

Dear Valentine,
I'm crazy about you.

KNIVES AND KISSES

STOLEN OBSESSIONS
A VALENTINE'S NOVELLA

AURELIA KNIGHT

**KNIVES
AND
KISSES**

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This book is dedicated to anyone who has ever gotten shit for loving themselves a little too much, and anyone who needs to love themselves a little more. You are enough.

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CONTENT WARNING

Knives and Kisses is a very dark Valentine's novella with triggering themes and content throughout. This is a quick, smutty read with a fun connection to Stolen Obsessions, but no major tie-ins! This is a loose Saint Valentine retelling, with a lot of theater kid shenanigans.

This book contains graphic, violent and sexual content that may be upsetting to some readers. The following lists some, not all, of the potentially sensitive subjects included. If you have a specific concern please reach out on www.AureliaKnight.com or in Aurelia's Facebook group [Aurelia's Illicit Library](#).

Dub/non-con, murder, Mentions of mental health topics, breath play, stalking, extreme exhibitionism, knife and blood play, physical threats and coercion.



CHAPTER 1

CICI

“ARMS, TAKE YOUR LAST TRACE! AND, LIPS, O YOU, THE doors of breath, seal with a passionate kiss!” A brunet Romeo impersonator misquotes the greatest love interest of all time.

“I swear to God, Corey. If you screw this line up one more time, I’m going to replace you!” I sit up from my spot on the painted wooden box that serves as my fake deathbed.

My best friend smiles and bats his eyelashes as if his charm will work on me. I may love the kid, but I am not one of the countless chicks who falls over him, and nothing is more important to me right now than this show. We are four days from curtain.

“Come on, Cici. Who are you going to find to replace me? You know you don’t want to kiss any of them.” He gestures toward our primarily male cast, who already each play multiple characters, and except for the actresses playing Lady Capulet and Lady Montague, who I wouldn’t mind kissing, he’s correct.

I sigh.

“I don’t want to kiss you either, Corey, yet I’ve done it repeatedly for the sake of my art.”

“Art, shm-art,” he snarks.

I take a deep breath and open and close my fists. He’s still smiling.

“From the top. Get it right, or I’ll put up a flyer at the community theater and replace you with someone who can act,

forget wanting to kiss them. They did *Romeo and Juliet* last month.”

“You wound me, Cici. I’m very talented,” he complains with a flourish only drama kids possess.

When he learns his lines, maybe.

As we’re moving back to our marks, a bright flash of light splashes across the stage as the door to the theater opens. A throat clears through the blinding brightness at the top of the aisle, and I push Corey away from me and get to my feet.

“Excuse me, this is a closed rehearsal.”

The door closes, and my eyes adjust to find the director of the theater department wearing one of her trademark brightly patterned suits with her locks twisted like a crown around her head. Professor Dillon is missing her usual bright smile, and I snap my back straight.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Professor.” I step back, nervousness replacing my irritation.

This is my big moment. I’m a senior and Juliet in our Valentine’s production. My cast might not be serious, but I am, and this woman is someone I want to impress, someone with connections and expertise.

“Cecilia, listen. I have some not great news.” Her Jamaican accent is soft, but her voice carries.

I take a deep breath as her words knock me in the chest. She has never personally visited me. Though I’ve done the opposite many times and talked her ear off about department problems as well as my own. She’s been kind and helpful to me even when she didn’t have much time.

“Which is?” I ask, only out of respect for her. I’m sure I don’t actually want to know.

“*Romeo and Juliet* is canceled. The dean just called. Our football team has officially moved up to D1 as a result of the season that just ended, and Valen Throne has been fielding scouts left and right. He’s a top pick for the draft. They’re holding an awards ceremony on Saturday night before he

heads off to vacation in France. They need the stage, and absolutely nothing can be done about it.” Her lips purse, but I don’t think it’s me she’s angry with.

“The show is Saturday night. That’s four days from now,” I answer stupidly, her words slowly sinking into my brain but still feeling impossible. “We’ve been rehearsing for months.”

She twists her fingers.

“I know this is a big deal, Cecilia. I am so sorry.”

She does know, more than anyone other than Corey, who only knows the details of my brother’s condition because they were friends first, and he still goes to the hospital to visit him often. She knows this is my last chance to shine.

“Why the hell can’t they do it Friday? Or somewhere else?” I’m about to cry, and it’s for so much more than this moment.

“I wasn’t actually given those details.”

“Why not? You’re the head of the department.” I’m whining, and I know it, yet I can’t stop.

“Cecilia, I need you to be professional. This isn’t a personal decision, nor am I the one making it.” She steels herself before she actually answers my question. “They want to do it before the draft pick is announced. They assume once it is, he’ll be in the NFL and too busy for them to use for publicity.” I don’t think they told her the last part either, but we both know it’s true.

My show is canceled because the quarterback needs to have his party before he’s even picked?

My gaze searches the stage for some divine inspiration hiding in the maroon-curtained wings or the set that we’ve painted and compiled by hand with almost no budget. I’ve seen much greater miracles happen in a theater. Only the theater light is on today—no crowd, no magic.

For now, I see nothing but lost potential and the fact that the world has given up on us. Tears fill my eyes as I look over the roses Jeremy—the actor playing Tybalt—and I spent hours

painting onto a giant wooden crate we found behind the art department. Our department used to have funding. Our freshman showcase was astounding, but everything started to change when the football team, led by Valen Throne, won the playoffs.

The university has been on a downhill path ever since, all because of the pretty boy jock who loves himself more than Eros or Cupid, the Greek gods of carnal and romantic love painted into the set design meant to stand for Friar Lawrence's vicar.

I'm absolutely crushed. My dreams are pounded into the stage beneath my feet scuffed into the tape, signaling our marks. I could give in to the immensity of my grief and disappointment, but the feeling forcing a stray tear out of my eye is anger. The whole universe may be conspiring against me, but I know I should blame one person for this.

"Why do they need a ceremony at all? They made Division 1! Who cares? He's not in the NFL!" My anger overtakes the worst of my sadness and uses the bits of my devastation for fuel.

"Cici." She sounds incredibly tired. "You know as well as I do the school has moved away from the theater arts and put their backing behind the sports department. This isn't the same university it was when you started. This is a huge deal for them. We can't compete."

I know that. The whole theater department knows that. We haven't even put anyone up for the National Theater Consortium since sophomore year when things were still normal. That's why I'm left with shitty actors who barely care. Everyone else transferred to their backup schools when they became a better option overnight.

That wasn't an option for me, with Camden needing someone to advocate for him. Someone has to make sure he's taken care of whether he's fully there or not, and with our parents gone, that job falls to me.

This is my final shot to be the star before I hang it up forever and accept that my dreams end in community theater.

If I can even get the bitter taste of failure out of my mouth long enough to enjoy it.

“Who gives a shit about Valen Throne!” I very nearly shout. All of the pain of my situation, my loneliness, my need to control everything and failing well inside me like a raging tornado ready to rip away my sanity.

I do my best to keep myself from having a complete meltdown and letting everyone see just how badly I’m losing my shit. We’ve been rehearsing for months. I’ve been preparing for this my entire educational career, and everything is being taken away. Nothing is left for me but this, and now it’s gone too.

That anger morphs into blinding hatred. I could kill Valen Throne.

“Unfortunately, a lot more people care about Valen Throne than Cecilia Harper.” The look in her eyes is kind and sad rather than cruel, making the words hurt that much worse. “We can talk about moving the dates for the play, but the schedule for the rest of the year is extremely tight, and the options aren’t optimal.”

“You want to stick me on a Tuesday night?” One of those tears slips free, but I choke the rest back. Crying won’t get me anywhere.

“I don’t want to, but that’s your only option. Tuesday or Wednesday night when we come back from break or nothing. I really am sorry, Cecilia.” She uses my full name with an admonishing weight like my mother would if she weren’t dead. “Get your attitude under control for the next time we discuss it. A smaller show is better than none, and you’re not the only one suffering due to their agenda.” She turns her back on me and heads out. Guilt swamps me because she’s right. She doesn’t deserve any of this either.

“It might as well be no show if no one comes to watch it,” I complain long after the door closes behind her, and the silence has become so thick I can’t take it.

Having the date on Valentine's Day was why the tickets sold out—dudes hoping to score off Shakespeare, and I was willing to help them. I'm really good. No one will care about Romeo and Juliet on a random Tuesday in April, and I won't have my goodbye performance be to an empty theater.

Determination bubbles up inside me beside the anger. When have I ever just given up?

"It's not that big a deal, Cici." Corey stands beside me and grabs my hand. "Come on, you were just saying I need more time to learn my lines." His cajoling tone only makes me want to throttle him, and I rip my hand out of his.

"That is absolutely not what I said, and of course it's not a big deal to you. This is everything to me." Corey switched to a business major last year and confessed he always thought this was more or less a dead end. That hurt, but I can't force people to be who I want them to be.

He sighs, annoyed with my intensity like usual. We're not the type of friends forged out of tons of common ground and fun. We're incredibly close and have been for years because after Camden had his first breakdown, Corey was the only person who cared to check on him. That forged a soul-deep connection with him, but there has always been a disconnect between us.

"So you're thinking we'll do it after break? I need to know if I have to keep all this in my head, Ci." God, he can be a jerk sometimes. Shakespeare is not "all this."

"Corey, what the hell are you talking about?" I ask him. I'm genuinely shocked that that's what he thinks is happening.

"Well, I wouldn't be mad if you called it off for good, but it seems like you're still set on it."

The rest of the cast close enough to hear turn to glare at him.

"I'm still in after break," one person says, and then a variety of the same responses follows. That gives me a flash of courage, and I'm convinced. I'm their star. I'm their director. I won't let them down.

I turn toward the aisle. “Corey, have you met me? Learn your lines. Our show is Saturday.”

There’s a collective whoop from the cast as I hop off the stage.

“What are you planning to do, Cici?” He sounds nervous and probably should be because my plan is loosely to wring the neck of a six-foot-four quarterback.

“Don’t worry about my plans. You have a date to get ready for, right? That’s why you were giving me such shoddy effort?”

He clears his throat, his cheeks coloring with guilt.

“Cici…”

“Learn your lines, and don’t worry about what I’m planning. We have curtain Saturday.”

“Cecilia, please!” I head toward the door as he calls after me.

“Worry about your date, Corey.” The door slams shut behind me and while I’m feeling petty, I’m glad to see his crush on me doesn’t seem to be a problem anymore. I’m glad he’s moving on, and hopefully, learning his lines won’t be an issue either.

CHAPTER 2

CICI

THE HALLWAY OUTSIDE THE AUDITORIUM STANDS DESERTED. I grab my coat off the hook, pull on my hat and mittens, and take a deep breath before braving the cold walk back to my dorm. As I step outside, the air practically blisters my cheeks, and I quickly pull my hood up to protect myself further. It's just past three, and not a soul can be found.

The sun sits low in the sky despite sunset being an hour away. My dorm is nearly a twenty-minute walk, so I jog, hoping to reduce my time in the freezing cold. I have clear intentions: get dressed to the nines and look smoking hot while confronting Valen Throne on his own turf. This ought to be interesting at the very least.

I've never gotten an invite inside, but he's the president of Gamma Theta Kappa, and their mansion sits in the center of the north end of campus. I'll need to call a rideshare so I don't freeze to death since it's a long walk on a nice day.

I pull out my phone and check the balance of my account, which is alarming. It's not always this bad, but the bakery and café I work for is closed for renovations this week. I'll be okay until Monday, but I seriously weigh walking and freezing versus spending the money for a ride.

I'm even more pissed now. I can't afford a *ride* to their over-the-top monument to superiority. It's all a load of crap. The members I've met are all assholes and bullies, and Valen Throne is their king. I roll my eyes because even his name sounds pompous. Insane parties, exceptional organization, and top-tier charity fundraising? Something tells me their soon-to-

be NFL quarterback president has very little to do with it other than having the right last name.

Harper sure doesn't mean anything for me but orphan. Alone. No longer Juliet.

I know that wasn't the exact option Professor Dillon offered, but it truly feels the same to me. The rush I get from performing comes from the crowd. There's nothing like the feeling of terror right before stepping on that stage and the euphoria as that bubble pops and you own the energy rather than fighting it. It's beautiful, it's addictive. I can't get it from an empty theater.

Valen stole that from me.

I kick the icy ground as snowflakes drift around my head. We've had nonstop snow since Christmas. I'm looking around campus, noticing just how empty it is. I would usually catch my friend Bianca on her walk between classes around this time, but I haven't seen her since before Christmas. She's not been around campus, but I heard her stepfather passed away. I consider sending her another text but decide against it. She hasn't answered the last three.

I make it back to my building, up the stairs to the third floor, and to the end of the hall, where I share a corner room with a cheerleader who is actually a really nice person. I shove the door open, finding my roommate, Katie, sitting on her bed. Her blond hair is up in a bun with pencils stuck in to hold it in place. She's stunning in an effortless way that always makes me the tiniest bit jealous.

"Hey, Ci, how was rehearsal? Can you grab me my drink?" She looks up at me with a smile that freezes the moment she takes in my expression.

"Oh, Cici, what's wrong?" I pull off my winter gear and drape it over the wooden chair in our small common area, then bend to our mini fridge and pull out one of her smoothies. I hand it to her as I sit on my bed and figure out how to answer. I had a lot of concerns about living with her when we first met, but she's a lot sweeter than I thought someone like her would be. I guess being judgmental and shitty can run both ways.

“Romeo and Juliet is canceled for an awards ceremony.”

Her cheeks heat, and her eyes widen.

“Oh God, Cici, the awards ceremony! I didn’t even connect the dots. I am so sorry.” Her mouth hangs open in horror.

“It’s not your fault, but yeah, I would have rather heard about it from you.” I sigh. She’s probably known about this longer than Professor Dillon.

She looks guiltily at her book, and my brief anger toward her cracks completely. We’re not best friends, and she’s in her own world. It’s not her fault she didn’t realize what this ceremony meant for me.

“I have a bone to pick with Valen Throne,” I tell her, redirecting my anger to the correct target.

That has her more concerned than me being angry with her.

“I have an econ project. I think I’ll stay out of this one.” She pulls one of the pencils out of her hair and bites the end.

“That’s probably for the best, Katie. My problems don’t need to be your problems just because we live together.”

“Cici, it’s not like that. You know we’re friends.” We’re friends of convenience, much like my relationship with Corey where the universe decided we should be put together.

“Yeah, of course.” She doesn’t even know I have a brother.

“You want me to come with you?” Her tone is dubious maybe even nervous that I might say yes.

“I’m sorry, Katie. I’m not being fair. I really don’t want you to come.” That’s the truth, but it still stings to watch her deflate in relief.

“I should warn you. They’re having a party tonight.”

“That’s inconvenient,” I tell her as I head to my closet and pull out some winter fishnets with skin-colored paneling to keep my legs warm, a little pleated miniskirt, and a cropped off-the-shoulder top.

I'm dressed to the nines a little while later, smoothing my long black hair and setting my bangs just right before I put in a little clip. There's a bit of tension left in the room, and I've calmed enough to feel really guilty about it.

"Wow, Cici, I'm not usually into the whole 'pastel goth' thing, but even I have to admit you look stunning," Katie comments as she pops her head out of her book. This is the type of comment that makes me think she'd rather not be seen with me despite us getting along.

"Thanks. I think."

"It's a compliment," she assures me.

"Thanks, then. I'll see you later." I head out of the dorm and back into the falling snow. It's colder this time than before when some sun was still left in the sky. My rideshare waits on the curb, and I give him my name before climbing in. It only takes ten minutes to get there, and a part of that time is spent waiting at red lights.

I don't keep up on Greek life, so I'm surprised to find the party Katie referred to is their Valentine's Day party, four days before the big event, which is on a Saturday this year. Wouldn't that be a better day for this? Oh right, they probably moved it for the ceremony.

Scantly clad girls dressed as variations of cupid brave the twenty-degree weather as I step out onto the sidewalk. Despite the aching chill, I feel incredibly overdressed in my crop top, miniskirt, fishnets, and boots.

Insecurity flashes in my gut as I look over their freezing, perfect bodies. Coming here tonight is setting myself up for embarrassment. *You are asking to be laughed at*, an insecure voice warns in my mind. But that bitter bitch is made of my self-doubt, and I've been trying to beat her to death since I realized I deserve the spotlight as much as anyone else.

My size doesn't dictate my talent or my worth. I may be bigger, but that sure as shit doesn't make me less. I repeat these things to myself until they feel true, and then I add a new affirmation. *I am not less than Valen Throne.*

As appealing as it is to keep my head down to avoid the cold as I walk up the path, I keep it high with my chin pointing out. While I get a few curious looks, no one pays me any particular attention until I get to the door. A drunk frat boy holds it open with his body. He's laughing with his buddy, smoking a cigarette on the porch. He drunkenly looks me up and down as I walk past him.

"I don't usually like big girls, but you look damn good." I laugh to myself because these jock types always say shit like this. It's not true. He does like big girls, but he only likes their bodies. And that's not enough for him to embarrass himself in front of his buddies who only see value in women for one reason.

"Thanks," I answer sweetly. I needed a little validation to work myself up to this, and his insecurities aren't mine. It took me a long time to unlearn the shitty bullying I got most of my life, but I'm attractive. As soon as high school wasn't a factor, almost every single one of my bullies wanted to fuck me. These guys are no different. Valen is the worst of them all.

"Hey, come back," he complains as I search for my intended target, but he can keep dreaming.

People dance and drink, and I'm shocked that this isn't the dirty, beer-scented party I imagined when I saw them all hanging outside. It looks like a perfect mix of a childhood classroom wet dream and a swanky party. I'm so into the decor I have to remind myself to stay pissed as I scan the space for Valen, who doesn't appear to be here.

I'm not going to start bobbing and swaying with these people who didn't invite me, but damn, does it seem appealing for a minute. I head over to the snack table and grab some liquid courage, seeing as Valen's not here yet.

Several freshmen pledges stand near the refreshments wearing literal French maid outfits. I can't imagine what they think they'll get out of this. Maybe Valen will bring them all to the NFL in exchange for a little debasement? Before I can pour my glass, one of them steps forward and fills it.

"Uh, thanks."

A little bit of time passes, then a little bit more, and before I know it, it's been hours of me drifting, not really speaking to anyone but the French maids, who seem to only be allowed to speak one of five pre-chosen responses. It's oddly entertaining to mess with them like they're British guards. I'm not sure exactly when I passed from a little tipsy to sloshed, but I'm definitely drunk.

That's when I see the handsome bastard standing at the top of the stairs with his best friend Jaden beside him. They're both gorgeous and tall, but Valen is broader through the shoulders and chest. Jaden's deep brown skin crinkles beneath his eyes as he smiles and jokes with Valen. Valen doesn't smile back, blue eyes surveying the party like everyone is there exclusively for him. Between the award ceremony and the freshmen pledges in costume, it seems he's right.

His light blond curls give him a false sense of innocence and ridiculous charm. His jawline is perfect, lightly stubbled, his nose strong but straight. He's so handsome, chiseled, perfect, I want to punch him right in his face for everything he's done as well as having the nerve to take my breath away. I came here to save my show, at least that's what I told myself, but staring at him, drunk as hell, I think I need to admit I came for revenge.

"Look, it's Valen and Jaden." People start talking about how hot he is. How amazing a ball player. How he's destined to be a star.

"I've never fucked him, but I want to get my shot before he's in the NFL," one girl says to her friend.

"You know I did last year. It was good, but he's really into himself."

"I would be too if I were him."

They both laugh, but I turn back to the snack table rather than listen to these girls gas themselves up about shitty sex with a dickless pretty boy. The anger that was beginning to fade beneath the alcohol sparks back to life hotter than before, but my drunkenness has put a nice dampener on my self-control.

The one French maid looks at me like he would make a move if he could say more than the five phrases as he pours me my drink. His heated stare cuts off as he glances over my shoulder and steps back like something scared him. I look over my shoulder, trying to figure out his problem, when Valen's eyes lock with mine.

He's on the middle step, halfway descended into the room, and I can't imagine why he would focus on me out of all the adoring fans he has to choose from. As he lands on the lower level, I'm sure he's going to look elsewhere, but for some unknown reason, he walks toward me.

I stand mostly straight as he maintains eye contact, the alcohol making me a little unsteady on my oversized platform boots. This confrontation is what I so desperately want. I could meet him halfway. Instead, I stand right here. Has he ever approached another person? If he has, I haven't seen it. They all go to him. The other players, these girls hoping to fuck him just to brag, NFL scouts who think he's worth something.

I'm so hot with anger and pungent jealousy I could tear his face off, but he's meeting my stare with the same intensity, and I'm too drunk to realize how I might be coming across. I lick my lips because they're dry and stuck together, and I'm not sure I can blame all the people who chase him. He's intensely magnetic and so physical that everyone around him has a natural instinct to submit to his presence. Those thoughts won't help me. Obviously, he's hot. Obviously, he's their alpha. I couldn't care less.

I push my chin up to make it as clear as possible to him that I'm not impressed. Hell, he looks pissed too. Maybe he knows I'm not on the guest list, and he'll tell me to get lost. He doesn't let chubby goth girls attend his fancy parties, but not before I tell him exactly what I think of him and his pathetic awards ceremony. How little his contributions to the world mean, no matter what these people think of him. He's at least going to know what I think of him.

What kind of asshole needs this much attention anyway? I look around the crowd, feeling the eyes on him so much like

the attention of being on stage. He'll have countless nights full of this, arenas full of this.

I realize there's a small amount of hypocrisy in my statement. Aren't I dying for what he has? Aren't I willing to fight for the small scraps of it I have? *It's not the same*, I insist to myself as he comes closer.

This is my last chance to get the rush that comes with performing. He's going to have an eternity of chances to get that high. He's getting picked up by the NFL, and I'm getting left behind. He's only a few feet from me now, and the crowd parts to let him pass. Their eyes land on me as they realize where he's heading. I don't even try to stop my eyes from rolling. I'm so angry the drink in my hand shakes, but behind it is a familiar buzz, a performance with a hungry audience.

He stops in front of me, towering over me even with the extra inches my boots provide. I'm a bigger girl, like the sweetheart at the door pointed out, and even being short, most men don't make me feel tiny. Valen is a different story. He's like a wall in front of me, and I have to pinch my neck just to see his face when he's this close.

He looks down at me and cocks his head to the side like he's pleased and pissed off all at once.

"Hey, this your first time at a Kappa party?" His voice is deep and smooth, absolutely panty-melting, and I can't imagine why he's wasting it on me.

"Obviously, Valen. This isn't my scene." My tone drips acid, and his smile widens.

"So you know who I am." My heart picks up speed as he leans into me, just close enough to make sure all my attention is on him. My eyes widen, but not in attraction like he's accustomed to. My anger is crackling under my skin, and I'm drunk enough to want the fallout.

"I know exactly who you are," I confirm with all the loathing I feel thick in my voice. "I heard about your awards ceremony on Saturday."

His shoulders subtly puff in response to what he perceives as praise. Teeth so perfectly straight and white I want to say they're fake, but there's one little chip on his canine tooth, and why wouldn't he fix it if they were? His lips are plush and pink, delicious. Is it really fair for anyone to get so much in life? For me to think he's this fucking hot all while hating his guts?

There's one intense moment between us before he moves. His chest touches mine as he leans down and places his lips an inch from my ear. "That's going to make this easy, then."

"What's going to be easy?" His lips briefly touch my earlobe. My drink is pressed between our chests before I take one step back to get some breathing room.

His eyes meet mine as he says, "Fucking you, gorgeous."

Splash.

CHAPTER 3

CICI

FOR A SPLIT SECOND, I DON'T UNDERSTAND THAT THE RED drink covering Valen and dripping down his face is mine. I threw it at him. The cup is still in my hand, complete evidence that I did indeed lose my mind and soak him in alcohol before even mentioning my show.

I'm wet too but too drunk to really notice how much landed on me versus him with how close together we were. I look down and see my whole outfit is ruined. The skin-toned peep panels on my tights are stained red, effectively destroying the illusion.

"This is all your fault!" I shout at him, not really helping the clarity of the situation.

He wipes an impossibly large hand over his face. Really is it necessary for anyone to be that big? The sticky drink clings to him, and he flicks his hand at the floor as he pulls it away.

"You threw your drink at me? How the fuck is it my fault you're all wet?"

"I'm not talking about that! I'm talking about everything else you've fucked up for me!"

People have completely stopped talking. They're staring at us like this is the juiciest thing they've ever seen, and through my drunken haze, I realize they're probably right. What the fuck have I done?

"You really should not have done that." His best friend Jaden says from beside him. Valen visibly shakes but says

nothing. “Come on, let’s go.” He tries to wave me out, but I don’t move.

Jaden grabs my upper arm and lightly drags me forward. Being drunk as hell, I stumble, and Valen reaches out to grab my hand before I fall.

“Get your hands off her, Jay.” Jaden looks at him like he’s lost his damn mind but takes a step away from me.

“Fuck you, Valen Throne! My play is canceled because of you. I’ve been working for this my entire life, and it’s ruined because you need another fucking party?! You’re not even that good-looking! So what if you can play football? Who gives a shit about a freaking ball?” I’m not sure who I’m trying to convince.

He yanks the wrist he’s holding and slams me against his chest, further soaking me in the drink I tossed on him.

“What are you talking about?” he seethes. “What fucking play did I get canceled? I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Cici. Now, let go of me, you pompous fucking asshole. Shakespeare is rolling in his grave, and why should you or Corey give a shit?” I realize with a small portion of my brain that my best friend refusing to learn his lines has absolutely nothing to do with this. I’m making a scene and not the type I planned.

“I don’t think so.” His voice drops from its smooth timbre to something gritty. “You made a mess, and you’re going to clean it up.”

“What about your mess, Valen? Who’s going to clean up the shitty mess you just made of my life?”

We’re inches from each other. Everyone is staring, and I do mean everyone. The music plays, but I don’t hear anything; I just feel the bass in my chest. That small sober me begs the rest to do some damage control, but that would never happen. I’m too fucking angry and too desperate.

“Let go!”

He squeezes harder, his fingers digging in and shooting pain up my wrist. Once again, without making a conscious decision, my hand comes up and lands across his cheek in a loud, sticky slap.

His eyes widen like he can't believe what just happened, but instead of being angry, he only grows more intense. Valen licks my drink off his lips and stares at me like he'd prefer to lick me. I hate him exactly as much as I did a minute ago, but now I'm soaked, and it's not from my drink.

The excitement and disbelief of the crowd are like an extra presence in the room, and the attention zips through me like an electric charge. It feels fucking incredible, just like being on stage. Valen's eyes meet mine, and for a crazy moment, I think he feels it too. The crowd and I hold our breath while waiting for him to toss me out.

He watches me while he decides, and finally, with a vicious smile, he turns, yanking me behind him. I'm dragged through the crowd and back to the staircase where he made his grand entry. I struggle, trying to jerk myself free, but he doesn't ease up, and no one stops him.

"Fucking let me go, Valen!" I shout at the top of my lungs, but he doesn't react, and neither does anyone else. As he tries to pull me up the steps, I drop to my ass. I'm not that easy to move, and I sure as shit am not going with him.

I stare at the people watching us. They've widened, leaving a semicircle like this is a street performance, and we're just busking.

"Are you all serious? None of you are going to stop whatever the fuck this is?"

Nobody will meet my eyes. Unbelievable. I'm ninety-five percent sure I'm getting murdered tonight when Valen turns to the room sticky and pink and says,

"Anyone here have a problem with what I do in my frat?"

"Most of the room says nothing, but the freshmen pledges dressed as literal French maids all answer in unison. "No, sir,

Valen, Sir.” And he nods at them. What the fuck is he going to do to me?

He yanks my arm twice, and I refuse to move. Much to my shock, he reaches down, one arm under my knees and the other behind my back, and picks me straight up.

“What the fuck? Put me down!”

He ignores me as he carries me to the top. Once we’re upstairs, it’s all but empty, but he still doesn’t put me down.

“Let go of me! This is kidnapping.”

“Barely,” he answers but doesn’t lighten up at all.

Jaden follows us with a blank expression, and I watch him over Valen’s shoulder.

“I’m not doing anything with either of you, so you should just let me go and let your buddy here clean up the mess for you.” A sickening sense of dread settles into my stomach as I consider why two guys I seriously pissed off might be dragging me to a bedroom.

“You’re not touching, Jaden,” he corrects. “But you sure as hell are going to clean me up. Then, if I’m feeling forgiving, you will explain what play you’re talking about. Maybe even what the fuck you thought you were doing coming into my frat and making a scene like that.”

“I’m not explaining shit to you. You deserved it. Stupid Division 1 football, asshole. I’m Valen Throne; everyone loves me. I’m going to be an NFL star.” I’m more drunk than I realized, but all my dreams are falling to pieces, and so much more than my play pulls this rage out of me as I struggle in Valen’s arms.

Apparently tired of my shit, he tosses me over his shoulder, the broad edge knocking the wind out of me as he tips me upside down and straps his absurdly strong arm over my thighs to hold me in place. My skirt flips up, and it’s only the panels of my tights showing, but I still feel exposed.

My dreams of getting my show back have withered and died, and despite my position, I’m not as afraid as I should be.

A strong hand collides with my upturned ass, and I squeal.

“I haven’t called you any names, Cupcake. You might want to settle down before you get yourself into an even worse situation than you’re already in.” The same hand gropes the cheek he smacked, and heat floods my body made of anger and pure sexual energy. His touch is addictive.

“My name is Cici.”

“Yep, Cup-Cake,” he confirms, enunciating the first letter as he rubs the cheek in his hand.

Wow, he managed to remember my name. The thought is meant to be sarcastic, but some part of me is actually impressed. Valen Throne gives me the intense impression he doesn’t care about anyone else unless they’re serving him, and I can’t think of any use I might serve him that would require remembering my name. He’s clearly interested in my ass, his fingers now sitting practically wedged into my ass crack as he tries to feel more.

The sober me is fucking terrified. Not one person in that room was willing to stand up to him, and I’m not even sure any of them wanted to stop him. I’m not sure I want him to stop.

“Did I give you permission to put your fingers halfway up my ass, Valen?”

“You’d know if my fingers were in your ass, Cupcake. Now shut your mouth before you piss me off even more.” He pinches the inside of my ass cheek, and I shriek.

“Jaden, are you willing to go to jail for him? You’re going to let him get away with this and just stand there? You want to fuck him and figure this is your in? Co-incarceration love story, best friends left with no one—”

“Shut the fuck up.” Jaden interrupts me, and I smile at having gotten to him.

“Talk to her like that again, and I’ll fuck you up, Jay.”

I stare at Valen’s back like he’s lost his mind and look at Jaden, who is wearing a similar expression despite it being

upside down. I figured out Valen likes my ass, and yeah, clearly, he wants to fuck me as a way to get back at me for embarrassing him, but that sounds way more intense than I'm in for.

“Listen, you may be a dick, and you totally deserved the drink and the slap, but I still shouldn't have done it. No need to fight your friends over me like some caveman weirdo. Just put me down and let me go home. I'll tell everyone you're very scary and not to mess with you.”

“Couldn't give a shit what anyone thinks of me, Cupcake.”

“Why the hell not?” I demand, truly shocked by how honest he sounds as he says it.

“I like me.”

“Well, I fucking hate you.”

He's quiet as he pulls out a key and unlocks a door on our right. Before he opens it, he pats me on my ass and says, “I'm sure I did deserve it, but you were stupid to do it anyway. We all need to pay for our mistakes, Cupcake. And I think I might like you hating me.”

My heart stutters like it can escape without me.

“I'm drunk. I'm pissed. I shouldn't have done it. Please let me go.”

“Too late.” He steps inside and closes the door.

CHAPTER 4

CICI

AS SOON AS THE DOOR CLOSES BEHIND US, HE LOCKS IT. THEN he pulls me over his shoulder, letting me slide down every inch of him, and I'm not sure who he's doing it for, me or him, but I nearly groan at the feel of his body on mine. I can't imagine he wants me the way I want him, but his energy is hard to misread as he pushes me back against the door. His hips and hard cock lead the way and press into my stomach as his hand laces around my throat.

Blue eyes stare into mine—angry, intense, full of feelings as deep as my own but impossible to understand, given we've never met. I've never been here. I know why he's the big bad guy in my story, but it feels like I'm the same for him. What problem do I represent? What dragon does he feel like he's slaying? He applies similar pressure to what he had on my wrist, and I quickly get a fuzzy feeling behind my eyes.

“Why are you so fucking pissed?” he demands with a little shake.

“It's your fault,” I answer simply. There's nothing else to say. I'm choosing to blame everything on him. If it feels this good while he kills me, maybe I won't mind.

“This is your fault,” he disagrees. “I've never seen you before. I *would* remember.”

“Why would you remember me?” I ask, his words and my own coming in odd intervals through the weightless feeling in my head, but he doesn't answer. “Why are you so pissed? It's just a drink and a slap.”

“It’s so much more than that.” And I feel the anger behind his words, shaking in his fists.

“Cause that makes sense.”

He’s so tall he literally lowers himself to me and raises my lips to his in one impossibly strong move, and his mouth is on mine. I gasp at the zip behind my breastbone. His lips are soft and overwhelming, the bite of his teeth surprising me as it cuts into my lip and elicits a drunken moan even less intentional than the drink I splashed on him. Rage and hatred pours out of me as I meet his angry kiss, and he lashes my tongue with his own.

“You’re so fucking pretty, so soft.” He murmurs the words against my lips as he ravages my mouth and flexes his fingers around my neck like a collar.

That’s a surprisingly flattering sentiment, and I find it so much better than something crass about liking big girls. I am pretty. I am soft.

“I hate you too, by the way.” He pulls back. His eyes are on mine again, and the feeling is like nothing else.

He lifts my hand to his cheek with his free one and perfectly fits my hand to the reddening mark. That’s when I look up and see the mirror on the ceiling, but that’s not what he’s watching us in. The entire room is covered in mirrors. What. The. Actual. Fuck.

He’s serious as he watches for my reaction.

“I like to watch,” he confirms with a crushing intensity, confirming the feeling we shared downstairs. It builds between us again, this time more powerfully.

“The girls you’re fucking or yourself?”

There’s no way this is just about them. I’m usually horny as fuck after a performance and desperate to get laid. That’s what this is like, like we put on the performance of a lifetime. I understand why the excitement has athletes ready to fuck everyone, especially when you throw the testosterone of a twenty-two-year-old into the mix. I’m desperate too.

His lip twitches in surprise, and his eyes flash as they bore into mine.

“Myself, but this time, I’d really like to watch *you*.” His eyebrows push together like the idea genuinely confuses him. Maybe it even makes him angry. His honesty keeps shocking me. He still hasn’t released me. My hand presses to his face. His other is around my throat. I’m lightheaded, kissed stupid, and soaking wet.

“What do you want to watch me do?”

“You’re going to suck my cock to apologize for your little outburst and to thank me for hearing you out.”

“You haven’t heard me out. You just got my play canceled and hauled me to your room despite my very loud protests.”

“Then you can tell me all about whatever play it is once you’re done.” He runs his thumb along the bottom of my jaw, and fuck, I’m actually tempted.

“Fuck you.”

There’s a mean glint in his eyes as he says, “You want to be a star so bad? Get on your knees for me, and we’ll both enjoy the show.”

He uses his leverage on my throat to push me down in front of him. My knees ache as they smack into the wood flooring. His hands are as big as my head, and I can’t help but admire them as he keeps one on my throat and uses the other to pull his cock out of his pants. Any quippy retort I had dies on my tongue as I stare.

He’s already incredibly hard, nowhere near the dickless jock I accused him of being. He smiles at me as he holds it in front of my face, enjoying how I’m eating my words right before I eat his cock. He’s possibly more turned on by what he’s done to me and his victory than I am, and that’s saying something. He really is perfect. God, I hate him.

He rolls a big fist over the length, and I can’t help but follow the movement. First in real life, then I watch the two of us in the mirror like he said. We are incredibly attractive

together. A delicious juxtaposition of hard and soft, my straight black hair, his platinum curls.

I've never seen a couple like us, and fuck, it's hot. I want to take pictures and blow them up on my wall like Valen Throne could be a part of my aesthetic, another pretty flashy accessory. As I process all this and my mouth hangs open in shock, he smacks his big cock against my cheek, bringing my attention back to him. It stings, but he only seems more turned on, like the pain was nothing to him.

"Don't hit people unless you want to get hit back," he tells me as he presses the head of his cock to my lips.

I want to fight, but something submissive unlocks inside me as I watch myself on my knees for him. The picture of the two of us is amazing. I want to pull my tits out and watch myself really go to town.

"Don't put your cock in my mouth unless you want it bitten off," I argue.

He forces the head of his cock against my front teeth, an open dare.

"You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, including me, and I'm so fucking mad about it I'm considering choking you to death. You better suck my cock and prove you're worth keeping, even if you put me to shame."

He sounds as angry as his words, serious as his fingers flex and tighten on my throat. I'm dripping wet for him, and like a good little slut, I open my mouth and stick out my tongue. I could call myself a victim because he's forcing me, but the pooling heat between my thighs and the hungry suction of my mouth as he passes over my tongue for the first time would prove that a lie.

He pushes his cock down like a tongue depressor, widening my mouth and admiring my tongue, first by looking down, then in the mirror. We both watch this unfold with a desperate, hungry feeling thick in the air that is somehow so much more intense and primal than just sex.

He tastes cleaner than I expected. I don't know why I thought a frat boy quarterback would taste like sweat, balls, and, at best, Axe, but he's clean and delicious. I break our eye contact and suck him deeper without him having to ask because everything feels more intense with him inside me, except for the loneliness. That's gone for once.

"Fuck, look at you," he commands, and I do. I watch as he stares into my eyes through the mirror on our side as I take him to the back of my throat. It's intense and somehow a thousand times more erotic than just looking up and finding him staring down at me. Like this is me, but it's not real. I'm an object. I'm his. I melt around him as he kicks his hips, shoving himself into the back of my throat, and drool slips over my chin.

"I wanted to do this downstairs and make them all watch, but I thought it was more important for you to see to really learn your lesson. You would have blamed me, not yourself, and this is your fault, Cupcake. You came here, you picked this fight, now watch how well you suck that cock."

I pull back, and he lets me, just enough to speak, but he's still got his hand around my throat. "Why are you so pissed about the blow job, quarterback?"

"Because I can't stop staring at you, and I only ever watch me."

He releases my neck, grabbing both sides of my head and preventing me from watching us in the mirror. My nose is forced against his pubic bone as he drives his cock to the back of my throat.

"I still can't stop looking at you."

He sounds so genuinely distressed by that, and I wonder what's going on in his head for one moment before the drunken stupor and overwhelming horniness blank out my brain. His hips pump into me as he seeks his release. How did he wind up so angry when I was the one with all the rage? I look up at him through my lashes, and he's not even looking into the mirror. He's staring at me.

“Fuck, you’re so perfect. I hate you.” He moans, his voice slipping into a deep groan as he holds me still and comes down the back of my throat. He’s a lot more vocal than other guys I’ve been with, and the sounds of his pleasure make my pussy pulse needily in time with them.

His cock twitches slowly, leaking cum, and I lap it all up. The moment he’s finished, I push him off me and clumsily get to my feet, feeling a lot of things, none of which I can make sense of right now. He’s staring at me, pants around his ankles, mouth hanging open, but he doesn’t say a word.

I unlock the door and let myself out, finding Jaden standing there. Did he just listen to everything we said? Did he hear the way Valen moaned for me while he came? The sane part of me is humiliated by the idea, but a perverted little part hopes the answer is yes. I won’t look him in the eyes to find out either way.

I never did clean Valen up or explain how he messed up my play, but he’s not the only one who’s a mess, and I sucked him off instead of giving him a piece of my mind. I’m so horny and angry I could scream.

“I hate you so much more than you could ever hate me, Valen Throne,” I tell the gorgeous blond asshole, with his big cock already getting hard again as he stares at me. I slam the door between us and prepare for my walk of shame back to my dorm. I can’t afford another rideshare.

CHAPTER 5

VALEN

I STARED AT THE DOOR FOR A LONG TIME AFTER CICI LEFT. I continued to stare at that blank spot until I fell asleep, and when I woke up, I did the same thing. I'm still staring at the door, wondering what the fuck happened last night, when there's a pounding knock. That's the reason I didn't mirror the door.

“Open up, dickhead.” Jaden's voice comes from the other side, and I dread having to deal with my best friend. He's going to want to know what happened last night, and the truth is, I don't have any good answers for him.

“Fine,” I answer just so he'll stop the fucking banging.

I wasn't even drunk last night. I don't have any good excuse for the fact that I saw a girl, and the rational part of my brain completely disconnected.

Typically, I'm the perfect quarterback. My worldview is practical and doesn't contain unnecessary points. I don't notice anyone unless I need to. Unless they're an X or an O on the play diagram, they may as well not exist. I have no idea why Cici is a giant glowing heart rather than a placeholder.

I stand, pull on my pants, and head over to the door. I take a good long look at myself in the surrounding mirrors before I deal with Jaden. My body looks as good as ever. I'm perfect not only on the field but also as the face of any team. But something is off today, and it's not just the anxiousness in my chest. My reflection is different too.

Red splotches cover my cheeks, and my eyes are too bright and wild. I'm freaking myself out, which is the opposite of my

normal reaction. Normally, my reflection turns me on, and not just because I'm a narcissistic asshole.

I'm an autosexual. Which is different from being so far up my own ass I can't see straight as everyone assumes. My lack of attraction to others is not an insult to them. I'm just everything I need or want in a person. The glaring exceptions being tits, pussy, and girl butt. Despite being primarily sexually attracted to myself, I am straight, a complication that has led to an extremely complex relationship with sex and dating.

I like to fuck women, but it's *me* fucking that gets me off. I never make the first move. It would be wrong knowing I would never want anything more from them. When I have a nonsexual reason to deal with a woman, like work or school, I simply give her respect, treat her like an X or an O on the play diagram, and ignore what use she might be to me.

I never used to have crushes, let alone be a creep, until I saw those big brown eyes and pouty lips all wrapped up in her cute Goth outfit. Then I couldn't stop staring. I went to her. There wasn't another option. Admittedly, I didn't expect to find her pissed off and ready to fight.

This girl Cici has fucked everything up in the span of a few minutes. I'm staring at living perfection, and I have no clue why my reflection won't get my dick hard right now. I'm about to become an NFL star. I have weight training today and love leg day, but none of that does anything for me. Not even the thought of myself inside one of the other countless girls I've fucked.

If I pull up the memory of how Cici looked kneeling beneath me, sucking me like she couldn't get enough? My cock instantly hardens beneath my pants. What. The. Fuck.

I open the door, cock still hard, not really giving a shit what Jaden thinks about my situation. I know he's here to hand me my ass anyway.

"What the fuck was that, Val? You're lucky I decided to be your friend and didn't kill you myself before you hit your growth spurt, fucking prick." Usually, I'm not a fan of his

ranting, but this time, I don't mind, seeing as I'm just as lost as he's accusing me of being. "She threw a drink at you and smacked you in front of everyone. You don't tolerate shit like that."

"I don't know, Jay. I would say I'm sorry, but I'm definitely going to see her again, and I don't want you talking shit to her."

His upper lip lifts like he smells something bad, and deep brown nearly black eyes stare at me like he's sure something is seriously wrong with me.

"You're going to see her again." He speaks the words tonelessly, like he's repeating gibberish out of a textbook.

"Yeah, today. I just need to find out where she lives." I'm nearly as confused about the situation as he is. The difference is I have the memory of her ass in my hand and her mouth around my cock, making me not care so much about the insanity of all this.

"Val, do you even remember her name? Did she drug you or something? Witchcraft? What is going on here?"

"Her name is Cici." A little rush goes through me. If I know a girl's name, it's usually a guarantee I haven't fucked her. She'd need to be an X or an O on the play diagram to warrant a name, and Cici floats right off the board.

"Holy shit."

"Get lost, Jay. I need to get dressed."

"That's the best you've got for me? Her name is Cici, and you're planning to find her today."

"And I'll beat the shit out of you if you say shit about her," I answer as I realize his tone is dangerously close to pissing me the fuck off. It reminds me of being insulted. I'm angry and testy at the idea of anyone doing anything to her, against her, toward her. Fuck, the idea that other people get to breathe near her all the time? I think my brain is about to explode.

I have never felt jealous of anyone for a moment in my life, and I suddenly realize everything I've worked so hard for

is meaningless. I'm Valen Throne, about to be an NFL star, wanted by women, envied by men. And I'm nothing. Not only is she more beautiful and special than me in every way, but so is every person who has gotten to touch her, kiss her, fuck her.

The idea that multiple cocks have been inside her makes me insane. You don't suck cock like that on your first attempt, and I know it's not reasonable, but it makes me so violent my fists shake. They all need to die. Everyone in the world with eyes needs to die.

"I think I need to lie down," I tell Jaden as I sit down and flop back, staring at myself in the mirror above my bed.

"Stay or go, Val? I have class." He's tired of my shit, but I am too.

"Stay."

"Alright, fuck off then. I swear to God, he gets crazier every day. If I had any clue before he hit his growth spurt I never would have stopped those kids from shoving him in his locker."

The door closes. I was always cute, but I wasn't always big.

I take out my phone and check my social media. There are pictures and posts from the party, but nothing about our altercation. No one wants to risk my bad side, not right now. This is a big university, and while I am a public figure, constantly spoken to and approached by others, I don't actually engage people that often. I don't even follow any of them back.

Where would I go for information if I actually cared about something other than news from scouts? The answer comes in the form of a square post with waving pompoms. The cheerleaders!



THREE HOURS LATER, I'M DRESSED IN CLOTHES I STOLE FROM Jay's closet, black sweats and a matching black hoodie pulled up to hide my golden hair, and walking across campus in the

freezing cold. I'm not usually the type to go inconspicuous, so I needed a little assistance from my best friend. He's also headed for the NFL, but Jay isn't an attention whore the same way I am.

He's right that I'm getting crazier by the day. I can't deny the attention from the scouts and the pictures of my future in the NFL being painted are getting to my head. My ego has always been intense, but this is more pathological. I'm about to get drafted. I'm about to be the star I've always wanted to be. It's all I've thought about, wanted, craved.

I dream of putting pictures of myself in my pro jersey on the wall beside the mirrors to look at while I fuck. But I'm not doing anything to further my agenda. Nothing about this will put a big-ass picture of me up for millions to see. I'm trekking across this frozen campus trying to find Cici because I need to see if she's as pretty and soft as I remember.

Yeah, I've definitely lost my mind.

Walking into the women's gym for the first time in my life, I find the cheer squad stretching out and chatting on a series of blue mats. They don't notice me until the door closes, and at that moment of observation, I realize how little attention I normally pay them. Their eyes all snap to me. No one moves except for a girl I've definitely slept with. She stands from her stretch and walks over.

"Hey Val, you need something?" Her name is Lisa, I think, and I fucked her freshman year? I don't want to lead her on by paying her unnecessary attention, so I scan the room for someone I haven't screwed.

"No," I tell, possibly Lydia. "Katie," I call the name of the girl I did an econ project with last semester, a nice clean X on the play diagram, and someone I definitely have not screwed.

Green eyes peer up at me, and her expression isn't as surprised as I thought it would be. I've never sought her out before, and I realize this is the second time in twenty-four hours I'm pursuing a woman. Cici is fucking everything up. I expect Katie to be a little starstruck like everyone else, but she seems pissed. What the hell does she have to be mad about?

“Valen.” There’s grit to her tone as she stands and gives me her full attention.

“I wanted to talk to you about something.” I’m trying to be polite, but I’m not used to asking people for anything, so I feel stiff.

“Leave Cici alone, alright? I don’t know what you did, but she doesn’t have many good things in her life, and she doesn’t need the few things she does have ruined. She’s a good person. Just leave her the hell alone!”

Well, that’s not what I expected to hear. Why doesn’t Cici have many good things in her life? My stomach flips with unease. She deserves everything. But I’m only thinking about that with a lesser part of my mind because I’m much more excited about how easy finding her turned out to be.

“You know Cici?”

Her eyebrow lifts, like she thinks I’m even crazier than Jay does. “Of course, I know her. She’s my roommate and has been for three years. I mentioned her multiple times when we did that project together.”

I just stare. It’s not like she showed me a picture of her. Why would I remember the name of her roommate?

“Well, my *roommate*...” She emphasizes the word like I’m still not paying enough attention to remember, but she’s talking about Cici, so I’m hanging on every word. “Came home crying last night because of you, after she told me she needed to confront you about ruining her play.”

She stares at me like she’s waiting for a response, but I have no clue what she wants me to say. All I want to know is where the hell I can find my girl.

“So what the hell did you do, Valen, because none of them will tell me!” She points at the girls surrounding her, some of them clearly feeling guilty while others are enjoying the power dynamic. But all I can think about is the fact I made Cici cry, and how badly I want to beat the shit out of myself, a feeling I truly don’t understand.

“I didn’t do anything to her. She was just upset. I just want to check on her.” I’m not sure if I’m lying, and I fucking hate that. Everything I do, I do with confidence, but this is so far outside of my purview.

“You know what, Valen? I don’t believe you. Guys like you never have good intentions for girls like her.” She turns away from me and sinks to the mat, resuming her stretch as a clear dismissal. My hands tighten into fists and start to shake. The things I want aren’t usually this easily withheld from me, and I feel so fucking small despite being three times her size.

“What’s her full name? Where is she right now?”

“Why do you want to know anything about her?” She looks at me sideways over her shoulder. Her anger switches to suspicion.

“The fat weirdo she lives with is Cecilia Harper,” Possibly Laney says. “I can’t believe she had the nerve to do that to you, Val. What did you do to her upstairs?”

She laughs and twirls her hair, obviously assuming I did something cruel to my Cupcake, and maybe I did, but she loved it. At least I thought she did, but after hearing she went home in tears... It takes all of my effort to control my temper. I’ve never felt these protective feelings for someone else, and they’re powerful. This girl isn’t worthy of being in a position on the play diagram, but I could literally snap her neck right now and enjoy it. I hate myself for ever touching someone who would speak that way about Cici.

“Cici is not a weirdo, and she’s not fat. Just because she’s not a size zero and has a different sense of style doesn’t mean anything,” Katie chimes in to defend Cici, and I immediately find myself invested in another person’s well-being. This can’t turn out well for me.

I turn to the girl I wish I could kill. “You’re just a bitter, jealous bitch because she stands out, and you’re completely and utterly forgettable.” Sex means nothing to me, and that’s all she ever was. She can’t hold a candle to Cecilia Harper. I get a full-blown stomach full of butterflies as I think of her full name, and as much as I hate this girl, I appreciate her for

answering my question. I turn and walk back out, knowing exactly what I need to find Cecilia now.

Katie chases me, grabbing my arm just as I'm stepping back into the cold February air. I turn to her, barely containing the violence pulsing through me, but luckily for her, it's just the two of us, and I don't actually have any ill will. In fact, I think I really like her.

"Leave Cici alone, Valen. I don't know what this is about." She looks between me and back toward the gym where the other cheerleaders wait. "But leave her the hell alone."

I easily pull my arm out of hers.

"No, I won't leave her alone." I take a couple of steps before turning back. "And don't touch me again." I belong to Cici. I don't say the last part out loud. It might be true, but that doesn't make it any less insane. My feet tear up the sidewalk as I head to a person whose name and face I know, but I can't deny that's only because he's done a ton to help me.

CHAPTER 6

VALEN

“CECILIA HARPER IS A DRAMA MAJOR.” KEVIN PUSHES HIS glasses up the greasy bridge of his nose as he reads from his computer in the student affairs office. Dark curls hang around his face, and I realize he’s kind of a creepy-looking guy. I’ve never noticed before. I met him freshman year while I was buying answers to the midterms, and he and I have had a decent working relationship since. He’s a nice tidy X on the diagram.

Football is everything to me. Academics are so far down I wouldn’t even consider them on my list, but Kevin here has helped me fudge the numbers semester after semester to keep me in good standing. Sometimes he sells me answers; other times, he just switches a few numbers. Either way, it all works out for me.

This office is supposed to be an informational hub to help current students, but Kevin will happily take a bribe to change all sorts of things in the university’s system, and the one administrator in here fucks a different destitute student every week. It’s not exactly the moral pinnacle of our university. This is the first time I’ve asked Kevin anything about anyone else except for the occasional football rival from another school, but he seems a lot more excited about this project.

“This her?” He turns the screen to me, and my heart throbs like a freaking girl in a rom-com at the sight of her shitty student photo.

“Yes.”

“Didn’t think she would be your type. Not saying she isn’t smoking, but I didn’t peg you for liking alt girls.”

“Not sure I like her because she’s alt.” That’s true. I like her style. It makes her different, but it’s nowhere near enough to explain the intensity of my attraction to her when I’ve only ever really wanted myself. Hell, I don’t usually even screw brunettes because I like that blondes look more like me. It’s not even twenty-four hours since I came down her throat, and she’s ruining everything.

“She lives in building B room 315 of the southern girls dorm. Roommate Katie Harris. She is a mostly A student with a few Bs mixed in. No crazy disciplinary records. Parents deceased which they gave her a grant for. Lucky, I wish my parents were dead and someone would pay me.” Has this guy always been a raging asshole? I’m not even sure.

“Anything else? Can you get me her schedule?”

“Already printed.” He nods toward the giant printer in the corner with a few sheets of paper sitting on top.

“Jeez, this girl has it rough. Brother is declared mentally incompetent, and he’s living in an inpatient facility. She doesn’t have much money either. Certainly not the type to run in your social circles. What was she even doing at your frat to begin with?” Obviously, he’s heard the rumors and tried a few times to ask me about them, but this is one way I don’t need to get attention.

“How old is her brother?” There’s this aching in my chest that I’ve never felt for anyone before, and it gets more intense with each new thing I learn about her. How hard it must be for her to be so alone. I wonder if she’s comforted by her own presence the way I am, but somehow I don’t think most people are.

“Says they’re about a year apart. He’s older. It happened after a party apparently. Says there were drugs involved but nothing else.”

“Thanks,” I say, but really I want to tell him he’s a slimy piece of shit. “Anything else I should know before I leave?”

And scrub your presence off my body.

“According to the activities system, she booked the auditorium this afternoon. Which is not a part of her normal schedule. You know, if you’re trying to surprise her and maybe get a little revenge, you might not want to do it at her dorm or in class where she travels more regularly.”

“Get to the point, Kevin.”

“Surprise her at the auditorium. This can easily be deleted on my end.” He clicks a key. “Whoops, there it went. Now go have some fun, big guy.” He winks, and I carefully think through my options before proceeding.

How did I not realize this guy is complete scum? I may focus on myself before anyone else, but I don’t want to see them hurt. Suddenly, I’m sure that’s exactly what I’ve done, seeing as I’ve paid a lot of money to people like Kevin, and I’m sure he’s helped people hurt girls before. He offered that much too easily.

I hand the morally bankrupt administrative assistant a fifty because, as fucked up as he is, I might still need him.

“Thanks for your help. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll forget her name.”

He smiles wickedly, assuming I mean something terrible is going to come her way, and he’ll want to be clueless for law enforcement, but I really mean I’ll kill him if he ever even looks in her direction. If he breathes within a hundred yards of her, he’s dead. I leave his office and tuck myself into my jacket. It’s freezing out, and there aren’t many people around. I could just drive, but I’m not in the right headspace to operate heavy machinery.

I take the long walk to an end of campus I’ve never visited before. The auditorium has its own parking lot, and the few times I’ve been here, I simply drove rather than walking through the arts buildings and the clusters of alt kids doing all kinds of different things. That’s definitely not what I find special about Cici, I determine as I pass a bunch of girls with a similar style sitting together in a colorful lounge. I don’t care

about any of them, none of them are X's, O's, or a giant glowing heart.

I guess I don't normally notice people or things all that much as I'm walking around. I'm searching for my own reflection or thinking of myself, my career, my future. How to lead my team like an extension of myself. Thinking about contract figures and my jersey number. I've always been superstitious and don't want to let go of my number. What will it be like to be the new guy on a field where my name doesn't mean so much?

I've never felt possessive of a person. Sometimes the position another X on the board holds, but not the person. I have a sense of superstitious need surrounding Cici, like the universe tells me I'll never play right again if she's not sitting in the stands cheering for me. Things are different right now, and I'm no longer the center of my world. Things seem brighter, louder, and as interesting as it is, it's terrifying.

She broke me.

I push open the door to the auditorium as quietly and slowly as I can. I slip into the hallway outside the theater and find it empty, but I'm a few minutes early. There are no coats on the hook, and I don't place mine there either as I'd rather no one know I'm here. I just want to see what she's like in her element. Learn something about her.

I'm not even sure if I'm going to talk to her or just watch and try to catch her later. I'm hungry to get my eyes on her, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I'm hoping I made her appeal up completely. That I'm going to take one look at her and realize I was wrong and there's no reason to tear my life apart or go crazy. I'm the only one for me just like I always thought.

I walk into the theater, look around, slip through the different aisles, and up onto the stage. There's no one in the audience, but I can already feel a little of the zip we shared last night. She loves to perform; she made that abundantly clear, and it seems so appealing to me, to experience that attention

the way she does. This is so much more intimate than the stadium. It's romantic in a way I never would have guessed.

A door pops and creaks as it shoves open, and I tuck myself into the curtains to keep from being seen. I feel like a complete moron until Cecilia Harper steps in, and she's somehow even more beautiful than I remembered. My heart races toward her, and there's no doubt about how she affects me. Her pouty lips are turned down, her lashes fanned against her cheeks.

A small cast surrounds her, looking equally dejected. I never did find out what play she was talking about the night before. All of a sudden, I feel as self-obsessed and useless as people have accused me of being because how did I forget to ask anyone about the thing that brought her to me in the first place? Her play.

"Cici, if we're doing the show after break anyway, do we really need to rehearse?" A guy I've seen at a party or two drapes his arm around her and pulls her tight to his side. Every muscle in my body hardens as I force myself to stay in place.

She shakes him off, and I drag in a breath. Another man touching her is physically uncomfortable.

"Yes, we need to rehearse. The show is going on as scheduled."

"How is that going to be possible? Everyone heard about what happened with Valen Throne, Cici. You may have smacked him across the face, but you certainly didn't convince him to move the ceremony, did you?"

That all clicks. She brought up the ceremony when I first approached her, and the ceremony is in the auditorium. Oh shit. I stole her spotlight. She told me herself it was all my fault. A vicious smile curls my lips. Good, you little fucking bitch, because you stole mine, and I'll never be able to get it back.

"I have a backup plan." There's a tiny, mischievous curl to her lips, and my cock twitches, hoping it's to beg me to pull my weight to change the date with her lips around my cock,

and I'm not picky about which set she chooses to convince me. I'm already tempted to forgo my glory for hers, which is a dangerous route.

"Cici, I love you, but I don't think you can pull this off," the kid who touched her says, and that brings on another kind of outrage. How dare he doubt what's mine, me by extension?

"Then you don't know me half as well as you think you do, Corey. Now places, everyone! Death scene from the top! I do not have time to fuck around, so you will all get this right the first time." My cock is so fucking hard it hurts watching her order them around. She is a star. She is more meant for the spotlight and leadership than I am. I'm torn between wanting to take her for myself and taking it all from her like she accused me. I am petty and self-obsessed.

There's some grumbling, but ultimately, they obey. Everyone takes their places. Cici lies down, and the prick that touched her, Corey, comes to kneel at her side. I don't remember this play very well. It never made sense to me, what with the star-crossed lovers bullshit, but I'm suddenly nauseatingly sure that something awful is about to happen.

"Thus with a kiss, I die."

And his fucking lips touch hers.

CHAPTER 7

VALEN

I DON'T EVEN THINK. I JUST THROW A PUNCH, KNOCKING A pile of boxes off a folding stool and sending them clattering to the ground. The asshole jumps away from her, and Cici's on her feet, storming toward the source of the sound in an instant. This wasn't my plan, but it's working well for me. He isn't touching her, and she's headed my way.

My hands flex with my rage, and my cock twitches as if she's running into my arms rather than checking out the source of a crash. God, I can barely take the fluttering in my stomach as she stares right at me without seeing.

Cecilia Harper—the name wraps through my mind and brands into my chest.

“This is a closed set. I swear to God if I find someone lurking back there, I'm going to kick your ass!”

She marches straight toward me and is only a few feet away when the smell of her hair fists my heart and cock. One more step and I slap my hand over her mouth, pulling her against my chest. My other hand slips over her throat.

She thrashes against me and opens her mouth to scream. “Calm down, Cupcake.” I grip her mouth tighter, squeezing her lips shut.

Her complaint tapers off to a whine as she processes what's happening. She jerks her body twice more but stops throwing elbows, and the fury vibrating off her quiets enough that a smile of satisfaction slips over my lips.

“You want your play back on, don’t you, pretty Cupcake?” I press my lips to her ear and breathe deep. She smells like sex and frosting. “You keep quiet about what was waiting in the wings, and I’ll think about helping you.”

She slams her heel into my foot but doesn’t make a sound. It hurts but not too bad.

“Cecilia, you know how much I liked that slap last night. Keep it up, and I might think you’re flirting with me.”

“Everything alright, Cici?” one of the girls asks.

“Make your choice. How important is your play to you?”

I move my hand from around her mouth but leave the other on her throat, giving her the opportunity to make me proud. Her plush ass cradles the bottom of my cock with the differences in our height, and I’m desperate to watch it disappear between her cheeks.

“Yeah, there’s a mess back here. Must have been a rodent or something.” She aims the dig at me, but I just smile. “I need to clean it up. You guys run lines. Don’t screw off!”

“Interesting choice of words,” I murmur into her ear as the hand covering her mouth slides over her shoulder and then along the full tits I’ve been dying to squeeze. Her breath catches as I trace her nipples through the shirt, and the idea that they are sensitive drives me insane. I don’t think I’ve ever sucked a girl’s tits in my life, but it’s all I can think about now.

“I want to taste these,” I tell her as I pinch and roll. “Why do you look so delicious, Cupcake?”

The sounds of their lines pick up, and their shadows move across the stage, but we’re hidden. Soft incandescent bulbs glow sixty feet overhead, but they barely touch us.

“Valen, what are you doing here?” she asks once she’s sure they’re distracted, ignoring my question. But if I’m not completely delusional, she’s excited to see me.

“You left too fast last night. I wanted to talk to you. You never told me about your play, but I figured it out myself.”

“This isn’t talking,” she comments as my hand moves up her shirt, over her soft stomach, and to her lacy bra. I roll my fingers over her nipples again, and a deeper gasp slips out of her lips. “I’m pretty sure what you’re doing is considered stalking.”

“It’s not really talking or stalking. More like groping, but you belong to me, so I get a pass.” Everything I do, I do well, and this girl will be no exception.

She laughs. “You’re fucking crazy, Valen. I swear. I don’t know who convinced you you’re the greatest person on planet earth, but they did us all a disservice.”

The words dig into my ego in a way I’ve never felt, and I twist her nipple in punishment. I expect a more negative reaction, but my cock jumps at her sharp inhale and sultry moan. She wiggles into my erection, and I can’t tell if she’s saying she’s not mine to tease me and force me to prove it to her or if she really believes it, and teasing me is just entertainment.

“It’s not a joke, and my status as the greatest man on earth is completely irrelevant to the fact that you are mine, Cecilia. You better tell that kid to keep his grimy fucking lips off you. Unless you want something unpleasant to happen to him.”

Her body tenses in my hands.

“You’re not threatening my best friend, are you, Valen?” There’s a deceptively sweet edge to her voice.

“I’m threatening anyone who touches you, Cupcake.”

“I’m not actually a piece of cake, Valen.” Maybe not, but I bet she is delicious. “And you don’t get to dictate those kinds of things to me.”

“Watch me,” I grit, my one hand tightening on her throat, the other still playing with her nipple.

She moans but continues arguing with me. “He’s Romeo, Valen. I’m Juliet. It’s not like that, but it doesn’t matter because I’m not a letterman jacket or a football, and you don’t own me.”

Fuck that. She's a thousand times more important than anything else.

"You have no idea how much I own you, Cupcake, but I will prove it."

She laughs again.

"This isn't a joke, Cecilia." She shivers as I say her name, proving that she wants me as much as I want her despite her protests.

"Then why is it so funny?"

That makes me nearly as angry as seeing another man kiss her, and the hand around her throat flexes. I wasn't kidding last night when I told her she needed to prove she was worth keeping around because if she's not, I need to kill her. I can't be outdone and rejected. I can't tolerate it. These emotions are too new, too near the surface, and I realize I would have been better off heading to the NFL without ever seeing her. It's too late now.

My one hand moves from her nipple to the front of her jeans, opening the button and slipping down over her stomach to her trimmed pussy hair. There's a brief flash of it before her slick lips part easily, and I have her clit beneath my fingers. I know how to fuck out of simple sense of courtesy. If I use someone for my own means, I might as well make it good for them, but this is the first time I've used these skills because I'm interested in the person's pleasure.

"If you're not mine, then why are you so wet?" I've never used sex to prove a point, but it seems like an incredibly powerful weapon now that I'm giving it due consideration.

"Because I'm horny, obviously. God, don't tell me you fit the dumb jock stereotype too." That pisses me off as much as it turns me on.

"So you get wet for every dumb jock when you're horny? You're not just a slut, you're desperate?"

She makes an outraged little sound. "No, I do not get wet for every dumb jock!"

“So it’s just me, then.”

She growls, giving me a surge of primal satisfaction as she fails to deny what I’ve done to her. My fingers move in different patterns until I find one she especially likes, and more of that thrill seeps into me as her body softens.

I squeeze a little tighter around her throat as I slip my fingers to her entrance and penetrate her for the first time. She gasps as best she can with me controlling her airway, but she makes no move to stop me or pull my fingers off her throat. She’s tight and hot, and my cock is so fucking jealous as I plunge my fingers into her and find her swollen G-spot desperate for attention.

“Remember last night when I told you, you needed to prove your worth to me or die, Cupcake? I wasn’t kidding, and right now, not only are you prettier than me and more interesting than me, but I just watched you kiss another man and tell me you’re not mine. How do you think that’s looking for you? You think your cunt around my fingers is enough?”

“Corey isn’t another man. He’s my best friend. Things aren’t yours just because you say they are, Valen. You actually have to own them. You don’t own me,” She grits the words through what’s obviously intense pleasure, and the fact she’s not even denying how good we are, just telling me it’s not enough makes me insane. I will do anything to own her, anything to make her accept my claim.

Maybe she’s right, and for the first time in my life, I see that I am lacking. There is something I want, something I need, and she says I can’t have her.

“Not yet, anyway,” I promise her as something dark rises inside me.

“Never. Going. To. Own. Me,” she speaks with the last air in her lungs, but I don’t let her take another breath.

I squeeze harder until the tension leaves her body, and she passes out. My anger fades entirely as her system fails to my superior strength, and I stop choking her long before I do serious damage. She’ll wake up in a few seconds, high as a

kite, but it will be too late by then. I'll be so deep inside her that she won't be able to force me out.

Supporting her upper body with one arm, I slide her pants down her legs but don't bother pulling them off. It doesn't matter for what I have planned. I leave her panties on, wishing it wasn't so dark and I could get a better look. My hands run over her ass and thighs, enjoying how much there is of both and imagining my face between them. I've never eaten pussy before, never felt the need, but tasting her will have to be a top priority.

My cock is out of my pants next, hard and aching, ready to cleave her in half. I don't have a condom, and I don't give a shit to get one. I want to feel her wet cunt with nothing between us. I'm going to fill her with cum and enjoy her hungry cunt sucking up every drop. I want to get her pregnant and keep her that way, along with a thousand other things I've never in a million years considered.

I spread her legs apart as she groggily comes back to, line my cock up with her entrance, and notch just the head inside her tight, puffy entrance. Before I fuck her too deep, I place a hand under each of her knees and lift her straight off her feet, bending her legs up to her chest with her feet dangling and her leggings still around her ankles. I slowly lower her all the way onto my cock. She moans long and low, and the people running lines stop to listen.

"You alright, Cici?" one of the guys asks.

"Tell them you're fine, and you just need a minute."

"Mmm," she moans just for me as she tries to adjust to how big and thick I am.

"Say it, baby. Say it or no more dick."

"I'm fine. I just need a minute," she calls loud enough for them to hear, but she sounds like she's getting fucked if you're listening carefully. She may not have agreed to this, but she just gave me all the permission I need to use her body. Before she's done speaking, I rock my cock into her, stroking her deep, dragging out her last syllable. She tries to strangle her

moan, but the keen in the back of her throat won't completely quiet no matter how hard she tries.

“Do you want them to hear you, Cupcake? It sounds like you do.”

“God, yes,” she admits, and my cock throbs in time with her grasping cunt squeezing. My arm muscles barely register the strain as I work her up and down on me, but my hips shake with the intensity of her slick, wet cunt. She might be a little bigger than other girls I've been with, but she's still so tiny. She's nothing in my arms and everything around my cock.

Her head falls back against my shoulder as I squeeze her thighs a bit too hard and seek my release in her body, not with her body, a distinction that is so clear to me now. I look down and just barely catch my cock disappearing inside her in the dim light. God, that's fucking sexy, but when I turn my head to the side and catch her watching my face, I nearly come.

“Like what you see, Cupcake?” She doesn't answer, but that charge we shared at the party while everyone watched courses between us. “You want to put on a show for them and be my star?”

This time, she nods, and my balls draw closer to my body, desperate to fill her with cum.

“You like that, don't you, baby? You little freak, you just got so wet for me.” And she is so fucking wet, her cunt gripping and pulsing as her head lolls against my chest. The position leaves me feeling so powerful I almost forget this is the first time in my life I've ever fucked without a mirror, and I'm missing nothing by not seeing myself.

“I didn't expect us to look so good together,” she admits as her pretty lips twitch and her eyes start to roll.

“I didn't expect anything like you.” I find an angle she likes so much she can't keep quiet no matter what. They're still reading lines, and with the fabric of the curtains dampening the sound, they can't hear or are pretending they can't.

Her orgasm surprises me, her lips shaping into a perfect o before her teeth cut into her lip and her head bangs more easily against my shoulder. Her cunt milks my cum from the base of my cock and rips out pleasure I've never experienced. I'd be screaming if I wasn't doing my best to keep it in.

"Fuck, Cici, fuck," I chant in her ear as she whines, neither of us able or wanting to be completely quiet.

"Valen, Valen," she whispers back, and that claim I tried to lay on her feels much more solid as my cum paints her insides in thick ribbons.

We're both finished a moment later, and I lower her to her feet. She wobbles as she tries to stand with her pants around her ankles and what's probably a light head. My cock slips out of her, and I tuck it back into my jeans still slicked in both of us. She turns toward me, and I watch her confusion in the near darkness.

"You didn't wear a condom."

"I wanted you full of my cum," I tell her point-blank. That was my goal, and that's what I achieved. I'm Valen Throne, after all.

She doesn't seem as upset as I'd like her to be.

"You're on birth control?"

"Obviously."

Obviously. Why is it obvious, and who has she been fucking? The rage burns hotter than I've ever felt, but I crush it down. No matter. I'll just have to figure out a way to get her off it without her knowing, and then I'll fill her with cum until she has no choice but to be mine.

"What about my show? Will you help me?" There's this hopeful look on her face that has nothing to do with me, and I'm so jealous I can't help but be a dick.

"You think you earned me helping you?"

She scoffs, clearly misinterpreting my petty jab for an actual denial. She did more than earn my help. She fucking enslaved me.

“Fuck you, Valen Throne. I hate you so fucking much.” She pushes me off her, and I allow it because I think I even like fighting her too.

She straightens her clothing out, but she’s still dripping my cum, and heads back out, interrupting their rehearsal.

“Rehearsal is canceled. I’ll see you all tomorrow.” Her boots echo as she stomps across the stage, and I step to the edge of the curtain to watch her exit. The group stares after her as she goes, but none of them leaves immediately.

Corey, as Cici called him, turns to the rest of them. “Come on, you know how my girl is. She’s emotional, and I haven’t given it to her lately. I’ll take care of things.”

No one answers at first, leaving a tense silence.

“You know I’ve never heard Cici say you two are together...” the one girl says, clearly hinting at whatever they’re all thinking.

“Doesn’t change the facts. Cici is mine.” And he leaves the auditorium, presumably to follow my girl.

I step out from behind the curtain, finding them all still sitting there, looking at the place Corey left. Their eyes widen when they see me, and I shoot them a wink.

“What the hell do you think that was about?” one of them asks from behind me.

“I think that noise was Cici fucking Valen Throne.”

“I think that noise was Valen Throne fucking Cici,” another corrects. And holy shit, I may have just come harder than I ever have in my life, but I’ve never been more turned on. Even our names sound good together.

Now that I’ve proven my point to her other friends, I need to figure out where this asshole gets off not only trying to claim what belongs to me but lying about his supposed best friend behind her back like a shitty limp dick coward. But not before I meet with the head of the athletic department and the dean. I have an awards ceremony to reschedule.

CHAPTER 8

CICI

MY EYES OPEN TO A MALE VOICE TALKING IN MY SPACE. I pretend to sleep for a moment as I try to decipher what's happening. I live in a girls' dorm. My roommate is a girl, and on the few occasions she's had male visitors, she's always warned me. This is weird enough that my nerves sit on edge. But then I realize I recognize the voice. Valen Throne is here.

My heart and pussy both clench, and I shiver in dread. After rehearsal, I once again ran back to my dorm in tears, but once again, it wasn't about the crazy rough sex Valen keeps forcing on me. It's about my life, my play, and the fact he still didn't offer to help me.

I haven't even fully processed how I feel about what he did to me at the frat party, let alone yesterday during rehearsal when he literally picked me up and shoved that monster inside my pussy. To say I've never been fucked like that before would be an extreme understatement. I want a repeat so badly I'm aching, but my fists are already balled up. I'm so angry with him for what he said to me after.

Do I think I earned his help? I more than earned it. I let him fold me into a pretzel and publicly impale me on the biggest cock I've ever seen in real life while my cast pretended to run lines instead of listening. I couldn't keep quiet, and I'm intimately familiar with how much sound the curtains block.

My pussy perks up, starving for more and making her opinion on the subject of Valen fucking me whenever he sees fit clear. He's awful, narcissistic like a Greek god, rather than a normal man, and it was still the hottest experience of my life.

What was it to him if he won't even help me? Probably less than nothing, but then again, he's here.

A little bit of hope flares to life. I told my cast I have a plan, but I don't. The only thing forcing me forward is absolute stubborn determination and the hope that beyond all reason and evidence to the contrary, things will work out for me in the end.

They never have before, but why not now? Oh, that's right, because Valen Throne is in my dorm, talking to Katie after blowing my mind twice in twenty-four hours. He could wind up altruistic, right? *And the devil may care*, that snarky voice answers.

"What's her favorite food?" he asks, cutting off my thoughts abruptly.

"Uh, she likes macarons, I guess." Katie sounds hesitant, and I wonder how many questions he's already asked her.

"Why do you want to know that, Valen?"

"What kind of question is that? I want to know what Cici likes and why."

"She likes macarons," she insists.

"Why are they her favorite?" he asks with an annoyed sigh.

"This is the kind of question you normally ask the person you want to get to know. You're new at this, but Jesus."

He doesn't answer.

"She gets to bake sometimes at her job even though she's a counter girl, and she really likes it. She wants to try to make them, but they won't let her. They're too expensive, and you can easily mess them up."

Why is he asking her something like that? And why is she actually answering him? I warm up a little more to Katie. I didn't realize she listened to me that thoroughly even after all this time living together.

"Are you her best friend?" Obviously not.

“No, I like Cici a lot, but no. It’s Corey Lewis. He’s a sophomore and a nice enough kid. I guess.” But her voice tapers off uncomfortably. What does she mean by that?

“Why don’t you like him?” He narrows in on the same hesitance.

What the fuck? Why wouldn’t she like him? Corey is an amazing person and a great friend to me. They’ve hung out a few times, and it didn’t seem weird. My heart pounds, choking off my breath.

“Yeah, he pretends he and Cici are dating when she’s not around. It’s weird, but she’s protective of him.” She pauses for a minute. “You can’t say anything about him. I tried to tell her once, and she got really mad and said I must have misunderstood, but I didn’t.”

Heat gathers in my cheeks, and my eyes burn. I’m angry as hell, feeling as protective of him as she accused, like it’s my brother she’s insulting and not Corey. But this isn’t exactly the first time I’ve heard this and not just from Katie. I really need to talk to Corey. His crush has gotten inappropriate if he’s still telling people we’re dating. But I don’t need Valen involved with my issues with Corey.

“He sounds like a real asshole.”

You’re one to talk.

“You really don’t have a lot of room to comment on other people in that department, do you, Valen? I mean, have you ever asked these types of questions about another person before? We did an entire project together, and you weren’t rude exactly, but I’ve never seen anyone who just doesn’t notice people quite like you.”

She trails off, not wanting to say that Valen Throne is the single most self-obsessed person on earth, and it’s really fucking weird that he’s here right now.

“She’s prettier than me.” He’s so sure of himself I almost laugh and blow my cover.

“A lot of people are prettier than you, Valen.”

“No, actually, they’re not. Just Cici.”

“Okay, then...” Her disbelieving tone nearly ruins my act. Has she not figured out how deep his pathological obsession with himself runs? Maybe she’s never been forced to her knees in his room of mirrors or choked while being told she belongs to him. God, I hope she hasn’t.

But prettier than him? I’m sure he’s actually crazy because no one is prettier than Valen. He’s fucking perfect, and I wish I could at least have the validation of him being a shitty lay, but no. My whole body clenches with delicious need when I remember the simplest of touches.

“Valen, I need to go to class.”

He doesn’t answer, and she clears her throat.

“You need to leave. I’m going to class, and Cici is sleeping.”

“No, she’s not,” he tells her with perfect certainty, and my whole body tenses.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Cecilia? Is he right? Are you awake?”

“Yes,” I mutter, thinking being dead might be preferable to the embarrassment.

She scoffs. “This has been the weirdest morning. I am going to class, unless you don’t want me to leave you alone with this creep.”

“It’s okay,” I whisper. “You can go.”

“Behave,” she tells Valen as she grabs her bag. “Pretending to be asleep.” She rolls her eyes at me. “See you later.”

“Bye, Katie.”

The door slams shut, and I push up from my bed, trying to look tough and commanding, but he’s just so big, much too big for this room or Katie’s little white computer chair, which he’s nearly crushing beneath him.

“What are you doing here, Valen?”

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“I’ve seen what talking looks like with you. I’m not interested.”

His cheeks turn slightly pink, and his eyes heat. I just about melt.

“I mean actually talking this time. I have a few things to say to you.”

“What would you like to discuss, Valen?”

“Your play and what you might be willing to exchange for my help. I can do it if I feel like it.” The hatred his sexpertise quieted flares back to life.

How badly do I want his help? I’m not comfortable with my answer. I get up, deciding that him showing up here at my dorm while I was sleeping not only proves he is a stalker, but it’s a shitty power play, and I can one-up him. He has something I want, but I know I have a few things he wants too. I pull my shirt over my head, and he swallows audibly as my tits fall.

“Uh.” He stares at me like a complete idiot, eyes fixed on my nipples.

“Hey, quarterback, have you ever seen a pair of tits before?”

“Not really,” he answers, his eyes sticking to my nipples as they sway with my movement. I’m not entirely sure what he means by that, but fuck, his undivided attention is everything. Valen Throne, with his eyes glued to my nipples, isn’t something I ever thought I’d see.

“What did you think I’d be willing to exchange for your very capable help in getting my show back to its originally scheduled date?” I ask him as I slide my pajama pants down my legs. He stares at my body in the full light of day like I’m truly the most interesting thing he’s ever seen.

There’s a flare of jealousy in his eyes along with the need. He believes I’m even more fascinating and attractive than him, like he said the few times he’s threatened to kill me. I should

probably be more nervous about that, but it turns me the fuck on, and I'm prone to the dramatic. The quality doesn't make me as nervous as it should in others.

"I want to eat your cunt, Cupcake." I nearly choke.

"You're joking."

"Definitely not joking. You want to play Juliet on Saturday night. I want to eat your cunt. I don't see how you lose in this situation." The morning light plays with his blond curls, and his pink tongue darts across his lips. I'm so fucking turned on that I nearly say yes.

"Maybe I just don't want to have sex with you again." I push my panties down my legs, bending over and letting him get a good look at what he wants to eat so bad. Does he think I'm getting naked so we can fuck? He's mistaken. I'm just getting changed for the day.

"Didn't say I wanted to fuck, Cupcake. I said I wanted to eat your cunt. Need it, actually. It's all I can think about."

That makes me pause. The idea of his face between my thighs is appealing, but no. He doesn't deserve it if my show isn't back on.

"Fuck off, Valen. You don't get to show up in my dorm while I'm sleeping and demand to eat me out, you creep. Give me back my slot, or get out." Something wild flashes in his eyes.

"I thought you might be difficult again, but I'm not playing with you, Cici." His hand slips into his pocket, but I'm not paying too much attention to the movement until the knife he pulls out flips open and my heart stops. "I told you yesterday that you're mine, and you better prove your worth. I meant it."

Cold sweat breaks out on my skin, and my voice dies in the back of my throat rather than forming into a scream. I've never had someone pull a weapon on me, let alone a knife. And my entire body shrinks like it understands the pain the blade promises on a fundamental level. I swallow hard.

"What the fuck is that?" I whisper, and the few feet separating us feels like less than inches.

“A knife. Now, get on the bed and open your thighs, Cecilia.”

My heart pounds in my chest, and all the snark dies out of me as panic grips my throat.

“Please don’t hurt me,” I’m begging as I stare into the most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen, so fucking blue, but a lot of predators are pretty in nature.

“Do what I say.”

“Put the knife away, and I’ll get on the bed,” I try to reason with him, but maybe he wants me to see that he’s not reasonable. If that’s his message, I’ve received it loud and clear.

“I think I’ll keep it. Now get on the bed.”

An intense rush of arousal mixes up in the fear. I’m not sure I would feel this way if I didn’t already know how good it feels to fuck him, but maybe I would. I can barely make sense of what turns me on anymore, and right now, I’m desperate for some kind of relief.

I step out of my panties and climb on the bed as he commanded, spreading my legs wide. His nostrils flare as he looks at every inch of me. Two steps forward and Valen Throne sinks to his knees in front of me. He doesn’t bother to kiss around my thighs or try to work me up to the sensation.

His free hand splits my lips wide, and he dives into me face-first. I shrink away from him like his tongue is the blade, as he swirls my clit. Before I let out a full moan he sucks my clit into his mouth, the overstimulation so intense I nearly come on the spot. My fingers slip into his silky blond curls and they wind around my fingers like they’re trying to grab me back.

He presses the knife to the side of my breast, the sting making the cruelly sharp edge known but only slicing the topmost layers of my skin. Rivulets of blood slip down my side, but the image is so pretty. He’s told me he was going to kill me multiple times, so I should be more afraid of him

spilling my blood. I should cry for help instead of more, but I can't. I'm so fucking turned on I almost feel insane.

“What are you planning to do with the knife, Valen? I'm not looking to die,” I ask as the pleasure in my clit builds, and the knife cuts slightly deeper.

“Cut my name into your skin,” he answers with his face still stuffed into my pussy. “Try denying I own you then.”

Heat rushes through me at the suggestion, and I don't know what's wrong with me because I'm gushing at the idea of this man I hate marking my skin forever and effectively claiming me. It was already nearly impossible to deny him. I have never been more satisfied in my life, and I'm scared he owns me without my permission.

“You can't own me, Valen. You can't.” I stare him in the eyes as I speak, and we share that flash again. We're our own audience right now, and I don't get how or why his attention is so powerful and feels meant for only me, but I do know Valen doesn't back down.

“You're fucking perfect,” he answers, understanding the words are a challenge. I can't ask this man to mark me, but I fucking want him to anyway.

He pulls back and runs an oversized hand over my thigh, choosing the perfect spot. Then he sets to work cutting a pretty V into my thigh. The first cut stings but brings a flash of euphoria. I'm shaking by the time he's done, and I'm bleeding pretty heavily despite it not being that deep. “That's enough. You get the picture, don't you, baby?”

Holy shit, what did I just let him do?

He runs his fingers over the wound, enjoying what he did to me, playing with the blood, drawing out the pain. But his mouth is back on me, licking and sucking. The pain and blood mixing with the feeling of his mouth is insane. He slides his bloody fingers inside me and plays with my G-spot.

I cry real tears as I orgasm on his tongue and around his blood-soaked fingers. He works every ounce of my pleasure out of me, carefully sucking and twisting his fingers like he

didn't just cut me up. When I beg him to stop, he does, but only long enough to pull his cock out of his pants. He lines himself up with my entrance, and I stare at him through wet lashes.

“No, Valen, I can't take it.”

“You can, Cupcake. You're such a good little slut for me.” His head slips inside me, but he stays shallow. The stretch is still too much, with the position he fucked me in yesterday.

“Valen, please, please.” Tears slip over my cheeks. I'm so stimulated that every inch of my body screams for relief. Whether that's him stopping or another orgasm, it doesn't matter.

“Keep crying, baby. Those tears make my cock so hard.”

And then this psycho licks the tears off my cheek as he rams his cock as deep inside me as he can go.

“So tight, Cupcake, so pretty.” I melt under his praise. I can't even believe someone who looks like him is lavishing it on me, and it's so raw, pulled from such a real place with my blood smearing between us.

He's shocked by every one of our touches, and it makes each even more intense that he refuses to ask permission. He doesn't care as long as I'm his. He wants me enough to take. And something is wrong with me because as much as I hate him, I love how wrong it is when he fucks me like this.

“Valen,” I scream as I come around him again, and a wet splash echoes around us. My body shakes, and my cum drips.

“Fuck, didn't know you could squirt.”

“Me neither,” I answer as he follows me, grunting in my ear, cock jerking inside me as he fills me with cum, each little twitch drawing out my own painful release.

He lies on top of me for a minute, just staring into my eyes.

“I have to get to class,” I finally tell him.

“I can walk you or give you a ride.”

“No, I don’t think so.” I push him off and get to my feet as our mixed cum slips down my legs.

“Why not?” He’s pissed off, and maybe that’s fair. I can’t tell anymore. I just need space.

“I like fucking you, Valen, but we’re not a thing.” I grab my clothes and start shoving them on, not even bothering to clean up. I just need to not be naked anymore.

“I cut a V into your thigh, Cecilia. What did you think that meant? ’Cause it wasn’t virgin.”

If he wants to be an asshole, two can play at that game.

“It could mean anything, but I’m missing a few letters to get to Valen, aren’t I?” I cock an eyebrow at him, daring him to do something. “Now what about my play?”

He’s putting himself away behind me, about to leave. The fury coming off him is palpable and slightly nerve-wracking. I think I finally chased him off for good, him and his fucking knife. The nutjob.

“I’ll see you for rehearsal.”

The door slams.

“What exactly do you mean by that?” But he’s long gone and doesn’t answer me.

CHAPTER 9

CICI

IT'S FRIDAY, SO I GO TO CLASS LIKE I SAID, BUT MY professors deserve better of my attention. All I can think about is how sore my clit is from Valen's pink lips and tongue sucking it halfway off my body, the throbbing of the cuts on my leg and breast, and the fact that I want to see more of Valen even though he still hasn't agreed to help me, and my show is tomorrow night.

I got on the bed like he asked, so maybe he will help.

The day passes in a blur of looking for him, accidentally scraping my injury against my jeans and hoping for him to appear around corners and out of air vents. By the time the later afternoon rolls around, I'm distracted, needy, and feeling like nothing in the world is going right.

I call the facility where my brother lives and ask if he can speak. He's not having a good day, and he asks if Corey will come and visit him. That makes two of us on the shitty day and not hearing from Corey. Which is unusual, so I call him next, and it goes straight to voicemail. That's strange, but he's let it die before. I try not to worry despite my paranoia. My skin prickles like someone is watching me, and shadows of people walking past make me jump.

When it's time for our last rehearsal before dress tomorrow afternoon, I've convinced myself that what Valen said about seeing me was nothing but talk. Instead, I open the door to the auditorium and find him sitting surrounded by theater geeks raptly listening to his every word. It takes only a moment before I pick up on the nature of the conversation.

“Yeah, like this...” Valen holds up his arms, demonstrating a maneuver I intimately recognize.

“I don’t think I’m that strong.” The scrawny Tybalt answers him. “How’d you get her legs up like that?”

“Are you talking shit about Cici?” The protective edge in his voice makes my heart flutter.

“No, I’m just not strong.”

Valen looks him up and down for a minute before laughing.

“Huh, you’re not, are you? Guess I didn’t think about that.”

“You mean, you didn’t just assume you’re better than me because you’re bigger and stronger? I assumed you’d stuff me in a locker on principle.” Everyone laughs.

I’m not surprised Jeremy would ask that. He’s the type who likes to make people uncomfortable, and Valen probably reminds him of a lot of different shitty guys. He’s sort of their king. But Valen doesn’t seem surprised or bothered.

“Honestly, man, not really. I don’t normally pay that much attention to other people, especially not what dudes look like. I’m sure you’re fine.”

They all just gape at him.

“That’s frighteningly narcissistic but also sweet?” Jeremy looks like he’s eaten something unpleasant, trying to figure out exactly what is going on. I personally think he’d need a team of doctors to fully unwind that ball of yarn.

“Hey, guys,” I say as I let the door shut behind me, and they all look up. “Thanks for talking about me behind my back.”

“Hey, don’t blame us.” Katrina, who plays Lady Capulet, waves her hand. “He’s the one bragging about fucking you.”

“And you asked him to stop telling the story?” I ask as I walk down the aisle.

“It’s not our fault if it’s an interesting conversation.” She winks at me before her face splits into a full grin.

Stacy, who plays Lady Montague, shoots her a dirty look as if she’s not nearly so entertained.

“Plus, your slutting worked out well for us. The show is back on!” Katrina claps.

“What do you mean?”

“Valen had the dean move the ceremony to Sunday. Isn’t he the best?”

“The best? This was his fault to begin with?” I turn toward him, wanting to look pissed but unable to keep the smile off my face.

“Why were you giving them the rundown, quarterback?”

“We’re interesting, Cupcake. I fixed your show for you.” He smiles up at me through his blond lashes, his curls making him look like an angel.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and breathe deep, trying to decide what the best course of action is. I’m flustered by his gesture and pissed off that it was so easy for him to fix when it was such a big deal to me.

“We are not a we. You and I fucked a couple of times, and now you did the right thing and gave me my slot in the auditorium back.” He shoots me a vicious glare accusing me of downplaying every part of this, and I can’t even pretend he’s wrong.

“A couple of times?” Jeremy hoots.

“Yes, a couple of times,” I confirm. “But that’s it, Valen. I’m done, especially if you’re going to give people the play-by-play. Thank you for going to the dean. I really appreciate it, but we’re not having sex again.”

My words sound convincing, but I’m insanely wet from having walked in on this, and his smile says he knows it. I’m even wetter from my gratitude, and the situation was his damn fault. He smiles like he knows and planned it special for me.

“You’re done? Huh, I’ll have to keep that in mind. Sorry, fuck buddy. I’ll never do anything like that again. Congrats on your big day. Since you won’t let me play Romeo, I’ll have to see if I can pencil the play in. Tickets are sold out, so hopefully, I can scalp one.”

“Tickets are sold out?” I swallow, my eyes widening and my defenses slipping.

“Yep, but we’re not fucking anymore, right, fuck buddy?” The dare in his eyes is hard to ignore.

“I am not your fuck buddy.”

“Exactly like I thought,” he agrees, but I haven’t chased him off.

Every last one of them laugh, equally as entertained as they are mystified by whatever is happening. We’re all happy. There’s a joyous sense of victory and relief in our company. I take a moment to read all of their expressions and see if anyone is judging me too harshly for using my magic pussy to get our play back. The answer seems to be no, but I realize someone is missing.

“Where’s Corey?” I ask.

“So if you’re not going to be my fuck buddy, what about being my Valentine? I’ve never had one before,” he continues, ignoring my question. “After everything I did for you, I think you should at least buy me a box of conversation hearts.”

“Absolutely not. I’m not sure you can read sentences that long, quarterback.”

“I can spell all the things I did to you.”

Another chorus of laughs, but Katrina comes to my aid.

“Corey didn’t text you?” she asks, moving the conversation briefly away from my sex life.

“I called him earlier, and his phone was off.” I pull my phone out of my pocket and try again. Once more, it goes straight to voicemail. I type out a text, thinking he might see it on his iPad if he’s having issues with his phone. “Let’s give him a few minutes to respond or show.”

We do, and the whole time Valen chatters, asking everyone questions about the theater and Romeo and Juliet like it isn't weird as fuck.

"I don't know if he's coming, Cici," Katrina says, shooting a sideways glance at Valen, who has switched to asking her about the farm she grew up on like he's never seen a cow.

"Give him time."

A few more minutes pass, and he still doesn't show up, but it's becoming increasingly apparent Valen doesn't know how to do small talk, and I find it oddly... charming. Fuck.

"Should we go on without him?" Jeremy asks.

"We don't have a Romeo," I answer, suddenly tired as hell from all the hoops I've had to jump through just to get my last real shot on stage.

"I can play Romeo," Valen offers, and at the moment his words land like a kick.

"Really, do you know the lines?" I ask sarcastically, and his lack of an answer is an answer.

"I've never paid much attention to this play, but I can kiss you and sword fight."

"Un-freaking-believable. What are you even doing here? You should be on Broadway."

"I couldn't embarrass you from New York, pretty Cupcake."

"Oh, I'm sure you could manage."

That's when I decide I've had enough. I'm going to go pull Corey's ass out of bed, and we're rehearsing this damn play. It's back on, and I let the excitement of that slip into my bloodstream. I do my best to fight off the gratitude for Valen that comes with it, but I can't manage it for more than a minute. Maybe I will suck his cock again.

I redo the top two buttons on my coat as I head to building five of the boys' dorms. It's not quite as cold today, and the

sun is almost bright. The dorms aren't coed, but no one stops you from visiting during normal hours.

I open the door and walk across the tiles toward the chairs and TVs set up on the first floor. The guys in the lounge look up at me and then jump, like they've seen a ghost. What the fuck? I turn around because I'm sure I'm not what's scaring them and jump too when I see Valen behind me.

"Why are you so quiet?" I accuse him as I try to catch my breath and restart my heart.

"Light on my feet. It's part of why I'm such a good quarterback."

"What a humble stalker I've gotten myself."

"Why would I be humble? I'm Valen Throne. You know better than anyone I don't have anything to be ashamed of, Cupcake. Especially now that I fixed things for you." But he doesn't deny that he's stalking me. Fabulous.

"Better than anyone? We've only screwed a couple times." Sex doesn't even get really good until you've done it a dozen or so times, and the potential for how amazing that could be scares the shit out of me. I roll my eyes as I continue walking, but he easily keeps up, following me down the hall.

"You're the first person I've ever had sex with more than once, and that was my first time eating pussy."

I turn and face him, not sure he said what I think he did. That can't be true, can it? It felt amazing, but it was a little too much. Someone less into overstimulation probably would have freaked out or not been able to come. It did seem slightly inexperienced in hindsight.

"Are you trying to distract me from the fact you are once again stalking me?" Because if he is, it's working.

"Yes, I'm trying to distract you, but that doesn't make it a lie."

I take a deep breath, suddenly certain I don't have the energy to play his games. That I don't have the right classification or defense level or whatever to protect myself

from a force of nature, a god rather than a man, whether his own ego made him that or not.

“Leave, Valen. I need to talk to Corey.” I don’t wait to see if he listens, slipping into the stairwell and letting the door drop behind me.

CHAPTER 10

CICI

ONCE I REACH COREY'S FLOOR, I'M CONVINCED VALEN actually left since I still don't hear anyone behind me. He's not so quiet he could evade notice on these hollow metal steps, and I breathe a sigh of relief and regret at the distance between us. This is too much too fast, and I'm too fucked up to make sense of it.

I walk into the hall and look back and forth a couple of times as my feet pass over the faded yellow and green tile. I pull out my phone and send one more text.

Me: I'm coming up.

It doesn't really matter that the warning is late. I wait a minute for him to get it, but it never marks read. The number 407 on his door has never looked so foreboding, and I'm not sure where this sense of dread stems from, but it's thick all around me.

Knock, knock.

Someone shuffles behind the door before it opens. My best friend is standing in his pajamas, wearing a suspicious glare that's first aimed straight over my head like he's expecting someone significantly taller. He looks down, finding me, and that quickly shifts to a hostile glare. I take a step back on instinct.

“What the fuck do you want, Cecilia? Didn't blocking you give you the hint?” I choke a little, so stunned by what he's saying. I'm not sure how to respond. No one ever catches me

speechless. I'm an improv pro, but this lays me out. I'm so glad the hall is empty, as his body language clearly says he won't be inviting me in.

"I called a few times, but I didn't realize you blocked me. What are you talking about? Why did you block me?"

His brown eyes lack their usual warmth. They're narrowed and annoyed, like my very presence in his life is somehow too much for him when I thought he was someone who would always be there for me.

"I'm talking about the fact that I'm done pretending with you just for you to fuck some guy at rehearsal like a goddamn slut when you're supposed to be with me. I blocked you because you're not fucking worth it."

I take another step back, feeling like he slapped me. A slut? And what the fuck does he mean by supposed to be with him? He knows I don't feel that way about him. What am I not worth? Am I really that much trouble? There are so many things I want to ask, angry words I want to hurl at him, but I try to focus on the most important ones. I was supposed to be coming here with good news.

"What do you mean I'm supposed to be with you? We're not actually Romeo and Juliet." My hands slap against my thighs in outrage. I can't believe this is happening right now.

"Your fucking show is canceled, Cici! I'm not obsessed with that. You are!"

"It's not. Valen fixed it. We're back on! Please, Corey." I'm begging, and I don't know why. I can see how far past that we are on his face.

"Your show may be back on, but he didn't fix shit. I'm out. I am done." He goes to shut the door in my face, but I put my boot in the way.

"You don't mean that, Corey."

"I absolutely do." But he doesn't shove me out of the way to shut the door like I'm scared he will. I've never seen this side of him, and it's like having my heart ripped out.

“You’re Camden’s friend; you’re my friend. It’s never been like that with us. What are you pretending?”

He opens the door, puts his hands in his hair, and sighs so loud it cuts through me.

“Cici, I was never friends with your brother, okay?” The words don’t even make sense, and my heart is already shattered.

“That’s not true.”

“He was weird when we were kids, and I don’t know how you’re so shocked about what he’s like now. We all saw him losing his shit years before he went over the edge. So how haven’t you figured that out? How are you so fucking oblivious?” There’s years of frustration lined in his face, and I don’t know how I missed this.

“Who’s we all?”

“All the other kids in school.” And the way he says it makes my stomach sink even further than I thought possible. My brother was always different. He had a lot of bullies. Was Corey actually one of them? I can’t accept this.

“How could you not be his friend? You are his friend. Corey, please. We trust you.” A tear slips over my cheek.

“I lied to get close to you. Remember how we had to remind him who I was the first time I showed up with you?” Corey actually laughs, and another piece of me dies. “It’s because he had no clue why I would visit him.”

I just assumed Camden was really far gone that day. When Corey came to me and told me how close they had been, I didn’t really question it. He showed me a picture of them that looked like they were buddies, but who knows if I only saw what I wanted to as a sad and lonely girl.

I just wanted a solid connection to who my brother used to be so badly. I swallow hard, not really wanting to understand what Corey’s telling me even though I do. How I’ve ignored the uncomfortable looks and paranoid statements Camden has made about Corey, and how this whole time my brother was trying to warn me, even when he can’t tell what’s real.

“But I don’t get it. You’ve sat with him so many times. You were such a good friend to him. Why do that?”

“Yeah, he must have been pretty confused about what the hell was going on at first, but I think he’s used to me, and I don’t mind doing it as long as you make it worth my time. I’ve spent a lot of time with the kid at this point, enough to actually pity him. I’d keep doing it if you gave me what I want.”

I try to ignore the fact this is the second time I’ve been threatened and leveraged for sex this week, but this time, I am most certainly not turned on.

“Does he even know you lied?”

“I don’t think he knows what lies are, not anymore.” He says it like a simple statement of fact, like Camden isn’t my brother and this isn’t crushing.

“Why would you do this?” I can’t imagine anyone doing something so sick or cruel, but when I look into his eyes, I see a true depth of selfishness I couldn’t have imagined before this moment. A thousand times worse than Valen Throne.

“Because I wanted to be with you, and that was my in. It was easy, and I took it. I never expected it to be so hard to get to the next step. I’ve never met a fat girl who thinks so damn highly of herself. You do realize a pretty face doesn’t make up for everything, don’t you?”

I shake my head. Everything is over for me. Everything is ruined. I wish I was dead. I wish I was with my parents. Camden wouldn’t even know. It might be better off if he were dead too, and we could all be together again.

“The play, what about the play?” I’m babbling, not actually worried about having a Romeo but holding the one thing I’ve been gripping through bloodied fingernails.

“Cecilia, absolutely no one in the world gives a fuck about your play, and only one person gives a fuck about you, and it’s not your brother, who barely knows if you’re in the room, or Valen Throne, who’s using you as a fuck toy. It’s me.”

More tears slip free as he picks at my deepest insecurity, the fact that with my parents dead and my brother unwell, no

one is left to care about me.

“So what then? What is your ideal situation, Corey?”

He smiles like I’m seriously considering what he’s offering and not asking the question in outrage.

“Come inside. We’ll talk, and then I’ll still play Romeo for you, if you’re agreeable.”

“You think I’d do that after what you just told me?”

He laughs. “Cici, I have never met anyone more desperate or fame-hungry than you. I think you would do anything for the spotlight. Absolutely anything. Even fuck Valen Throne behind that curtain like we all couldn’t hear you whining like a bitch in heat.”

Much like what happened the first night I met Valen, I don’t think before I act, lifting my hand and smacking Corey straight across the face. My hand lands against his cheek with a slap, and his mouth drops open in outrage. Unlike Valen, he’s not amused. The twist to his features terrifies me before he moves, and with speed I don’t anticipate, he backhands me across the cheek.

The slap echoes down the hallway, and my yelp carries after. I hold my breath for a moment as I brace my body to keep from falling. I stay up, but my knees briefly buckle with the impact. I wait a half-second for a door to open, for someone to come to my rescue, but there’s no one.

The pain blinds me, momentarily pulsing through my skull and behind my eyes rather than just in my cheek. I look up at Corey through tear-filled eyes and hope to see some regret, but instead, I watch his hand rise again. With my last bit of self-respect and self-preservation, I kick him in the balls as hard as I can.

My boot connects with flesh, and he hits the ground, probably the way he hoped I would when he hit me. His hands shoot to his groin, and he rocks back and forth in the fetal position while he splutters.

“You fucking bitch. Should have just raped you myself if that’s what you like. Shouldn’t have waited for Valen Throne

to do it.”

“Fuck you, Corey.” I’m so disgusted by his opinions of me and my choices that I want to step on his balls for good measure, but I’m too heartbroken to be vindictive, too newly betrayed to be ready for vengeance. I turn and run, hoping he doesn’t get up and follow me.

Valen’s words ring in my head. “*Don’t hit people unless you want to get hit back.*” But when he hit me back, he smacked me in the face with his dick, which I ultimately enjoyed. I’m afraid Corey has much worse waiting for me. How is the most intolerable person I’ve ever met actually a much better person than my best friend? I hold my cheek, and the sobs try to rip out of my chest.

I throw the door open. The lounge is empty now, and I launch myself into the blistering February breeze. My cheek aches and burns and I’m surprised to find I’m actually alone for once. I cry a little harder in relief and disappointment. I want Valen, but it’s probably for the best that he’s not here.

I can’t imagine what he would do if he heard or saw what just happened. I am beyond devastated, heartbroken, and betrayed. I want to break down and never get back up. Even more pathetic, I know I should hate Corey, but I don’t. A part of me can’t let go of the idea that Corey has been there for my brother when no one else was, even if he did it for awful reasons.

I can’t stop the tears from spilling as I walk across campus back to my dorm. All I can think about is my brother and how badly he’s been taken advantage of and what I have to do to ensure no one sees the mark forming on my cheek.

Why is it that Valen suddenly feels like someone I want to run to, when I know better on every level? Haven’t I learned the universe likes me alone?

When you love to perform, it’s easy to get carried away and forget that people will match your energy to use you. It’s so easy to get caught up when you have good intentions, and I can’t help but wonder if any aspect of my life is real or if I’m just an “improv expert” so desperate for connection, I’ll go

with anything. The old adage is, never say no. And as I think about my life, I'm having a hard time thinking of a single instance I said no before today.

CHAPTER 11

VALEN

CICI RUNS OFF, HOLDING HER CHEEK, AND I WATCH, STUNNED as the sheet of her black hair slips through the door before it closes. Her cry echoes down the hall and cuts into my heart a hell of a lot deeper than that V I put in her thigh. I can't breathe. There's a fist around my lungs and heart, something wedged between my ribs like the few times I've cracked them playing football.

It takes me a few minutes to understand what's happening, to get why everything in the world is sideways and all I can taste is blood, all I can see is red. A part of me wants to chase Cecilia, but I have no clue what I would do if I caught up with her. How could I help or make her feel better when I'm nothing but ego and rage? I'm Valen Throne, and the things I'm good at aren't good for other people, just me. I'm not good for Cici.

He hurt her, and suddenly, he's not an O on a diagram. He's a flashing target ripped off the board and waving in front of me.

The piece of shit who has been lying to her and using her for years is still lying on the ground cradling his balls. A warm rush passes through me at that, and I think it's pride. She didn't hold back. But when does Cici ever? In the short time I've known her, she has never made herself smaller for other people.

I'm the same, but it's different.

I don't need to make myself smaller. My size is power, and I've had that since I was sixteen. I'm conventionally attractive,

practically famous, and about to be a pro athlete. Being myself is easy. Being Cici takes guts. She's alone, she's struggling, and this piece of shit slapped her.

I step out from my hiding spot on the opposite end of the hall.

When Cici went upstairs, I just ran to the other side of the building and took the south stairs. She's crazy if she thinks I'd fuck off just because she told me to.

Corey doesn't notice me until I'm standing over him. He coughs and chokes as he hangs onto his balls. "What the fuck are you doing back here? I did what you said. I'll never speak to her again."

It's true I had a little conversation with him the day before, and I thought I made myself clear, but apparently, he didn't understand that "stay away from Cici" didn't mean break her heart into pieces and put your hands on her.

"That's not what I said, Corey, and I think you know there's a difference between following the letter and the spirit of an order."

His head thumps against the floor as he whines. "You wanted me out of her life. I'm out. You don't get to tear people's life up and then dictate how the pieces fall."

What a hypocrite. Even I know what he did is disgusting, and I'm just barely human.

"Actually, I do," I correct his incorrect assumption. "I'm God's favorite."

"You would think that, you miserable prick, but you're just a creep! Everything you have will be gone in a few years." But he still doesn't stand.

"If I wasn't his favorite, he never would have given me Cici." Who gives a shit if looks and strength fade? As long as I get her, I win. "You lose, Corey."

He makes a sound somewhere between a laugh and a grunt of pain as he tries to push himself off the floor and onto his

knees. He stares up at me with shitty brown eyes full of lies. Lies he used to get close to my cupcake.

“No one even likes you! They’re afraid of you, or they want to use you, but they don’t like you. Cici won’t ever love you.”

That fucking hurts and picks at all the shit she’s said to me these last few days. I knee him in the balls once more for good measure. My girl didn’t do as much damage as she meant to. I just know it. She will love me. She has to.

“I like me,” I tell him as his stomach lands smack on the ground, and he gags. “Cici will love me.”

I step on the hand he used to hit Cici, grinding my heel into it and enjoying his screams. I don’t ease up until a crunch turns his gags to full-blown vomiting, and then I just want to avoid the splatter.

I wait until he’s done, then I grab him by the broken hand and drag him over the lip of the door fully out of his dorm and into the hallway. This is by far the most violent thing I’ve ever done, and I’m hungry for more. The few times I’ve been in a fight, it was pulled apart, and yes, I crave the violence of my sport, but this is different. This is a blood debt. He touched what’s mine. He hurt what belongs to me.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he cries as he squeaks along the tile.

He tries to pull his arm out of my grip but quickly gives up with the pressure on the break.

“Please, Valen, please,” he begs.

“Please, Corey.” He thinks I’m mocking him, but I’m mimicking Cici’s words as she begged for him to be the friend she imagined all along. He lands a punch against my thigh with his unbroken hand, but he’s weak, injured, naturally a pussy, and it barely fazes me. I wish he could hurt me. This primal need won’t quiet without spilled blood, and the ripped skin on his broken hand is not enough. I need to bleed for Cici’s suffering too.

I bend and throw my first punch, connecting with his open mouth, cutting my knuckles on his teeth and breaking the two up front. He shouts, the sound bloody and broken. Rather than trying to fight, he cradles his own face as I drag him to the stairwell.

“Please, man, please,” he garbles through the blood as I line him up with the top step. He’s a little tall, but I’ll make it work.

“It’s too late for that.” I land a heavy kick in his ribs, knocking him off the top step and building enough momentum to keep him rolling. His body thumps hard as it hits each step. He lands on the wider platform between the staircases, chest up, arms spread, panting, whining, making even more pitiful noises than Cici did.

“I’m sorry. Please. I’m sorry.”

“No one in this world gives a fuck about you, Corey. No one, and I’m going to prove it.”

This time, I grab him by his collar and push him backward down the steps, letting his head bang on each one as he falls to the bottom. He’s not conscious as I take the rest of the steps, using his body as the last and pressing the shape of my boot into his chest.

I look around quickly and find two doors. One leads to the common area where those guys were sitting, and the other leads out. I prop the exit door open, using the brick sitting next to an ashtray the smokers must use to keep from getting locked out of the building. People do so many different things when you bother to pay attention to them.

I drag his unconscious body out by his broken hand, and he vomits again, but this time into the back of his throat. I stop once we’re free of the door and drop his hand against the concrete, the shape changing upon impact.

I stand over him and watch him begin to suffocate. His eyes twitch and roll behind the lids, and I decide Cici might not be the only interesting person on earth after all. The ones I hate are entertaining while they die, and I think Corey may be

the first person I've ever noticed enough to hate because he dared to touch the only thing in this world I love.

And I see that now. I've been obsessed with myself, but it's not the same as love. Love is what I feel for Cici. Love is what makes this feel so fucking good.

“She will love me back.”

Before Corey dies, I turn him on his stomach. He coughs as the puke spills onto the sidewalk, but there's not much fight left in him after everything. His eyes barely flutter as he groans.

I stare at him for a moment, deciding whether I'm actually about to do this. And honestly? I'm already nearly there. He's broken, his breaths coming labored like I might have done some serious damage kicking him down the stairs. He's more than half gone. What is it to finish the job? And I want to finish it. I'm not a fucking quitter.

I go back to the door, realizing I left perfect inspiration lying there like a doorstep. I grab the brick, and the door slams shut. I look around, for the first time realizing that I'm out in the open, and there could be any number of witnesses. I don't see anyone, though, and I wonder if this would be better with an audience like everything else. I won't be finding out today.

Then I smash the brick into his face until nothing is left to recognize, and his teeth are dust lost in blood.

When it's over, I sit on the ground beside him, covered in thick, sticky red. It reminds me of the first night I met Cici and how she threw her drink at me. I've been getting messy from her since the first moment we met.

No one has seen us, and I realize that's likely a result of being tucked into the courtyard behind the dorm. It's lucky I pulled him out back here and not up front. I wasn't thinking far enough ahead to care about what would have happened if someone was watching. Maybe I'm wrong, and they're watching now, but they're too scared to make a move. Maybe the cops are coming.

There are no windows on this side of the building until you get to the very upper floors, and they don't have a good vantage point. It's too cold to just hang out outside, but I'm probably minutes from being caught by whoever smokes those cigarettes.

Cloudy white breaths puff out of my mouth, and I pull my cell phone out of my pocket. The blood on my hands smears across the screen, and the phone doesn't recognize me with all the blood I didn't realize was coating my face. I dial a number I haven't called since I graduated from my boarding school in the Alps four years ago.

I'm praying it still works as it rings, wondering if he's even in the country. Last I heard, he was local again.

"This is a surprise, Valen," a light French accent sounds down the phone and dread follows. There aren't many people in the world I notice enough to feel anything about, but this one even unsettles me.

"Pax, I need a favor. Does your brother still take care of *problems*?" I grit the last word. Problems is the polite way to refer to his hobbies. The blood on my hands is starting to dry, stretching my skin uncomfortably.

This is my first time getting this bloody, but certainly not his. The serial murderer rampaging the French countryside was never caught because his father is the head of a powerful crime organization. His brother, their fixer. This should be nothing to clean up by comparison.

"Niko is busy learning from our father what it takes to be boss. He isn't pulling favors for schoolboys, Valen."

I'm not a fucking schoolboy, but I don't have time to argue with him. Self-preservation is kicking in and telling me I can't eat Cici's cunt from prison.

"Then I need your help, now."

"Why would I want to help you? You're boring. I don't do boring." He laughs a little bit, and I'm offended at the insinuation that there's anything lacking about me. Maybe my ego is actually a problem.

“I beat a kid to death outside of his dorm, and I need someone to come get the body before they throw me in jail.”

He’s quiet for a long moment.

“Literally beat him to death? With your fists?” He’s probably popping a boner, and I’m torn between not wanting to excite the fucker and needing his help.

“A brick.”

“Huh, well, maybe you’re not as boring as I thought. Send me your location and then leave. Immediately.”

“You’re serious?” I don’t dare to believe he is.

“Has anyone seen you?”

“Not that I can tell.”

“Then I’m serious. Leave, and I’ll take care of everything.” Relief pulses through me.

“Thanks, Pax.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Val. It won’t come cheap.”

The phone hangs up, and I’m just about to take Pax’s advice when a thought occurs to me. I knew Corey wouldn’t be playing Romeo the moment I watched him kiss her, and I’ve been making certain plans to ensure Cici has a great night. I’m not actually as clueless about the show as I’d like her to believe, and I can’t let his big mouth fuck my plans up for me now. We have a show tomorrow night.

I pull Corey’s phone out of his pocket. It’s an older model, so I press his thumb to the scanner and open Cici’s contact. First I unblock her, then I type out a text.

Corey: Cici, I am so sorry. I’m not going to be there for dress rehearsal, but I’ll be at the play tomorrow night. I know you’re mad, but let me make this up to you. It’s not as bad as I made it sound. I was just angry.

I don’t wait to see if she answers, feeling an oddly uncomfortable sensation in my chest. Does lying to her bother me? I think so...

I tuck the phone back into Corey's pocket and leave like Pax told me to. He'll fix this because it's what his family does. He knows how to do it right. But I'm sure the help won't come cheap, just like he said, and a sick tremor rolls through my stomach at all the things I stand to lose.

Instead of going back to the frat house covered in blood, I take the trip all the way home. When I get back to the thirty-room mansion, my parents aren't within shouting range. The place is so big they don't notice my arrival, which is exactly what I want. Ideally, no one will notice I was here, and I can slip out just as quietly.

I head to my room, and as I walk down the hall, I pass at least a hundred pictures of me, awards for my excellence, and pictures of me in my jersey. Then they turn to my father's accolades, my grandfather's, my great-grandfather's, and as I look at the men who came before me, I wonder how much blood is on their hands.

It must be a lot for the Bouchards to be willing to advance favors to the Thrones. We may have money, but we're not an organized crime empire. How deep does that involvement run?

I get naked and climb into the giant walk-in shower I've been using since my room moved in high school. The giant rain showerhead drenches me in seconds, and Corey's blood washes away and swirls down the drain.

When I get out, I have a text from Pax.

Pax: It's all taken care of. Nice job, pretty boy. I had no clue you were such a gruesome fuck. You definitely have the skills needed to pay this favor back. I'll be calling.

A kissy emoji is attached. I choose to be relieved and worry about that debt another day. I clean the device of any visible blood and leave it on the counter to dry.

I get dressed in some sweats and throw on my old letterman jacket. I'll be getting a new one for bringing the team to Division 1. I always bring my team to the top. I am the

top. Of course I'll be well suited for whatever favor Pax needs. I can handle this.

I'm Valen Throne, God's favorite.

When I get back to the frat house, I hop straight into bed. I have Cici's number from that creep in the student affairs office and there's this odd ache in my chest that's replaced the anger I spent on Corey.

Me: Are you okay, Cupcake? I had a weird feeling about you.

Liar, liar.

Cici: How did you get this number?

Me: It doesn't matter. Is everything okay?

I know that it's not, but I'm hoping she'll ask for me to come to her.

Cici: Lose my number, Valen. I am not a fuck toy, and I'm done being used.

She was hurt, and I left her. She needed someone, and I didn't go. I squeeze the phone until it cracks, then throw it into the wall, punching a hole in the drywall. That will never happen again. I will always be there for her whether she wants me to or not. Cici is mine, and no one else will ever touch her again. I look at the damage I've done. So much for no one noticing I was here.

CHAPTER 12

CICI

MY CHEEK DOESN'T LOOK AS BAD AS I FEARED IT WOULD THE next morning, but it hurts. It's Valentine's Day, and I still haven't brought myself to answer Corey's text. What the hell does making something like this up to me look like to him? I think I hate him, but I'm praying he shows anyway.

"It's not as bad as I made it sound," he said. I repeat that to myself over and over like a lifeline.

I read back over Valen's message for the hundredth time and get the same pangs of guilt and sadness. I said those things out of frustration because of Corey and how raw I felt after he hit me, but Valen never answered. He never said, "Hey, Cici. That's not true. You're more to me than a fuck toy."

So the only logical conclusion to draw is that I'm not more to him. And why would I be? Because of some crazy connection I thought I felt? I might as well have been shot by a drunk cupid for how I've fallen for this man who only cares about himself.

Our dress rehearsal is at noon, and the show starts at seven. When I get to the theater, only half of my cast is there. Thankfully, one of them is a stand-in from the local theater playing the nurse as we never got anyone to commit to the role.

I decide on running the lights and our marks rather than a true rehearsal. There's a string of text explanations on my phone and promises to be here later. Whatever happens tonight, none of it will make me feel better about what Corey's

done. None of it will make me feel better about the piece of my heart that's yearning for and can never really have Valen.

I don't know why I thought he would be here. Or that he meant all of those strange obsessive things he said. Why did I start to believe he owned me as he insisted? That I am actually his? I was setting myself up for disappointment, even more so when I got those texts last night.

They were so weird, but they touched my most vulnerable pieces. It was like he knew something was wrong, and more than that, he cared. It made it that much worse when he didn't pop up in my dorm and push himself into my life or pussy. How the fuck can Valen leave me feeling empty when I never gave him permission to fill any part of me?

He never came through, and he's not here now. Just like always, I only have myself to count on, and other people have me. I blame myself for this situation with Valen and Corey. I should have paid more attention and been more careful with both of them.

By the time six thirty rolls around, the packed theater buzzes with excitement. I peek through the curtain unable to believe just how full it is, just how raucous. Why are they so excited? I think I might puke. The last time I saw a full house here was my freshman year, and it wasn't like this.

We're half an hour from curtain. The rest of my cast showed in the midafternoon, and we're all in costume and makeup. Sound and lights are cued and waiting, and Corey is still nowhere to be found. My heart breaks again, and I'm near tears, almost hysterical, trying to hold them in and not ruin my makeup.

Katrina, who plays Lady Capulet, has her arm wrapped around me in comfort, and she's speaking some meaningless words because not only is our show ruined, but I was inches from getting what I wanted. A full theater with an excited audience, and I have no fucking Romeo.

I'm about to rip the fabric headpiece out of my hair and storm out when a curly blond head appears through the theater's back door. My heart lurches in excitement for one

stupid moment before I realize that as much as I want Valen with me, it doesn't actually solve my "I need a Romeo" issue. Corey isn't standing behind him.

But then he pulls off his letterman jacket, and I see he is in full costume. What the hell is he thinking? He runs over to me with a smile I've never seen before, and I'm terrified by whatever he's planning.

"Valen, what are you doing?"

"Corey wouldn't come. I'm playing Romeo, Cupcake," he answers like it's the simplest thing in the world. Like he'll fix any problem I have. He smells like the cold and masculine cologne and I want to kiss him.

"But you don't know the lines," I argue, shaking my head, trying to figure out how he thinks this could work.

"I learned them for you."

I laugh because I know he's full of shit. "In a couple of days?"

"Yeah, it was important to you, and I couldn't let you down," he insists, but there's mischief in his eyes, and I don't dare hope he could have pulled off a miracle.

"Prove it, or I'm not going on that stage with you," I say, my voice thick with tears.

He waits a moment before repeating some perfect iambic pentameter with the strangest look on his face.

"How?" I ask, my brows pushing together, wondering where the delay came from.

"It's only one hundred and sixty-three lines, Cupcake. It wasn't that hard for a dumb jock who's never paid attention to Shakespeare." He winks at me with a dirty smile.

"Valen, what the fuck is going on?"

I step toward him and grab him by the lapels of his ridiculous oversized costume. Where the hell did he find Renaissance clothes for a giant on such short notice? That's

when I see the headset in his ear and punch him in the chest.
“What is that?”

“Okay, I lied a little. I don’t know the lines, but I watched the play a ton of times over the last two days, and I get the vibe. My buddy here will read them to me.” He taps on his ear.

“You think *that* is going to work?” He really is crazy.

“I’m here. I know how to kiss and sword fight, and I’m going to repeat whatever the guy in my earpiece tells me to at the right time. This should work. And the worst thing that can happen is I make you look like a better actress by comparison.”

“I don’t need anyone to make me look better, Valen Throne.”

“I know that, Cecilia Harper.”

I’m warm and tingling from his gesture. This has so many opportunities to go wrong, but my other option is to send everyone home. I never got an understudy for Corey. Our productions just don’t get that kind of attention anymore.

“Valen, I don’t know...”

“Let me try to make this up to you. It’s Valentine’s day and it was all my fault, remember, Cupcake?” He’s hinting at the night I threw a drink at him and sucked his cock. How the hell was that four days ago? It feels like another lifetime. “We’re so good together. We’ve got this.”

“Cici, we need to make a decision,” Katrina reminds me.

“What do you think?” She’s in costume just like me, with a big smile on her face. She gives Valen a conspiratorial look that makes me a little nervous. Katrina is an amazing actress, but she’s weird, even for a drama kid.

“Let’s do it. He’s Valen Throne, Cici. Even if he sucks, they’re going to love him, and you’re good enough for both of you.”

I take a deep breath, one full minute to think it through and decide, what’s the worst that can happen?

“Let’s do this,” I agree.

“Thanks for letting me fix everything, Cupcake.” He kisses me so deep and passionately I start to sway. What is he talking about fixing everything? His ego is insane if he thinks this one thing fixes everything. I slap at him, pushing him off.

“We don’t have time for that. We have work to do.”

“Yes, Cupcake.”

I lead Valen to the lighting table to fix his makeup and give him a last-minute crash course. I have to give him credit. He does seem to understand the tone well. I hope this line-feeding shit works.

We’ve got curtain in five minutes, and the cast runs through last-minute notes with Valen, who is listening with rapt attention when a text flashes across my screen.

Katie: I’m here with Bianca and her new boyfriend Klaus and they said we can’t get in. My ticket is no good. What the hell is going on, Cici?

Me: I have no idea, I’m sorry. Tell Bianca I’ll meet her boyfriend after the show.

I don’t know what she’s talking about, and I wish I could help, but I don’t have time. I am relieved to hear Bianca is back around. I was starting to get nervous. The theater is insanely full as I look out, even more so than it was thirty minutes ago, and I’m sure they oversold the tickets. They probably didn’t even keep count; it hasn’t been necessary in so long.

“Did you tell everyone you were playing Romeo?” I turn to him with an accusative glare.

“Not everyone, but you wanted a full house, and you got it, baby.”

“I—” I swallow hard, trying to decide how I feel about this. Yes, he pulled his weight to get them here, which wasn’t how I wanted to get it, but he still got me my full house. “Thank you,” I finally decide.

“You never need to thank me.” He touches my cheek so gently my heart feels like it may explode out of my chest with affection for him. “Game time. Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER 13

CICI

MY HEART SITS IN MY THROAT AS THE MUSIC PLAYS AND THE opening monologue is performed. I'm convinced this can't work. This is the stupidest idea I've ever heard. But I really should have already learned not to underestimate him. Valen hits his mark and repeats his first line perfectly. Then another, and another, and he's captivated everyone by the end of his first scene.

He really is painfully handsome in his Renaissance attire, blue eyes like jewels, shining blond curls, and a face that devastates anyone who looks his way. He is my Romeo in an ethereal way I can barely wrap my mind and heart around, but my soul accepts without issue.

The stage empties and resets. There's my cue, and I school my expression as I make my entrance.

"How now! Who calls?" The lights momentarily assault my senses as I adjust to everything—the heat, the smell, the dust in the air from the curtains moving, and the soft murmur of the crowd.

"Your mother," our middle-aged stand-in speaks, and the magic of performing sweeps me away.

The scene changes, and I'm repeatedly amazed by how good of a job Valen is doing convincingly parroting these lines. We're on stage together once more, the attraction between Romeo and Juliet lacking any need for artifice when he's the only thing I can see, the only person I want to feel.

Our chemistry is palpable, his grand gesture landed, and the sweat that drips down my back is only partially a product

of the lights. The rest is the thrill of performing with him. I think I might be falling in love with him, and I have no hope of keeping the source of all this passion straight.

“My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand. To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.” Valen perfectly nails the lines, staring into my eyes with the most aching tenderness and Romeo and Juliet kiss. Yeah, I think I love him.

It’s better in front of the audience than I could ever have imagined, and for a moment, I’m the one who forgets my next line. That tension sits in the air between us and extends to the audience, and before I know it, I’m as excited by our performance as I am by those watching eyes, and I’m dripping wet, hungry, and satisfied all at once.

The set moves a few more times. I perform my lines with all my heart, forgetting this is my last time and enjoying this magic. I can’t even deny it’s better because Valen Throne is a star, and he’s at my side. I just hope my parents can see me, and my brother would be proud of me if he was really here.

I’m on the balcony. Valen and I parry our lines, and our intensity only builds. We’re better together than Corey and I ever were, and he’s proving without a shadow of a doubt what I mean to him unlike my supposed best friend, who couldn’t even show up for me after everything.

The show moves perfectly until we get to the scene where Romeo begs Friar Lawrence to marry us in secret. The friar agrees, and the wedding itself is supposed to take place offstage, switching to the next scene.

Instead, a new bit of set design I’ve never seen is rolled out. It’s a hand-painted altar with the names Cici and Valen on it in a heart. Instead of Friar Lawrence, the twenty-two-year-old actor, an elderly priest steps out from the wings. I don’t think he’s in costume. He approaches the altar and lays his Bible on top.

The lights change slightly, and the audience is more visible until a spotlight hits us both, and I’m momentarily blinded.

“What the hell is going on?” I whisper to Valen, hoping our audience doesn’t hear. Like if no one hears us things will go back to the way I expect them.

I look around, finding my cast backing off the stage and into the audience with mixed expressions. The older woman from the community theater walks straight out. Some of them look nervous, some excited. Katrina shoots me a wink, and Stacy shakes her head like she’s about to witness something awful.

“It’s time for the real show, Cupcake.” Then he grabs my hand and drags me toward the priest as I struggle.

The old man doesn’t look concerned by how strange this all is, so he’s got to be in on whatever Valen is planning. How much did he pay for this? How much did he pay all of them?

He speaks softly so his words are just for me.

“I was planning to help you days ago, but after what happened with Corey last night, I knew I needed to do something big to prove you’re mine. That I will never throw you away. Don’t worry, Cupcake. I’ve taken care of everything. We’re going to be so happy together.” His blue eyes have a wild gleam, and his golden curls shine beneath the lights.

My heart pounds, and my breath sticks in my throat as I try to rip my arm free of his, but he doesn’t let go, and no one in the audience makes a move. That feeling of excitement coming from the crowd only grows more intense. I’m suddenly sickly sure Valen didn’t just pay them. He chose these people on purpose.

“How do you know what happened with Corey yesterday?” My stomach roils as I wonder why Corey didn’t show up after sending that text.

“Father DiMarco, this is the bride,” Valen tells the priest as we stop in front of him and the altar.

“I am not the bride,” I tell the priest. “This is a play. I don’t know what he told you, Father, but I am not marrying him.”

There's a rumble of excitement through the crowd, like they're growing to the point they've all been looking forward to. The priest doesn't even meet my eyes.

"We are gathered here today to celebrate the holy union of Valen Throne and Cecilia Harper." The old man continues like I didn't even speak. He can't actually be a priest.

"I'm not marrying you, Valen. This isn't legal."

I'm still fighting him, but he wraps his arm around my shoulders, squeezing me to his side, and the affection I can't help feel for him is forced into my system. How does he know how badly I want to be held on to? What did he do to Corey?

I remind myself to stay angry, but I'm getting swept away in the drama like I always do. I already felt like he was my Romeo. I was in the spirit of begging for this very union. The watching eyes only make it better, scarier, more intense. Just like Valen.

He pulls a piece of paper out of his pocket and holds it up for me to see. It's a marriage license, and if I didn't know I never signed it, I would think that was my signature too.

"We have a marriage license, we have a priest, and we have a lot more than two witnesses. This is perfectly legal, Cupcake. You're mine forever, even if your pretty thigh is missing a few letters." His gaze drops to the leg he sliced while he ate my pussy for the first time.

"I don't want to marry you," I tell him, hoping that might change his mind. I have crazy, intense feelings for him that may have shifted to love during this performance, but I do not want to marry him.

"I know that, Cupcake. I'm not crazy. But I realized something after I watched that fucker hit you. You need me. I need you, and I'll never let you be alone again, even if you want me to."

"You watched him hit me?" I ask, the sting of his betrayal washing over me so fiercely that I want to rip his head off. "You let him hit me and didn't do anything?"

“No, I didn’t do the right thing because I should have comforted my wife.” His expression twists, and I think he’s really upset with himself.

“We’re not married,” I argue with him, but I’m quickly realizing it won’t get me anywhere.

“Not yet,” he assures me.

“I can’t do it unless she says I do, Valen.” The priest interrupts.

“I won’t,” I tell them both. Valen smiles as he pulls out the same knife he used to cut my thigh. My blood is still dried across the blade.

“I *do*,” he vows as he presses it to my throat, the threat in his crystal blue eyes clear. I stare into them for one long moment, seeing a lot of things. A monster, a god, the man I love, something I can’t begin to control. A force of nature who has decided I belong to him. A man who will kill me if I don’t give him what he wants, and dammit, I want to give myself to him.

“I do,” I agree as a tear slides down my cheek.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

His lips are on mine again. The knife nicks my skin. I’m crying, and I don’t know if I’m more horrified or touched. I’m losing my mind. I’m going to wind up next to Camden.

“You know I fucking love you, don’t you, Cecilia?” He presses the knife deeper to emphasize his words.

“How could I know that? This is crazy,” I argue with both of us because maybe I do know it. Maybe I feel it with each drop of my blood slipping down his blade.

“Of course it’s crazy. I still love you,” he tells me as he lets the blade clatter to the floor. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

Jaden and another man I don’t recognize step forward. I shake, thinking Valen is going to let them touch me, but he pulls me tighter against him as he hands off the marriage

license. They each sign as witnesses. What the fuck is happening?

“Please mail that in immediately, boys. We don’t want to give Cici time to intervene.” He pats his best friend on the shoulder, who gives me a solemn look, practically begging me not to send him to jail like I threatened four days ago when he was complicit in much less serious crimes.

“You’re all going to let him do this to me?” I ask the men, the audience, anyone. I’m the center of attention, just like I wanted after all. I feel like less than a person with my choices taken from me, but somehow being his feels like more. He’s no mere man.

As he did the other night in his frat, he says, “Does anyone have a problem with what I do with my wife?”

As a chorus, they all say, “No, sir, Valen, sir.”

He kisses me again, and the cheers play like a too-loud recording. It can’t be real. This isn’t my life. This is a performance. I’m an improv pro, and I don’t see any choice but to go with it, but there’s one thing I need to know.

“You said you did the wrong thing by not going to me? What did you do, Valen?” What did he do to Corey?

“Don’t worry about that now. Our show isn’t over. You’re still going to be my star.”

CHAPTER 14

VALEN

“VALEN, THIS IS FUCKING INSANE. STOP THIS RIGHT NOW. What did you do to Corey?” I ignore her questions. Her emotions about his death will be even more conflicting than her opinions on me secretly forcing her to marry me like a modern-day St. Valentine. “Valen, I said stop.”

I think the lady doth protest too much. Pink stains her cheeks, tears drench the thick lashes rimming her eyes, but her pupils are wide. Hunger glints in her eyes as she surveys the crowd and presses her lush ass against me. She can call me crazy, but she desires me as much as I want her.

“I’ll make you a deal, pretty Cupcake, since you’re my wife now, and what’s mine is yours and all.” I turn us around so we’re fully facing everyone watching us. My frat brothers from years past and present and their wives line the seats. Millions of dollars in gems, designer gowns, and suits fill the seats like this is a night at the opera. These people would enjoy the show, but more importantly are who I could trust to keep it quiet. Most of the wives won’t believe this is real, no matter how hard Cupcake protests.

“I don’t want any deals,” she whispers, but her voice carries over the crowd, like their excitement serves as amplification. “I want you to call those guys back, rip up the license, and put an end to this.” She doesn’t want that. She wants me, and she wants to be a star. I know it, and I can give her both.

“Deal, on one condition,” I tell her with the smile thick in my voice. I press my cock into her ass and enjoy her shiver.

“What condition?” I smile as I watch her shift from aiming her words at me to the audience.

“If I feel your pretty cunt right now and you’re not sopping wet, I’ll call them back. I’ll let you go.”

There’s a rumble through the crowd.

“But if you’re as turned on as I think you are, I’m going to fuck you on this stage and prove to everyone exactly who you belong to.” She shivers against me, and there’s a loud series of whoops.

“Valen, please don’t.”

I bend to the ground, sliding my hand up her long skirt, over her thick thighs, and to her panties, which are already drenched. It might be sweat, though. It’s hot up here, so I move them to the side and slip my fingers inside her to be sure. There’s a roar from the crowd, and she literally clenches around my fingers and drips down my hand as she stares out over the audience.

Her long black hair is braided like a crown around her head. The maroon gown brings out the olive tone in her skin, and my wife is so beautiful my heart clenches in my chest.

“I don’t think you want that deal, Cupcake.” She doesn’t answer as I move my fingers in and out of her, and she stares into the crowd where people watch her like a goddess, desperate to see what happens. They’re all going to see she’s mine. That’s what.

I watch in rapt fascination as she slips into my perfect subby little star. It’s like the rest of her brain has shut off, and she’s just here with me, for me, and they’re all desperate to be us. She moans as I find her clit with my thumb, and her knees buckle as I plunge my fingers deeper.

“Tell them all you want this, baby,” I command. Looking up at her, I’m stunned by her beauty like I was the first time I saw her. I thought I was only attracted to myself, but that’s because I was wrong. I’m made for her.

“Valen, please.” Her body trembles deliciously, a little ripple jiggling her ass.

“Please what?” She doesn’t answer, and I can’t blame her for not being sure. I planned this all for her, so I know exactly what to expect. I’ll take care of her. I always will.

Standing behind her, I let her feel my full presence at her back. Nothing will happen to her with me here, nothing she won’t love anyway, not again. I pull the zipper down her back, and the tearing echoes through the room. There’s an electric charge as I push the dress off her shoulders, and it slips over her breasts. I couldn’t have planned her lacy bra any better, suggestive but keeping my perfect nipples hidden.

The fabric catches on her round ass, and I push it down her hips, leaving her standing in her shoes and underpants. I consider taking her hair down and wrapping it around my fist, but I think I like this look for our performance, our wedding.

I won’t fully strip her. All of these delicious parts are for me only, but they all get the idea. They’re all desperate to be her or be with her, and I made sure we had the best audience possible for this show. I look into the crowd and appraise each of their faces. This is going to be perfect.

Grabbing her throat, I pull her tight against me, squeezing until she’s lightheaded and gasping for more. I put a hand under one of her knees, leaving the other on the ground, lifting and widening her leg until they can all see the V I cut into her.

“Look at them watching you, wife,” I command, and she shivers.

“Why are you doing this?”

“You wanted to be a star, and that’s exactly what you are. Don’t you love it?”

She shakes but doesn’t answer.

“Tell me, Cici, or I won’t fuck you in front of all of them.” She waits for a long moment, and I flex and loosen my hand as she decides, keeping the high buzzing through her veins.

“I love it,” she finally admits, giving us both what we so badly need.

I bend her over ever so slightly so she can support most of her weight, but her pretty face is on full display for our audience. I push her panties to the side, just far enough to slip my fat cock into her cunt but not enough to reveal her pretty clit to the hungry animals in front of us.

She whines nice and loud as I slide my cock in. The cut on her neck from when I forced her to marry me bleeds ever so slightly beneath my fingers. The blood slips around my fingers, upping our production value, but it's not deep. She'll be perfectly fine. Some people drop to their knees and begin servicing their partners, and others start to fuck right in their seats.

I wolf whistle, getting everyone's attention.

"Sit the fuck down, you degenerates. This isn't an orgy. This is a wedding." I grab her thighs as I pound into her, and while people aren't so open about it, they're still going at it. I'll make sure I fuck at their next formal event.

My cock slips all the way to the back of her pussy. She's choking my cock as I choke her. I'm into the theatrics of this all, so I hold on until she passes out. The audience gasps like I've killed her, but I don't let her fall. I fuck her from behind with my hands around her throat for everyone to see, and ten seconds later, she comes back to, her orgasm ripped out on a scream. I pound into her, so close to following but needing to give them all the show they expect from Valen Throne.

"Valen, please," she begs and whines as I overstimulate her within an inch of her life. She screams in pleasure-pain, and I don't ease up.

"You're taking it so well, Cici. Just feel their eyes on you. Feel my cock inside you." She loosens under me and eventually starts to moan. When she comes again, she soaks me with a wet splash. The stage is covered in her cum, and I think I'll permanently rename the front row the splash zone.

I come, drenched in her cum, to the sound of their applause and the roar of, "Valen," pulsing in my ears.

EPILOGUE

SIX WEEKS LATER, WE'RE IN FRANCE VISITING MY NEW husband's grandmother as one of the last stops on our honeymoon. He did legally marry me. The fucker really put a lot of effort into our Valentine's date, after all. He was drafted to a top NFL team, and with his contract advance, he's put my brother in a much nicer facility. I have options I could have never imagined. He's Valen Throne after all. He's God's favorite and mine too. My phone buzzes.

Katie: Where are you?

Me: Still in France, having a great time.

Katie: Cici, if this is actually you. What color are my favorite underwear?

Me: Katie, you don't like underwear.

Katie: Hey! Don't tell people that.

Me: I'm telling you. Have a good day. I'll text you later.

I've gotten some variation of this life-proving question every day I've been gone, and I've been thinking Katie is a much better friend to me than I realized. I was certainly wrong about Corey being my best one.

Speaking of unpleasant things like the man who betrayed my trust for all those years, I think Valen may have killed him. I haven't asked for a few different reasons. One of them being that when I told Camden he wasn't coming back to visit, he smiled and hugged me. That interaction left a bitter film of guilt over the whole experience, but as Valen said. At least he's in a better situation now.

Corey was officially reported missing a few days after the play, and no one has seen or heard from him since. I was questioned by police over the phone, and they certainly weren't pleased with my sudden marriage and disappearance, but despite that, there was nothing for them to attribute to me. I still don't actually know for sure that he's dead. His parents believe he ran away, claiming he was angrier than ever the last few times they spoke. But I don't believe that.

I remember what Valen said about Corey during Romeo and Juliet/our wedding. Honestly, I haven't asked because I don't want to know. Why kill my own happiness for someone who used and mistreated me? Someone who told me I was nothing and slapped me in the face. Who wanted to hit me again before I kicked him in the balls.

Am I married to a murderer? Maybe I am; maybe I'm not. Either way, I can live with it, seeing as the things I know he's done are definitely worse than defending the person he loves to the death.

He's self-obsessed, an ego monster, and he forced me into this marriage, but I can't help it. I love him.

“You’re very pretty, dear,” his grandmother tells me as she comes to sit by my side and hands me a cup of tea. Her accent is thickly French, and she’s stunningly beautiful even at her age. According to Valen, she was a movie star and model in her day.

“Thank you.”

“Are you pregnant?” I nearly choke on the hot drink. Is she calling me fat? I think it’s clear my thighs aren’t the result of a baby.

“Um, not that I know of, why?”

“I was just wondering why the two of you rushed the ceremony. I would have loved to have been there.” She looks down, genuinely hurt. Pity lances through me, but not guilt. That was hardly my fault.

“Oh, uhm, I...” I don’t have any good answers for her.

“I couldn’t wait for the wedding night, Grandma. We stayed virgins, Catholic wedding and all that.” Valen winks a blue eye at her.

She laughs and blushes, waving a hand like she slightly scandalized but understands the draw of young love.

“Good boy.” She smiles at him. “I always knew you were my angel, my little cupid.”

Oh, well this explains some of his ego.

“Oh Cecilia, Valen tells me you want to learn to make macarons. I can teach you. It’s an old family recipe, and you’re my granddaughter now.” I’m stunned once more by how much attention this man always pays to me, how doting he is for someone who doesn’t seem to give a shit about anyone but us and his grandma, the only member of his family he insisted upon visiting.

“Yeah, that sounds great,” I tell her, and she bustles past me into the kitchen. I shoot my husband a disbelieving look. I’m not sure how, but in addition to all the awful stuff, he is also the sweetest man on earth.

And he’s my Valentine.

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ABOUT AURELIA

Aurelia Knight is a hot mess, doing her best to keep it together most days. Words are the greatest love of her life second only to her husband and sons. If she's not typing away, getting lost in her own world, she's reading and slipping away into the worlds of other writers. A caffeine addict who believes sleep is secondary to the endless promise of "just one more chapter".

For the most up to date information join Aurelia's reader group on Facebook, [Aurelia's Illicit Library](#), and subscribe to her mailing list at www.AureliaKnight.com

