothing about her performance earlier to even hint at her being an unwilling participant. She was willing, all right. It got her hot, showing off for me, which only added to my satisfaction. A silent give and take, the two of us egging each other on.

I need to stop thinking this way, or I'll come in my pants.

Hanging from the back of my chair is a small shopping bag. I ran an errand of my own this afternoon, and knowing what's waiting for her has me ready to go up to the room and demand she move her ass.

Turns out, there's no need. From where I'm seated, I have a clear view through the lobby, and my heart threatens to burst from my chest when I see her step through the sliding doors.

I called her a goddess earlier, and I meant it, but it's never been truer than it is at this moment. The sight of her in a low-cut, curve-hugging black dress is almost enough to knock me on the floor. The cut of the fabric accentuates her full tits and luscious hips that sway slightly as she strides across the lobby. Her legs look a mile long in a pair of silver stilettos that I can't help but imagine gripping as I drive myself into her. By the time this night is over, those heels are going to dig into my shoulders.

She tosses her thick, red hair over one shoulder before tucking it behind her ear, and I'm reminded of how nervous she is. It's almost touching, especially when she's trying so hard to hide it.

"Did I do a good job?" she asks by way of greeting once she reaches me.

I can't find the words. She's overwhelming, the sight and smell of her taking over my awareness until I'm ready to take her here and now. But she wants reassurance, so I force myself

to put my thoughts together. “I’d answer, but I’m too busy making sure none of the guys in here lay a finger on you.”

She blurts out a high-pitched laugh of disbelief. “Get out of here.”

“You think I’m kidding?” I lean in, letting my lips brush against her earlobe. “To your left. Don’t be obvious about it.” She turns her head slightly, and the scent of her perfume stirs a growl in my chest. This woman is mine; that’s all there is to it. I don’t care what it takes. She’s never leaving my side after tonight.

“Okay, so he’s looking at me,” she whispers, unaware of my thoughts. “I’m sure there are women looking at you, too.”

“We’re not talking about me right now.” Because I can’t help it, I place my hands on her hips, pulling her closer. Fuck, she’s tempting. “We’re talking about you. What do you think that man wants to do to you?”

“How should I know?”

“Lesson one: you don’t walk into a bar looking the way you do right now and act like you don’t know what a man wants to do. You have to know how jaw-dropping you are.”

She leans back a little, far enough to look me in the eyes and shake her head. “I really don’t. But I’m glad you think I am. I don’t want you thinking you wasted your money.”

She still doesn’t get it. “I’m telling you right now, there is not a man tonight who’ll set eyes on you and not wish he could bury himself in that pretty pussy.”

Her gaze darts around, her cheeks going red. “Colton,” she whispers on a strained giggle.

“You don’t believe me? Maybe we should ask him.”

Her gasp draws the attention of the people closest to us. “Don’t do that!”

“Suit yourself.” It’s almost too fun, fucking with her like this. Deep down inside, she’s still the good girl she always was.

But even deeper, there's somebody a lot darker. Someone who's curious. Willing. Even eager. "It's the truth. And where we're going, there's going to be plenty of opportunity for men to approach you."

My fingers dig into her flesh hard enough that she winces. "But you're not going to take them up on it. Understood?"

"Of course." There's still innocence shining from her eyes as she frowns. "I'm going to be with you. This is our agreement."

She has no idea what her submissiveness does to me. "Exactly. You belong to me and only to me. And what we do, we do together. No other partners."

Now she's frowning in earnest. "Where are we going? You're making me nervous."

It's about time to get moving, anyway. I was going to offer a drink here, but we can always have our drinks at the club.

"There's only one way to find out." I pull out cash for the bartender before standing. "By the way, that bag is for you. But I'd wait till you're outside before opening it."

"Okay, now I'm really nervous," she mutters as I drape a protective arm around her waist and steer her out of the bar and into the lobby. Simply being this close to her is getting me hard again. To think, she has no idea. In her head, she's still the nerdy kid.

The fact is, she was hot back then, too. And she was just as unaware as she is now.

"A limo?" she breathes, her eyes widening as the driver I secured for the evening steps out and opens the door for us.

"It's a special night." And it was the right call since her face is shining almost as bright as the moon hanging overhead. This is run-of-the-mill for me, but to her, it's probably a first-time experience. What will it be like, showing her the world? I can't wait.

Climbing inside the limo is a welcome relief, the warm exterior heaven on a cold night like this. "Wow, this is so

cool!” She turns to me, grimacing as soon as the words are out of her mouth. “That must have sounded so lame.”

“It is cool.” I nudge the bag closer to her, sitting between us on the seat. “Check out what I got for you.”

“You really didn’t have to buy me anything.”

“Just wait until you see what it is.” Something tells me she’s going to feel a little different when she does.

And I’m right. Her mouth falls open in a gasp once she identifies what she’s pulled free from the cloud of tissue paper: a black leather collar with a D-ring attached in the front, to which a leather leash has been clipped.

Her wide, innocent eyes are full of confusion when they meet mine. “Is this what I think it is?”

“That’s for you to wear tonight.”

“Oh.” The collar starts trembling in her hands. “That’s what I thought it was.”

I take her chin on my finger and lift it until she’s looking at me. “Rule number one is no allowing other men to touch you tonight. Rule number two? Go with it. Trust me.”

I take the collar from her. “Lift your hair so I can put this on.”

She hesitates for only a split second before doing as I say, allowing me to cinch the collar around her throat before letting my fingertips trail over her shoulders. She closes her eyes and shivers slightly, her skin pebbling at my touch.

It is so easy to excite her. No other man will ever touch her, not this way. She makes me feel like a king—something all my money has never done.

“You have nothing to worry about tonight.” I ease the coat away from her shoulders and press my lips to the one closest to me, marveling at the smoothness of her skin and its sweet scent. “We’re going to have a lot of fun.”

“This is the sort of thing you had in mind? Leading me around on a leash?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I want to do.” And now, my hand is on her knee, easing its way beneath the hem of her dress. “What, you think you can walk around looking like this, and I’m not going to want to show you off? I want every man there to see us together and know you belong to me.”

The combination of my touch and my words have her melting against me, and a surge of blood fills my dick and makes it stand painfully erect as I continue exploring her smooth, sexy thigh, inching closer to the prize waiting at the apex.

I run my tongue over her earlobe, savoring her short little breaths and the fluttering of the pulse in her throat. “You are going to give every man in that club an instant hard-on when he sets his eyes on you. Every single one of them is going to wonder what it would be like to have your lips around their cock before they bury it deep in your cunt.”

She lets out a tiny sigh, her eyes closing. “Oh, my god...”

I lean her against the back of the seat, parting her thighs wider. “I’m going to make you come for me,” I whisper while planting soft, lingering kisses along her jaw, then down her throat, lapping at her skin, soaking in the scent of her perfume. Sweet, floral, but with an undertone of muskiness that’s going to drive me insane.

There’s another scent I’m more interested in, and I plan on wearing it on my fingers, face, and cock by the time the night is over. “You’re going to come for me, and only me. However I say, whenever I say.”

“Yes...” I don’t know whether she realizes she whispered her agreement, but it has the strange effect of stirring pride deep in me.

“You’re going to enjoy it.” I cup her mound, reveling in the heat radiating from her and the way her wetness left her panties plastered to her lips. It’s almost too easy. “I’m going to give you a night you will never forget. You’ll be begging for more, I promise.” She only whimpers before spreading her legs wider, tilting her hips like she’s offering her pussy to me.

And I accept it, stroking her lips through the satin before raising my fingers to my mouth. Good god, I've never tasted anything so addictive, so good I find myself licking my fingers before going back for more.

But this time, after catching her essence, I run my fingers over her mouth. "Taste yourself," I whisper, then groan at the sight of her tongue slipping out, the feeling of it brushing against my skin. "Have you ever done that before?"

"No." She licks my fingers again, and it will be a miracle if I don't come before we reach the club. She's so willing, so eager. All mine.

"And I want you to think about that when I bury my face in your pussy later, and you hump me until you drown me in your juice." The thought alone is enough to make me strain against my zipper—the idea of pulling it out does occur to me, but we're almost at the club. Besides, this is about her. Making sure she's ready.

If she isn't, she's damn close to it, her head thrown back in abandon while I continue stroking her lips. "My god, Colton..."

"That's exactly right. I am your god." She opens her mouth like she's about to smart off, but the feeling of my fingers delving beneath her panties and through her sopping slit wipes away everything else. She barely chokes back a cry, hips shooting up, head falling back.

Fuck, she's dripping. For me, only for me. I waste no time driving myself deeper, stretching her tight little tunnel to prepare her for my cock. "I'm going to fuck you tonight. I'm going to take you beyond any limit you thought you had. And you're going to come all over my cock."

"Colton... oh, yes... fuck me..."

"And this mouth..." When she turns her head my way, I sweep my tongue over her juicy, red lips. We both shudder. I have to fight the desire to fuck her face, knowing those lips are going to feel so fucking good around me. "You're going to

wrap these lips around me and suck. And people are going to watch while you do.”

She arches her back, her gasp sharp. I’ll be damned if another flood doesn’t coat my fingers, just the same. Because she loves the idea even if it shocks her.

She loves it so much she’s already starting to grip me tighter, almost holding my fingers in place as she builds. “That’s right, baby,” I whisper, pounding her hard, fast, the way I’m going to do later. “Come for me now. We’re almost there. I want you to come before we get there. I want you dripping when we get out of the limo.”

“Yes,” she breathes, working her hips against my fingers. “I’m going... I’m going to... oh, god!” She stiffens, her face frozen in a mask of something close to pain before the wave crashes, and that look is replaced by bliss, her body now undulating like a wave, her muscles drawing my fingers deeper. My palm is glistening by the time I withdraw my hand from between her shaking thighs.

“Now lick it clean,” I order, grinding my teeth to contain a groan as she eagerly does what I say.

The things I cannot wait to show her.

She’s barely returned to her senses when we pull into the parking lot of Purgatory. It’s a nondescript building with a cinder block exterior on the first two floors, topped by a heavily windowed third floor that I know was only added on once the structure took on its current use.

“What is this place?” she whispers once we come to a stop at the entrance.

“It’s a private club. I’ve visited a few times when I was in town. We’ll be having dinner on the third floor—it has great views of the river, and there’ll be fireworks tonight.”

“And what happens on the other two floors?”

“I already told you some of it.”

With that, I climb from the car, the leash in hand, and give it a tug as a signal for her to follow. She’s wearing a faint

smile when she steps out, almost bewildered. Like she can't figure out why she enjoys this.

On cue, the door swings open. I'm sure we're being watched from somewhere inside. It's so dark inside there's no way of seeing what lies beyond the doorway. Her nerves must be killing her by now— if it wasn't so brutally cold out here, I would drag this out, savor her response.

Instead, I take the lead, and she has no choice but to follow.

Whether she wants to be or not, she's mine.

But I get the feeling she wants it.

HARPER

WHAT THE HELL HAVE I GOTTEN MYSELF INTO? I'M IN A DAZE as I strip off my coat and hand it to a girl standing behind the counter of a sleek dimly-lit entry. She wears a blood-red dress that's actually more modest than I would have expected. But then I have no idea what to expect, do I? It's not like I've made a habit of visiting places like this.

I still can't believe I'm here. I can't believe I let him finger me in the car. I can't believe any of this is happening.

Maybe that's not the point. Maybe the point is just to enjoy it while I can.

"Welcome to Purgatory. We're happy to see you again, Mr. Pierce," the girl practically purrs. "Enjoy your evening. Dinner will be served at eleven o'clock, but you are free to visit upstairs and enjoy the light fare we're offering until then."

Colton turns to me. "Are you hungry?"

I shake my head because my stomach is in knots. I can't imagine eating a bite. "I think we'll just visit the bar for now," he tells the girl, who steps aside so we can continue past her, through a dark red curtain and into what looks like any average, everyday club, besides the cages hanging from the ceiling with naked dancers inside. There's a dance floor in the center where a handful of couples grind against each other in the semi-darkness, groping out in the open, but that's the spiciest action I can see.

Otherwise, people lounge on purple and red couches, chairs, and padded benches while they chat and enjoy their

drinks. They're all dressed well, and I'm surprised that more than a few of them are middle-aged or older.

Damned if my heart doesn't sink a little. What was I expecting? An all-out orgy the minute I walked through the door? If anything, I should be glad for the chance to work my way into this rather than being thrown into the deep end right away.

It's like he's reading my mind. "This isn't where the real fun happens." Even so, the more I look around, the more obvious it is that this place is special. For one thing, I'm not the only one walking around with a leather collar around their neck. There are even a few men being led around by women, and one of the men crawls on all fours even though he's wearing a suit much like the one Colton wears now.

And wow, does he look incredible. He is by far the hottest man here, in a dark suit and tie that give him an air of control. He looks so domineering, and all I want is to give him everything he asks for.

It's only when he gives a sharp little tug on the leash that I realize the bartender asked what I'd like. "Chardonnay, please," I mumble, still overwhelmed.

"Dazed?" Colton asks with a soft laugh. "I knew you would be. And I was right, by the way."

"About what?"

"There are no fewer than three men eyeing you like you are tonight's main course." He grabs my ass, squeezing hard enough to make me wince and suck in a pained breath. "But you're mine, aren't you?"

"Yes," I whisper, both because I know it's what he wants me to say and because it's true. I am his.

And not only because I wouldn't want to be stuck here without him.

Once we have our drinks, Colton looks around the room. "We could hang around here for a while if you want, or we could—"

“I want to look around.”

His eyebrows lift when he turns my way, and frankly, I don't know where that came from, either. “I'm just saying,” I continue. “You promised a lot back in the car. And there's only a few hours until dinner.”

Who the hell am I? Or maybe this is who I was all along. Maybe all I needed was an excuse for it to come out.

“Far be it for me to deny you what you want.”

With the leash in hand, he leads me away from the bar, and I don't know if it's fear or excitement that leaves me fighting to keep all the wine in the glass rather than splashing it around.

This is it. And there I was, thinking I'd spend my night in the room, with room service and a movie.

I couldn't have predicted this in a million years. I couldn't have predicted him—the man he is now, a man who undoes me with every word, look, and skillful touch. This is not the boy I used to know. This is a man I could see myself spending a lot of time with.

He's your boss, remember? Right, but I'm not exactly trying to think about that right now. Besides, most of the blood has already left my brain in favor of traveling south, to where I'm hot and wet all over again.

We walk up a wide staircase carpeted in the same deep red I've seen so far, and with every step, the sounds from various overheard rooms get louder. I don't have to be able to see what's happening to know exactly what I'm about to find. My nipples tighten in anticipation.

Colton stops midway, grabbing my arms to stop me as well. “Before we go up there, your safe word is red.”

“I need a safe word?”

His eyes briefly glance over my body once more. “Probably, yes.”

“Red, got it.”

He nods and continues leading us up into a large, central area, while the outer walls are lined with doors. Some of them are open, and couples stroll slowly from one door to the other, observing what's happening inside. They're so casual about it, too, like they make a habit of watching people have sex.

It's the middle area that catches and holds my attention. A few pieces of equipment are scattered around: a leather-covered bench, a table with restraints attached, and a harness hanging from the ceiling.

It's the harness being used by a naked girl who's suspended while a heavily muscled middle-aged man takes her from behind that grabs my attention. A second man uses her mouth, fucking her face, pulling her forward before the other man pulls her back against him.

All the while, she screams in pleasure, her cries muffled thanks to her full mouth. The slap-slap-slap of skin on skin and the sight of so much forbidden depravity heat me inside, leaving me squeezing my thighs together in a vain attempt at relief for my aching clit.

What would that be like? To be used by two men is one thing, but out in the open? Because we're not the only ones watching, either. At least a dozen people are gathered around, watching intently, and I watch in mixed shock and fascination as a woman dressed like me begins rubbing her partner's growing bulge. He slides an arm around her shoulders, then reaches down to fondle her breasts.

But they never take their eyes off the show. And people make a night of this kind of thing? They don't seem ashamed at all, nor are they surprised. This is nothing new for them, while for me, it's like Colton pulled back the curtain on an entirely new world. I knew clubs like this existed, but I never imagined anything this high class—people sipping champagne while watching a live sex act.

And enjoying themselves while they do.

What if that was me in the harness? A rush of heat races through me, sizzling my insides and making my skin tingle. I

wouldn't dare... would I? I'm starting to question a lot of things.

Colton traces a line down my back with one finger.

"You like what you see, don't you?" he murmurs, his voice low and full of dark promise. All I can do is nod, mute and overwhelmed. "Let's see what else is going on around here. They recently renovated the place."

He leads me away from the trio, all of whom seem like they're getting close to the finish line if the change in pace means anything. I sort of want to watch, but he has other ideas.

We step into the closest room with an open door. Here, a pair of beautiful women have stripped down to their thongs and stockings and are tangled together on a bed, kissing and touching, while two men stand back and stroke themselves as they watch. I can hardly breathe, unsure where to look—at the sizable, dripping dicks being stroked or at the girls, one of whom slides down the length of the other's curvy, creamy body before slowly removing her thong.

"Open her up," one of the men grunts. "Spread her wide." I can't see her pussy from this vantage point, but both men quicken their stroking at the sight of it before the girl on top lowers her head and begins lapping at the seam. The girl on the bed arches her back, burying her hands in the girl's hair as she moans out her approval.

I can't help but look down at Colton's crotch, where his erection juts out straight ahead. So I know how he feels about it, not that there was ever a question. We go to the next room, and by now, I've started to loosen up a little. I'm not afraid to look people in the eye, no longer worried somebody will point at me and call me dirty or a pervert for liking this.

We stop in the doorway, watching a woman flog a man's bare ass while he bends over a bench with a ball gag in his mouth. This is beyond anything I've ever seen, and I can't help but wonder what he gets out of it, knowing people are watching him be humiliated. I guess there's a kink for everyone.

Right now, it seems like my thing is wishing I had the nerve to be this free. Because that's what I see in front of me: freedom. Nobody's apologizing for what they like or for wanting to do it in front of other people. I've spent my whole life apologizing. Now I'm filled with longing that goes beyond the fire raging in my core.

One room after the next, I'm introduced to sights and sounds I've never experienced. A woman on an x-shaped wooden cross, her nipples clamped along with her clit, while a man runs a feather over her naked body. In another room, a man lays across a sofa while a woman rides him, and a second woman hovers over his face. Colton's sharp intake of breath when the women begin passionately kissing leaves me rubbing him, feeling bolder than before.

This isn't the effect of wine on an empty stomach. It's not even knowing we never have to see each other again. I want this.

Colton tugs on the leash, and I follow him back out to the open central area where the two men have finished and are helping the girl out of the harness. "Sorry we missed the finish?"

He pulls me in close with the leash, and between the wine and my arousal and the sounds of sex coming from all those rooms—the swish of a flog, a muffled cry, the moans coming from the two girls going at it on the bed—there's only one response I can come up with.

"I want you." My heart's in my throat, hammering until I can hardly breathe, making me dizzy. Or maybe that's his closeness, his breath on my face, and the very obvious erection pressing into my belly.

I told him the truth, plain and simple. I want him; I've always wanted him, but never more than right now.

"How badly do you want me?" He chuckles darkly, running the backs of his fingers over my cheek until I shiver.

As wound up as I am now, that's practically enough to take me over the edge. My entire body is a live wire, ready to snap.

And then he is pushing me onto my knees, his hands on my shoulders. I can't stop shaking, especially when I sense the presence of others closing in nearby. At the same time, my panties are a soaking mess, and I feel the moisture that's already leaked onto my inner thighs. It would only take the slightest touch down there to relieve myself, but I'm not sure I have that in me. Not yet, anyway, not in front of these people.

"Show me how much you want me." A sudden tug on the leash leaves me pressed against his dick, my nose buried. I can't twist my head around or pull away thanks to how tight he cinched the collar, the leather now pressing into my neck until it stings in the nicest way.

Instinct leaves me rubbing my face against his crotch, and the twitching of his dick tells me it was the right thing to do. "Holy fuck, you're going to make me come," he groans in the near darkness. "Unzip me. Pull me free."

My hands are trembling in time with the fluttering of my heart, but I somehow manage to do what he says, finally dipping my hand into his shorts and wrapping my fingers around him. My god, he's a monster, so big I'm not sure I can take him into my mouth, much less anywhere else.

But damn it, I want to try. That's the most surprising thing of all of this, even more surprising than the fact that I'm doing this in front of other people. They're watching, whispering, and one of the women actually gasps when I pull his erect dick free.

All for me. This is all for me. I bet she's jealous. I don't even know where my thoughts are coming from anymore. I'm not sure who I am or why I'm ready to cry with need as I extend my tongue and catch the moisture at the tip of his mushroom head.

He yanks me down again with the leash, and suddenly, there's nothing to do but open my mouth and take him inside all at once, his thrust so sharp and deep my body convulses, my gag reflex on overdrive.

"Take it," he grunts, forcing me to either relax my throat or throw up what I just drank. I pull in a deep breath through my

nose, and it steadies me until the reflex passes.

“That’s right. Good girl.” He places his other hand on the back of my head, fingertips massaging my scalp, sending delicious thrills through me until I moan around him. “So hungry for my cock. Now show everybody how hungry you are and how grateful you are for this.”

I lift my head, my lips stretched around him, and plunge down again. I can only take three-quarters of him, so I use my hand to cover the rest, allowing my saliva to dribble down so I can work him with my fist and my mouth at once.

I might not be super experienced with this, but I’ve watched videos, and the way he moans my name tells me I must be doing something right.

Still, he only allows me to have control for a second or two before he begins thrusting. I barely have time to recover before he thrusts forward, again and again, punishing me, hitting the back of my throat and going beyond, like he wants to work all of himself into me.

“Fuck, you take my cock so well,” he praises, and I rub my thighs together, praying the friction can elevate some of the pain I feel. I need to come. Tears fill my eyes and slip down my cheeks and off my chin, and soon I can’t help but groan in dismay and discomfort.

“You’re such a good girl. You’re going to make me come.”

He continues fucking my mouth like a savage beast, his fingers in my hair, tugging the strands tight, causing a sliver of pain at my scalp.

When I glance around, I find more than one of the men stroking themselves. It should disgust me, but the effect is just the opposite. Now I want to do this right. I want to give them a show.

Even if I’m afraid Colton is going to smother me. He won’t let up even when I try to push away. All he does is laugh, the sound soft enough that only I can hear it, while all around us, there’s more grunting and murmuring, and yes,

heavy breathing from somebody other than the man now pummeling my mouth and throat.

“Are you ready to come on my cock? Is that what you want? Does your little clit and pussy need some relief? I can see your arousal on your thighs; you’re making a mess on the floor.”

Dear lord, his dirty talk only encourages me to continue taking his cock like I’m a professional at it.

It’s a relief when he pulls back all the way, and I sag a little, gulping in one deep breath after another, shaking, fighting to get control of myself.

“Up.” He pairs the single word with a sharp tug on the leash, and I wince from the pain of the collar as I stand on trembling legs.

Gently, he pulls me over to the padded bench nearby, using the leash to direct me until I’m draped across it.

I don’t have time to think, much less keep up with what’s happening. All of a sudden, the dress is up around my waist, and my panties are down around my knees. The feeling of air hitting my bare, wet lips is a shock but not an unpleasant one. Not even close.

He drags two fingers through my wet heat. “Like I said earlier, you made a mess on the floor. I should make you lick it up before I let you come on my cock.” Oh god, the thought is enough to send me into a hissy. His heavy hand lands on my hip. With the other, he fists his cock in his hand and guides himself to my entrance.

One breath, and he’s inside of me. I’m wet as hell, my arousal coating my thighs, but nothing could prepare me for his massive cock.

His thrusts are animalistic, and I can’t help the scream of pain mixed with pleasure that rips from my throat as his huge cock stretches me to the limit. He uses me like a toy, pushing me forward before pulling me back until my ass is flush with his body.

The pain and pleasure intensify, and oh, my god, he's going to tear me in half and make me bleed. But fuck...

He's also going to make me come.

There's no way around it. I'm climbing higher and higher; there's so much of him it feels like he's ingraining part of himself inside me, and his heavy balls slap my clit with every deep thrust and twist of his hips. Fuck, like a thread, he undoes me, leaving me a pitiful mess of nothing.

Through hooded eyes, I see them. Our onlookers. They're watching us. Couples. Single men. Their reactions come to me in brief glimpses.

Men stroke themselves and play with their partners. One hikes his companion's dress up over her hips and begins playing with her ass while she strokes him, and another steps up behind his partner before shoving a hand down the front of her dress to fondle her while she grinds her ass against him.

I grow wetter knowing that we're doing this to them. It's erotic and sinful, and I'd think I was dreaming if it wasn't for the very real sense of being filled, my pussy stretched and pushed beyond my limits.

A man steps out of the shadows, walking toward us. I notice his cock in his hand. It's hard to make out his face when I'm being fucked for dear life. "Let me take that pouty fucking mouth of yours and put it to good use," he taunts and takes a step closer.

A sniggle of fear takes root in my belly. I don't know if I want to be shared and used like this. Before I can say a word, Colton is growling, but his thrusts remain the same as he speaks through his teeth.

"Touch her, and I'll cut off your dick and shove it down your throat. She is mine, and the only one who gets to fuck her throat, pussy, or ass is me." The possessive tone of his voice makes me shiver and heightens my pleasure. He's doing things to me I never thought were possible, making me feel things I never wanted to experience before.

He leans over me, one hand on either side of my body, lowering his head to pant into my ear. “Shit, see, they all want you. They wish they were me, balls deep in this tight pussy. They want to be the one you’re screaming for.”

“Oh, Colton...” I manage between the moans I can’t contain, louder and louder every time he crashes against me. It hurts so good...

“Are you gonna come for me? Are you gonna squeeze my cock tighter than you already are?”

“Yes!” I gasp, the sensations building to their peak.

I was already so close, but this? I couldn’t keep myself from coming if I wanted to—and I don’t want to, not at all. I want to fall apart in front of these people. I want them to remember this. To remember him and me.

“Let me hear it. Let me hear you come, baby.” And then he yanks on the leash, pulling my head back, and I let out something between a sob and a scream as that last little bit of sensation shatters me, leaving me shaking and screaming and falling apart for everyone to see.

By the time the rush of blood in my ears quiets enough that I can hear what’s happening around me, Colton roars his own release, sending a splash of hot cum across my ass. I’ve never felt so dirty, so used, so triumphant.

I notice the smiles around me, smiles of approval, and even catch one of the men coming down the throat of his eager partner. He came while watching me. A shudder runs through me, and now all I want is to do it again.

But not just yet. There are limits to what my body’s capable of, and right now, I am so sore I’m not sure I’ll be able to walk.

It’s only another moment before Colton wipes me clean—they must keep towels on hand for this. I don’t try to get up until he tugs on the leash, and his little smirk when we are face to face again tells me that was the right move. He likes to be in control.

And it seems I like being controlled.

I guess you learn something new every day.

“How did you like that?” he asks, though, of course, he must know.

“What do you think?” I lower my gaze, looking down at his crotch before meeting his eyes again. “You felt it. I’ve never come that hard in my life.”

“I always had a feeling there was a bad girl underneath the surface.” That gets me blushing, which of course, makes him laugh. “Come on. You can finish cleaning up, then we’ll go upstairs. They’ll be seating us for dinner soon.”

“Good, I’m starving.”

He smells faintly of sweat and cologne when he pulls me in close, lowering his head so our lips brush. “Just know I’m not finished with you. Nowhere near it.”

Sore or not, I don’t want him to be. Because I’m not finished with him, either.

COLTON

I'M WALKING ON AIR BY THE TIME WE ENTER THE DINING ROOM on the third floor, surrounded on all sides by windows giving us a view of the riverfront and the fireworks that are soon to come.

Several tables are already in use, guests enjoying drinks and conversation after playing downstairs. I recognize a couple of them as witnesses to what went on between Harper and me.

I still can't wrap my head around it. She's like a dream come true—willing, even eager, and clearly just as hot as I was over performing for an audience. It's like she was made for me. All this time, I never imagined finding someone in tune with my needs.

And of all people, it would happen to be the bookworm I had a crush on in high school.

At my request, we're seated in the corner, the table with the best view of the river. "This is incredible," she whispers, her head on a swivel as she takes in the luxurious surroundings. No one would ever guess from outside that there's a fine restaurant up here, with soft lighting and music, candles on the tables, expensive china, gold cutlery. Christmas trees still sit in the corners, twinkling festively.

"They grill the best porterhouse in town if you can believe that." She's still looking around in amazement as I peruse the wine list, choosing a cabernet sauvignon before handing the list back to our server.

“I would never guess this was here.”

“They keep it that way. They’re discreet, as they expect their clientele to be.”

“So, is this what rich people do when they go out to have fun?”

The innocence in her question makes me laugh gently. “Yes, to be honest. And the membership fees reflect that.”

“I feel like I’m dreaming.” The nasty little minx I fucked downstairs has faded to the background, while the innocent, shy little nerd has come forward again. But I get it. When all you want in the whole world is to come, you tend to forget your inhibitions. Afterward, it’s a different story.

But unlike virtually every partner I’ve ever had, I don’t want to shake Harper off like a piece of gum on my shoe. Instead of getting tired of her the moment my dick softens, I want more. Not just her body, either. I want her laughter. I want her open, honest wonder. Like the look that came over her when we emerged from the hotel to find a limousine waiting. I want to give her more reasons to look that way.

Once the wine is poured, I raise my glass to her. “Is this how you imagined ringing out the old year?”

Her cheeks flush as she touches her glass to mine. “You know the answer to that.”

“I have to say, I didn’t imagine you would be as quick to fall in line.”

“I guess there’s a lot about me you don’t know.”

“Tell the truth. There’s a lot about you that you don’t know, either.”

She smiles faintly, nodding. “No, but I’m starting to learn.”

My cock is stirring again. It seems like he can’t get enough of her, either. Maybe it’s because I’ve had her, but she’s even more gorgeous than ever—eyes sparkling, the full lips drawing my attention and making me remember how good they feel wrapped around me, better than I ever imagined. I took off her collar so she could enjoy her meal, but it’s in my pocket, ready

to be used again. The faint line circling her throat is a reminder of how easy it was to bend her to my will.

“Real talk.” I lean in slightly, lowering my voice and meeting her gaze. “What’s life been like for you since high school? I guess you already have a pretty good idea of how it’s been for me. I started working for my dad’s firm in my senior year of college. Once my father saw how well I did, he retired. What about you?”

She’s a turtle retreating into its shell, her shoulders hunching, her confidence draining. “You were right about me sticking around back home. I was going to go away for college, but then my dad got sick, and Mom needed me to help out. So I ended up going to community college the first two years, then taking online courses for the rest of my undergrad and graduate work. I just graduated this past semester. In the meantime, I worked part-time doing bookkeeping for a couple of the little places around town.”

And there she was, one of the smartest girls in class. “You were going to Columbia, weren’t you?”

Her features pinch in obvious pain. “I don’t want to talk about it. No offense.”

“None taken.” What a fucking disappointment that must have been. All these years, she’s been sticking around a town where Main Street goes dark at dinner time. Aside from the movie theater, there was nothing to do at night but hang out and maybe get drunk in the woods. She’s too old for that now. “Did anybody else stick around town?”

“Not really.” She laughs shakily, then takes another sip of her wine before adding, “Now you see why I was willing to do anything to keep this job. It’s my way out.”

“I’m glad you got the job, though I’m not surprised. You’re a fucking genius.”

“Is that the word you used to describe me back in the day?” Her head tilts to the side, her lips twitching in a smirk. “Because back then, I’m pretty sure you called me a nerd. Dork. The bookworm, the loser...”

“You know that’s not how I really felt, especially when we got to know each other.”

“Really? Because the last thing I remember, you were making a big joke of asking me out on a date.”

The bitter note in her voice is surprising. “Who was joking?”

“You were. Like I just said.”

“I was not joking. I was dead serious. I wanted to take you out.” I wanted to do a lot more than that, if memory serves. “You were the one who turned me down without even thinking about it.”

She sits back, brows drawing together. “Because I figured you were joking.”

“I meant it.”

“How was I supposed to know? I mean, you never even spoke to me before we had that project together.”

“I know that.”

“All your friends were jocks. And they always used to snicker behind my back. Who could blame me for thinking you were just screwing around to embarrass me?”

“I wish you had said something then. I would have set you straight.”

“And how would you have done that?”

“How do you think?” When she blushes, I know she gets my point. All this wasted time, all because of crossed wires.

“We were kids,” I remind her. “Kids make mistakes. But I’m glad fate brought us together again tonight.” I can’t help but grin before asking, “Are you glad?”

“What do you think?” There’s a devilish gleam in her eyes, that disappears before the server approaches to take our dinner order.

They’re busy in the kitchen, every table full, but I don’t mind waiting. How often do I have the opportunity to sit

across the table from a woman who stimulates more than just my dick? Maybe it's the sense of her knowing me, that familiarity. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since high school, but at my core, I'm the same person I always was. There is a sort of shorthand between us that only comes from past acquaintance. I haven't been able to enjoy that in years.

"I would love to show you around town once you settle in," I offer over our salad course. "I could even introduce you to a few people I think you'd get along with. I'll show you the sights. Introduce you to more establishments like the one in which we're currently seated..."

She giggles but can't hide her intrigue. "I thought you were rarely in town, and men like you were too busy for things like that?"

"I will never be too busy for you."

Shit. I didn't mean for that to come out, not that way. It turns out she's bringing back old habits, too, such as the way I used to blurt out whatever stupid thing was at the forefront of my mind before common sense could convince me otherwise.

Staring down at her salad, she murmurs, "That's very nice, but..."

"No. Don't pretend this is nothing but kindness or something I feel like I have to do. When I find something I want, there's nothing that can get in my way."

She lowers her fork to the plate, gaping at me. "Are you saying you want me? For more than sex?"

"And if I was?"

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything." It's only ten minutes until midnight, and boats now clog the river, everyone waiting for the big show. A sense of excitement spreads over the dining room as champagne is handed out to the guests in preparation for midnight.

She bites her lip, staring at me with an almost uncomfortable intensity. "Are you playing me? You don't have

to. We can leave tonight where it is.”

“That’s what you think of me?”

“It took me a long time to get over you. I guess I’m not looking forward to going through that again.”

“You liked me that much?”

“Colton, I might as well tell you I was in love with you. Completely crazy about you. But you were about as attainable as the moon.” She looks out the window toward that glowing orb, the light from it shining on her face, making her hair glow like fire. “And yeah, there were times when I thought that maybe we were connecting. So when you made it sound like a joke when you asked me out, laughing and everything, it broke my heart.”

I don’t know what’s come over me. I only know I can’t sit at this table with her for another moment before making sure she understands something. I stand, extending a hand, and she hesitates for only a moment before taking it and following me to the alcove where the restroom doors sit. It’s sheltered from the rest of the dining room, and I take advantage of that by pushing her up against the wall between the doors.

“What are you doing?” she whispers, looking in the direction we just came from. “Everyone will—”

“A handful of those people just watched you fuck downstairs. You think it matters?” My fingers wrap around her jaw, and I tilt her head up so our eyes meet. “Nothing about tonight has anything to do with kindness. I didn’t offer to spend time with you because I feel sorry for you or to make up for the way I hurt you. I didn’t even know I had.”

The temptation to kiss her is almost too strong to resist. “I’m not used to being sorry for what I’ve done,” I whisper, staring at her luscious lips. “But I am sorry I caused you pain. Truly, I am.”

“Thank you?” The fact that it’s a shaky little question makes me chuckle, but the sound dies in my throat as my body tunes into her nearness. She’s a drug, one that has me under its spell. Every short, hitching breath that thrusts her tits against

my chest. Every slight whimper, like the one that squeezes its way from her throat when I tighten the pressure from my hand. It isn't pain, no. It's need, she's needy, she's needy for me. Who wouldn't get off on that?

Who wouldn't want to rain pleasure down on her until she begs them to stop?

That's what's on my mind as I run a hand down her body, taking her thigh and lifting it, draping it over my hip. Opening her so my fingers can delve into her sweetness. She's wet again, and that's no surprise—and she clutches my shoulders, eyes closing, breathing hard, fast, enveloping me in heat.

It's not enough to touch her. I need to taste. I slowly lower myself, running my mouth over her tits and stomach, before working her dress up.

She seizes up, pushing ineffectually at my shoulders. "You can't!"

That ends when I take her wrists and pry her hands away. "Don't tell me what I can't do."

She's lost by the time my mouth covers her pussy, my ready tongue working its way into her slit, the scent, and taste of her enough to make me forget there are dozens of people only feet from where I'm eating her with a hunger that goes far beyond anything physical. I need this woman. I need her in my world. I need her to become my world.

And I need to become hers.

It doesn't take long before her protestations turn to something else, something deep and primal, her fingers tangling in my hair, and she grinds her hips, humping my face the way I told her she would. She fights against the sounds of pleasure stirring deep in her, settling only for soft whimpers that I pull from her with every lap of my tongue, with every flick against her clit.

I could die doing this and do it without regret. This is what I was made for. She is who I was made for. Pleasing her, fucking her, introducing her to pleasure beyond her wildest dreams.

“Oh... oh, yes...” Her nails dig into my scalp as she climbs, climbs, shivering and grinding and losing herself entirely, forgetting right and wrong in favor of sensation. Sweet, musky nectar flows from her like honey from the comb, and I catch it, drinking it down, savoring every drop. Knowing I’m lucky enough to be the man to taste her.

The last man who ever will.

I’m only dimly aware of the countdown starting in the dining room. “Twenty! Nineteen! Eighteen!”

“Fuck, Colton!” Her hips jerk wildly, her hands holding my head in place as she races toward release, grinding in desperation. I take her clit between my lips and suck, flicking with the tip of my tongue, racing against time. I’m going to make her come at the stroke of midnight. She’s never going to forget this.

“Fourteen! Thirteen!” I add one, then two fingers, driving them deep inside her. She bears down on them, hips jerking, so wet it coats my chin when I can’t catch it fast enough.

“Ten! Nine! Eight!”

“My god!” She tenses up, her voice a high-pitched squeak. “I’m going to come!”

“Three! Two! One!”

“Fuck! Yes!” She pulls my head in just once more before a fresh flood of juice pours from her twitching hole, the muscles rippling around my fingers, her clit pulsing.

Cheers and shouts erupt all around us, but I ignore them in favor of standing, wrapping my arms around her, and holding her against me. She’s weak, shaking, and panting for breath. Red, gold, and green lights flash across her face as the fireworks begin.

“Happy New Year,” I murmur, my lips close to her ear. She smiles—lazy, a little dazed—and tilts her head back when I lean in for a kiss, eyes closing. Ready for me.

This goddess. My heart aches at the sight of her perfect beauty, the trust radiating from her. It’s humbling knowing she

trusts me this way.

All of that goes into the kiss I press against her lips, my arms tightening around her warm, willing body. I'm holding the entire world here and now, parting her lips with my tongue, my heart soaring when she wraps her arms around my neck and holds me tight. There's nothing in the world but the two of us.

And there never will be.

HARPER

I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER BEEN THIS HAPPILY EXHAUSTED IN my whole life.

It's a whole new world now. I'm a different person than I was when I walked out of this hotel. The girl climbing out of the limo now, her hand in Colton's much larger one is worlds away from the wide-eyed girl who never rode in a limo before tonight. It's only been a matter of hours—it's barely two in the morning—but it may as well have been years between then and now.

I lean against Colton as we cross the lobby, quieter than before but not completely dead. We're not the only people stumbling in after hours of partying. "Is it wrong to wonder if people know?"

He doesn't need to ask what I mean. "Unless they were there, there's no way—though you do look thoroughly fucked."

"Seriously?" I ask, shocked.

"You think they haven't seen anything like that before? Come on." He laughs gently, pulling me in a little closer, his arm around my waist. I've never felt so safe and protected.

I guess he has a point. There's probably been plenty of action right here in this hotel, come to think of it.

I still can't believe I'm here with him. He's so handsome; the girls behind the front desk stop and watch. When I turn their way, raising an eyebrow, they pretend to be busy. "This feels like a dream," I muse as we step onto the elevator. My

feet are killing me, and I'm sore almost all over, but I'm happy. Happier than I've been in a long time. Like I made up for years of not having a life at all in one short night.

And I have him to thank for it, the man still standing with his arm around me. Protective? Possessive? I don't know. I only know it feels good. And to think, I was shocked and angry when I found him in the room. But I never could have guessed how things would turn out, either.

Now I wish there was more to this than a single night. My heart sinks not at the idea but at the fact that I had the idea in the first place. This is not a man to fall for. We had fun, a lot of fun, but I need to get over it now. Right now, right this very minute, or else I could end up with my heart broken all over again.

“Bed, sweet bed.” Once we're in the room, I sink onto it, not bothering to take my coat off before I do. What matters more is getting these heels off—I'm not used to walking in them, and my feet are starting to go numb.

When Colton catches me messing with the straps, he sinks to one knee before me. “Let me.” Even now, half-dead with exhaustion, I can't help but thrill at his touch. He takes his work seriously, carefully unfastening the buckles before loosening the straps covering my feet and ankles, then easing the shoes away from my feet. I let out a blissful sigh, one that only gets louder when he begins rubbing one foot with his big, strong hands.

“You don't have to do that,” I whisper, though I don't want him to stop.

“Again, telling me what I should and shouldn't do. Don't you know better by now?”

He's right. I should know better. Instead of telling him to stop, I settle into it, allowing the pressure from his hands to soothe the ache in my feet.

Unfortunately, a new ache is starting to stir. One that begins a lot higher up, the place where my thighs join. Not a

minute ago, I was sure I couldn't do anything else tonight but pass out cold.

Now, watching him take the job of rubbing my feet so seriously, on his knees in front of me... It's intoxicating, the way the rest of the night has been.

“How are your legs? Are they sore, too?”

“Now that you mention it...” I bite back a giggle as he moves his hands further up until he's massaging my calves. It's magic, his skillful touch, how he applies just the right amount of pressure until I could just about melt into nothing.

“I like this too.” He goes from staring at my legs to looking up at me. “Alone, all to myself. With nobody else looking at you.”

He works his way up to my thighs, and I realize I'm holding my breath as he inches the hem of my dress higher and higher, exposing an inch of skin at a time. Soon, it's not enough for him to only touch me. He begins dragging his lips over my skin, and there's nothing for me to do but sink deep into mindless bliss, every touch, every brush of his lips, and flick of his tongue pulling me deeper into pleasure.

But it's different than before. I couldn't describe it in words if I tried. I only know how it feels. He's gentler now than he was at the club. Almost considerate. I'm not going to fool myself into thinking it means anything, but is it wrong that I sort of want it to?

No, you idiot, it's just for tonight. Maybe it would be better if I stopped him?

I would also be the stupidest person in the world if I did. Who would stop this? The anticipation that makes my breath catch and my heart race, the growing heat, the promise of what's to come.

Besides, now that he said it, I understand something else: I want him all to myself, too. Just the two of us, one more time. If I have to spend the rest of my life without him, I might as well have plenty to remember him by.

By the time the dress is around my hips, and he's begun to lap at the soft seam between my leg and my mound, I'm on my back, writhing, moaning his name. I want to lose myself in him again, to lose all connection to the girl I was when I woke up this morning. I want what he brings out of me. He called me a goddess, and that's who I want to be, his goddess. Someone worthy of worship.

And he is worshipping me, lapping at my covered pussy before pulling the panties down, over my knees, my ankles. But instead of eating me again, he sits me up, his brow furrowed in concentration as he strips off my coat, tossing it aside before unzipping my dress and sliding it down my shoulders, my arms, until finally, he pulls it off entirely, where it joins my coat on the floor.

"These tits. Perfection." That's all he says before burying his face between them, grunting like an animal, then unfastening my bra so he can feast on my nipples. Back and forth he goes, taking his time running his tongue in slow, lazy circles before drawing them between his teeth and sucking. All I can do is whimper my approval, running my hands through his hair and holding him as close as I can.

I want him. Not just tonight, but always. I've never felt more alive—who could blame me for not wanting to give this up?

He releases me with a popping sound, looking up to give me an almost drowsy smile. "You are perfect." Those three little words go straight to my pussy, making my clit throb painfully. Perfect. He thinks I'm perfect.

I need to touch him. I need to feel him and explore him like I haven't been able to yet. I take off his tie, then begin unbuttoning his shirt. I want to touch what I've seen. I need to commit every bit of him to memory.

I shouldn't be surprised that once his shirt is off and I begin running my hands over his impossibly huge shoulders and chest, that he's quick to take my wrists in his hands and hold them together.

"What are you doing?" I ask with a nervous laugh.

He doesn't answer verbally, but he doesn't really need to once he wraps the silk tie around my wrists and pulls tight, rendering me pretty much helpless.

He then pushes me back onto the bed, holding my wrists above my head with one hand while nudging my legs apart with his body. His covered erection presses against my pussy, and my eyes roll back in my head at the unbelievable heat building there. Not just heat, either.

Hunger. A deep yearning for more. For all of him.

"Fuck me," I whisper, blushing but not caring. I'm beyond that point now.

"I'll see what I can do." Still holding my wrists in place, he undoes his belt and fly with his other hand, staring down at me all the while. I can hardly breathe; I'm so thrilled and nervous and excited. It's the look in his eyes that does it, I think. Like there's nowhere he'd rather be than right here, right now. On top of me, pulling his erect dick free from his shorts before shoving them down until he is as naked as I am.

I wrap my legs around his hips and pull him closer—if I can't use my hands, I'll use whatever else I have available. I just want the touch of his skin, to test the firmness of his muscles.

And, of course, there's the impressive rod between us, flopping against my stomach before he positions it, the head pressed against my soaked entrance. He runs his head through my slick juices, breathing faster, the way I am, before pushing forward.

"Oh, shit!" I shout when he invades me again, filling and stretching me. Bringing me to that place between pain and pleasure but easing me closer to pleasure with every sure, deep stroke.

"You like that big cock inside you?" he grunts, laughing softly when I moan my response. Yes, I like it. I love it. I could get very used to it.

He's taking me, yes, making me strain against him and fight the tie around my wrists.

But I'm taking him, too. Working with him. Moving my hips to meet his thrusts, sweeter all the time. Pulling him deeper with my legs. Arching my back so my nipples rub against his chest.

I'm afraid to look him in the eye, afraid of what I'll see. Or what I won't see—no matter how much I want to. I don't know what would be worse. Instead, I close them. It's safer that way.

But it doesn't keep my heart from swelling. It's the smell of him, the feel of his body, his helpless grunts as he takes pleasure in me. The special something that makes him who he is.

He's only going to hurt you.

I squeeze my eyes tightly shut like that will force the thought away. I can't think about it. I need to live in the moment for once.

"Harper... Harper..." It's music, the sound of him groaning my name. I wish I could record it and play it for the rest of my life. Even if it wouldn't be the same but then nothing ever could.

Oh, no.

I fell for him again, didn't I?

"You have one more left in you?" he whispers before running his lips over my jaw, my chin, and down my throat. "Can you come for me again?"

I don't have a choice, do I? Because even the slightest touch is enough to set me on fire. All I can do is hold on while he takes me closer, closer, losing his rhythm in favor of taking me harder. Faster. Until we're nothing more than two rutting animals, fucking like it's our last night on earth.

It might as well be because I can't imagine going back to my life without him.

"So sweet... Harper... my goddess... wrapped around my cock..." He invades my mouth with his tongue, plunging in and out in time with his deep strokes that feel like they're

about to split me in two—but not before I come, and I’m going to. I’m so close now I can almost taste it.

And when it happens, when the wave breaks and crashes against me, I’m almost pulled under by the force. I’m barely aware of Colton’s last burst of speed, his animal growl before pulling out to come across my stomach.

It’s over. I wish it wasn’t, but it couldn’t go on forever. My heart sinks with the fading aftershocks of my body’s release. The smaller and quieter they become, the deeper my regret. Because it’s over. I’ll never get this back.

He doesn’t say much, rolling away from me and untying my wrists. I’m still a breathless lump by the time he washes me clean, then pulls back the blankets and helps me beneath them. How can he go from being so domineering to treating me so tenderly? It’s like he’s two different people.

And I’ve fallen for both of them.

“I don’t know about you,” he finally says, sighing and joining me between the sheets, “but I’m wiped.” I groan my agreement, smiling in happiness when he wraps me in his arms and pulls me close to his chest.

That’s how I fall asleep. In his arms, my body still trembling in the aftermath of the best night of my life, with a smile on my face.

By the time my eyes open again, it’s morning, sunlight streaming through the gap in the drapes. I only slept four hours or so, but it’s going to have to be enough.

Because I want so much to stay, which means I have to leave. Now. Before I come up with a reason not to.

I won’t let him be the one who leaves me. He won’t hurt me this time.

I’m as quiet as I can be as I pull sweats from my suitcase, pulling them on in the bathroom. Last night’s makeup is more or less in place after I forgot to wash it off, so I skip washing my face now to keep from waking Colton. He’s still out cold, thank god.

I can't face him. I couldn't handle the excuses, or worse, if he acted like nothing happened.

So even though my heart feels like it's going to explode from the pain of leaving, I tiptoe to the door with my bag in hand before turning the handle as slowly and quietly as possible.

Not quietly enough.

"What the fuck are you doing?" His voice is as sharp as a whip crack, startling me into yelping as I spin around.

I expected to feel guilty if he caught me.

I didn't expect the rush of fear. Because I never imagined him charging out of bed and across the room, his eyes blazing, his teeth bared in a snarl. "Do you think I'm letting you sneak out on me?"

There's barely time to breathe before he drags me back to the bed and throws me onto it. "Wait!" I beg, holding my hands out in front of me. "This was only supposed to be for one night. I have to get home."

"Only for one night?" He takes my arms again, this time pressing me against the mattress. "How do you not get it?"

"Get what?" I whisper, teeth chattering. It's like he's another person again—not just dark, but violent. The way he's looking at me, he wants to hurt me.

His smile doesn't help anything since it's downright sinister. "I'm changing the terms of our agreement."

COLTON

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND.” THE WAY HER VOICE IS SHAKING, she’s not only confused. She’s terrified. Of me.

Right now, she has every reason to be. Leaving like that? Sneaking away from me? “What is there to misunderstand? You belong with me. You have no right sneaking out of here like that.”

Her eyelids flutter so fast I’m afraid she’s about to pass out. “You must’ve known after things went the way they did that I can’t let you go,” I insist. “That wasn’t a one-night experience. You are not a one-night woman.”

“What are you saying?” She squirms against me, but it’s hopeless. No way could she break free.

“I’m saying you’re staying with me now. I’m not letting you go this time. I’m not a stupid kid anymore.”

Her eyes dart over my face. There’s makeup smeared beneath them, a reminder of everything that went on between us. How could she imagine that’s where we’d end? I thought she was supposed to be smart.

“Be serious, Colton.” This time around, she’s the one who tries to laugh it off. Like it’s all a joke. Now I understand how that could’ve hurt her years ago. Here I am, telling the woman she’s all I want, ready to kill her before I let her go. And she’s laughing.

“You think I’m fucking around? How can I convince you?” My grip on her arms goes tight until she sucks in a pained breath. “Do I need to fuck you again? Because I will if

it gets the point across. You are not leaving me. You are never leaving me.”

“But...” Her voice softens, along with the fear etched across her face. “I don’t get it. You want to be with me? For real?”

“For real,” I murmur, lost in her eyes. She’s magic, pulling me under her spell even when I’m half-crazy with outrage and the knowledge that had I slept deeper, she would’ve gotten away. Sure, I could’ve easily found her, but that’s not the point.

It’s making sure she knows I’m not letting her go, something I should’ve made clearer last night.

But last night, I couldn’t know what it would be like, opening my eyes and seeing her standing at the door. The way my heart clenched. The dropping of my stomach. The sense of losing everything that ever mattered.

“But you’re... you. Why would you want me when you can have any woman in the world?” There’s that innocence again. I’m helpless against it. The last of my anger melts away—I release her, pulling her up until she’s sitting beside me.

“When I saw you step off the elevator last night, every other woman in the world ceased to exist.” She opens her mouth, prepared to argue, but I shut her up with a hand over her mouth. “Shut up and let me talk. You’re all I want. You’re all I’ve ever wanted. I understand now why no other woman has ever been enough.”

“Colton...” she mumbles, the word muffled. “Please don’t say things like that. Be honest.”

“I mean it.” Cupping her face, I draw her close. Fuck. She is so precious, so fragile and perfect, and so in need of my protection and adoration. I can’t believe I went this long without her. “Nobody could measure up to you.”

She covers my hands with hers, a smile beginning to spread. “I’m just me.”

Just her? Talk about an understatement. “You’re everything. I already knew you were special when we were

kids, but I've seen some things. I've been places and I've met people, and time has only made you more special."

"I wish I could believe that."

"I'll show you. Just tell me how. What can I do?" All she does is laugh in disbelief. "I'm serious. I'll spend every day of the rest of my life demonstrating what you mean to me. How important you are."

I can't keep a slight growl out of my voice as I add, "How you belong to me and nobody else. Nobody is ever going to touch you but me. Morning, noon, and night. You're mine."

She bites her lip, and I know I have her. Because no matter what her so-called good sense tells her, there's a deeper understanding at work. Part of her that understands the connection we have. How unbreakable it is.

"I didn't want to leave," she whispers. "I really didn't."

My heart's going to burst out of my chest. It's too full. "So why did you try?"

"I didn't want to have to face you if you acted like last night didn't mean anything. It would've killed me."

"I could never."

"I was afraid to take the chance." Her hands slide up my arms until they reach my shoulders. Her touch is a balm, soothing me. Healing me. "Last night meant so much to me. I couldn't stand finding out it didn't mean as much to you."

"You're kidding?" I'm laughing as I lie down, bringing her with me. "I intend on making that our New Year's tradition. Making you come as the clock strikes midnight."

"That was pretty amazing."

"And the ideal way to start a fresh year. A fresh life. The two of us."

"This is crazy. You know that, right?"

"People told me I was crazy to expand the company into Europe. Here I am, my business thriving. My instincts are

never wrong.” I press my lips to her forehead, her nose, her eyelids. My precious, precious girl. My goddess.

“What about my job?”

“What about it? You don’t have to work, ever. Not anymore.”

She surprises me by pulling back—but I shouldn’t be surprised. I’ve known since we spent afternoons in my parents’ basement, books and posterboard spread out in front of us, that she’s a hard worker and stubborn as hell, and she takes pride in both.

“I didn’t go through all that schoolwork to give up my career now. I wouldn’t be happy that way.”

“Whatever makes you happy, then. I’ll move my home office. Or you can come to New York with me and work out of that office. So long as we’re together, nothing else matters.”

“You really mean that, huh?”

“Harper, I’m in love with you.” I have to laugh at myself—those words have never come out of my mouth before now because I never had a reason to so much as consider them. Now, they fall out of my mouth like it’s nothing. “All I want is you and me. No matter where we are, and I want you to know that I never intended to take your job. You would’ve still been working for the company had you not become mine.”

“Thank god.” She closes her eyes, sending tears rolling down her cheeks, wetting my hands. “I love you, too. I always did. Even when I hated you.”

“Forget about that now.” I draw her close, needing her in my arms. We have so much time to make up for. “Let’s start fresh. Here and now. For the rest of our lives.”

“That sounds good to me.”

How did I get this lucky? Now I understand how pointless life was starting to feel, with nothing but work to keep me going. Having the promise of her in my arms and my life—being able to treat her like the queen she is—has given me purpose. I can’t wait to spoil the shit out of her.

But first...

“There’s one thing we need to talk about.” I lean back to scowl down at her. “You’re wearing too many clothes. Let’s do something about that.”

EPILOGUE

HARPER

“THAT’S RIGHT... JUST LIKE THAT... SHOW ME HOW MUCH YOU love it...”

My head bobs up and down in Colton’s lap while his praise rings in my ears. When I close my eyes, I can almost pretend we’re alone. That there aren’t handfulls of people wandering past our room, a few of them lingering nearby. Watching and enjoying.

It’s always like this. I love the time we spend alone at the penthouse we now share, but there’s something special about doing it in front of strangers. Something especially dark and dirty—in other words, hotter.

We never invite others to play with us, though we’ve been propositioned more than once. It’s not going to happen, and wouldn’t even if I wanted it to. As far as Colton is concerned, others can watch us and be jealous, but that’s it.

I don’t want or need anyone else. I have everything right here.

The sounds of his pleasure have the same effect as always. After three months, I still get wet at the slightest touch. Knowing I can make him feel good is a high that goes way beyond anything physical. It makes me proud. It brings me joy.

Knowing others are watching while I do it, though, is what leaves me with no choice but to slide a hand between my legs so I can touch myself. I need relief after at least an hour spent

watching others playing around the club. The ultimate foreplay.

“No. Get up.” He pulls me off him by my shoulders, his voice sharp. “You’re saving that pussy for me. Climb up here.” Slouching a little, he gives me space in his lap, reaching for me to straddle him.

“I need to come,” I whisper, raising myself up so he can position himself against me.

“Greedy. You haven’t come enough tonight? You can’t stop at three?”

I have to laugh a little as I lower my body, taking him inside me. The soft groans coming from behind me are nothing compared to what stirs in my chest. Deep satisfaction takes the form of a long, low moan until I settle in at Colton’s base.

As always, there’s a mixture of animalistic lust and tenderness in those gray eyes. “You need to come? Make yourself come, baby. Give us all a show.” His hands on my cheeks, he parts them slightly so the people watching can see him disappearing into me.

Nobody at the office would ever guess this is what we do in our free time. I decided to move to New York to be with him. He’s nothing short of professional, always, with me and everybody else. He might maul me the minute we’re alone, but it never gets in the way of business. That’s part of what’s made him a success at such a young age. He knows how to separate work and play.

And when he plays, he plays hard.

Lucky me, being his playmate. Being his means clearing his head and relieving his tension.

“I love you,” I moan, my head falling back so my long, red locks brush against the small of my back. I love how free he makes me feel. How loved and cherished. How respected and dominated at the same time.

I love how he fills in all my empty spaces and makes me feel complete.

“I love you,” he whispers against my skin between slow, wet kisses over my breasts. “My goddess. My world. Always.”

Then he wraps my hair around his fist and yanks my head back until I gasp. “Now fuck me,” he growls through clenched teeth, and I shudder in response before doing as he says.

Just like I always do and always will.

The End

Darcy Rose

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Darcy Rose is a USA Today Bestselling author of steam novellas with a dark edge.

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