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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANNA EDWARDS

MINE

A DARK ROMANCE

ANNA EDWARDS



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**USA Today Bestselling Author Anna Edwards returns to
her dark side with Mine.**

**Eaton and Shelby must navigate the sins of their parents
and hope at least one of them survives.**

Our parents decided our future long before we were born.

We've no say in what happens now.

Well, she doesn't, because she's mine.

I will make her pay for what was taken from me.

All her dreams of a normal life are about to vanish.

Replaced by a hellish nightmare.

Death might be her better option.

But I won't let that happen.

I will get my pound of flesh.

I will make her suffer.

I'm the devil she thinks I am.

So why do I find myself starting to care about her.

*Share my life
Take me for what I am
'Cause I'll never change
All my colors for you.
Take my love
I'll never ask for too much
Just all that you are
And everything that you do.*

I Have Nothing – Whitney Houston

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxYw0XPEoKE>

This is the song that will stay with me forever. It seemed appropriate for Eaton and Shelby and the story they must go through. Sorry, but not sorry for putting them through it.

Anna Edwards

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SHELBY

I put the plate of biscuits and gravy down in front of the customer and can't help but look up and notice *him* standing on the sidewalk again. He's been there, in the exact same spot outside the supermarket, every lunchtime for the last week.

With his crisp suit and tie, he looks out of place among the poverty-stricken, local inhabitants. The area of Pharr where I live has a rundown, small-town vibe; its struggling residents occupy the most mobile homes per capita in all of Texas.

I shrug his presence off. Whatever he wants, it'll have nothing to do with me. A handsome, rich man rescuing a poor, city girl from a living hell only happens in fairy tales.

This is real life, and I've got customers to serve.

"What can I get y'all?" I ask a man and woman who appear to be a couple.

They are obviously tourists; the maps spread over the table and the fanny pack are a dead giveaway. I don't know why they've chosen to eat at the run-down diner I work in. The red leather chairs are tatty and in desperate need of re-covering, and although the white plastic tables are clean, they've seen better days.

Why the fuck anyone would want to visit Pharr is beyond me.

“Could you recommend a local delicacy?” the man responds, his strong British accent sounding cute. “My wife and I want to try as many new dishes as possible on this holiday.”

“Well, I’ll be. You’re from England!” I exclaim. Like it’s the first time I’ve ever met anyone from there.

“We are. We’re from Kent. Just outside London,” the man replies with a smile.

I’m glad he added the last bit. I wouldn’t have a clue where Kent is, but I’ve heard of London. Having never left Pharr, I don’t know much about the rest of the world.

“What y’all doing after this?” I question.

“We’re driving from here to Los Angeles, hoping to take in as much of the country as possible along the way. It’s just so vast, and there’s so much to see,” the man replies.

“Well, you’ve just got to have biscuits and gravy,” I recommend. “It’s a favorite around here.”

In truth, it’s pretty much the only food on the menu that’s edible. We’re not exactly five-star dining, but in a city where most residents live below the poverty line, we provide food at cheap prices, along with a generous helping of grease. Let’s face it, when you’re hankerin’ for food, you’ll eat anything.

“That sounds perfect. Bring us two plates, please,” the woman requests, and I scribble the order down on my pad. “We’ll have two cokes as well.”

“What type?” I ask. “Coke, to a Texan, is any carbonated beverage.”

“Coca Cola, please,” she confirms.

“I’ll get that out for you straight away,” I say with a nod.

As I walk away, I pass by the diner window and notice the man has disappeared. He’s probably returned to his wealthy, privileged life.

The rest of my shift passes without any drama. The friendly tourists leave me a big tip, which I’m very grateful for. It means Mom and I won’t have to rely solely on the scraps from the diner kitchen for the next few days, not that Mom eats very much anyway. I might be able to afford some fruit or maybe some vegetables that haven’t been deep fried. Even a fresh apple would be nice.

“See you later, Fred.” I grab the bag of leftovers I’ve collected over the course of the day and wave goodbye to my boss.

It’s past ten pm, and when I step outside, the cool air of the late evening hits me even though I’m still wearing my diner uniform, which consists of black leggings and a long-sleeved red shirt. It’s cold for this time of year. I inhale deeply, clearing away the stench of fries and burgers. The polluted town air fills my nose instead, but it’s still smells fresher than the odor of grease I’ve been breathing in for the last eight hours.

Clutching my bag of scraps in one hand, I make my way through the busy streets toward my mobile home that sits on the outskirts of the city. The home I share with my mom is rundown and hasn’t been decorated since the seventies, but with my mom’s issues after my dad died, it’s all we’ve got to live in.

The one-bedroom, mobile home is in darkness when I arrive, which suggests my mom is out. I'm kind of grateful for that as I don't want to have to handle the shit that comes with her, tonight.

After opening the door, I step inside and flick the switch to turn on the lights.

Nothing happens.

"Fuck's sake." I grumble, running my free hand over the top of my head in frustration.

This is just what I need!

Placing the bag of food on the kitchen counter, I go back outside to check the generator only to discover it's out of fuel. I drop my head into my hands. There goes my big tip, and with it, the happiness I was feeling at the prospect of a meal that doesn't comprise solely of leftovers. I'll have to use the extra money to buy fuel tomorrow, instead.

I make my way into the kitchen area and grab a couple of candles and the bag of scraps before heading back outside. Tonight there'll be a candlelit dinner for one.

I've got a little seating area out front with a log of wood I use for a seat and a small planter containing a few herbs I've cultivated from stolen cuttings. I place both candles on the ground and light them. It's all very peaceful out here and a little bit Zen.

Opening the food package, I see it looks quite appetizing for once. One of the customers left their salad untouched. The leaves are a little wilted, but as I shovel them into my mouth, I savor every bite. There's also some chicken wrapped in cheese and bacon, and even a few fries. I hadn't realized how hungry

I was after my shift until now, so I gulp everything down quickly.

“Meow.” Betty, my little cat friend appears by my side, obviously attracted to the smell of food.

“Evening, Betty,” I greet her as I break off a small piece of chicken and throw it toward her.

Betty’s not my cat. She’s a stray I look after and feed. I throw her another piece of chicken, and she rolls over onto her back for me to stroke her stomach and purrs when I tickle her tummy.

“Have you had a busy day sleeping, Betty?” I ask.

“Meow,” she answers, as though she understands everything I’m saying.

I guess you could say Betty is my only friend in the world. I didn’t make any friends at school. In my last few years of high school, I wasn’t there a lot. I grew up early. I had to with a mother addicted to heroin and a father who died far too young. I wish I could say I remember him. But I was only two when he was shot and killed.

My mom doesn’t talk about his death. I think it broke her, and that’s the reason she lost herself to her addiction. I can’t count how many times I’ve tried to help her quit. Now, I guess, I’m just waiting for the day I wake up and she’s overdosed. It’s a tragic waste of a life.

Headlights flash as a car pulls up in front of me. My heart deflates. I know instantly who it is. My mom’s home, and my worst fears are realized when she stumbles out of the passenger side of the car.

Betty, as if sensing trouble has arrived, scampers away in a hurry, growling as she goes because she isn’t able to finish the

chicken.

“Shelby.” My mom waves at me.

The driver of the car gets out. He’s one of Mom’s regulars. He makes my skin crawl.

“Hi, Shelby.” He nods my way. “Is tonight going to be the night you join us? You know you want a piece of me.”

My stomach turns, and I hope I’m not about to bring up the contents of my second-hand salad and chicken.

“Leave her alone,” my mom quips and pats at her client’s fat stomach playfully. “I’m woman enough for you.”

“And I’m man enough to handle both of you. One day, you’ll be desperate enough to spread your legs for me, Shelby. Like mother, like daughter. Your mom is a whore for her heroin, and no doubt, you’ll follow her down that path eventually. After all, you know nothing different.”

The man’s smirk is cruel and twisted, just like his words. He’s right, though. I may still be a virgin and determined to stay that way for as long as possible, but prostitution is one way to make money. And it’s the destiny of many women, and even some men, in this city.

I turn my back to him and respond, “But today won’t be that day. By the way, we’ve got no power indoors, so you might want to go elsewhere. With or without my mom.”

He laughs. “I only need your mom’s pussy to get my dick wet. I never want to see her drugged up face while fucking her. I won’t have to do her from behind if it’s dark. It’ll be a welcome change.”

His words sting. This is my mother he’s talking about. I’ve tried to do everything to help her, but her addiction is too far

gone.

A lone tear tumbles down my cheek as I watch them go into my home, and not long after, the rhythmic sound of fucking starts. I don't want to be here. I don't want this life. But it's the one that was chosen for me. So, I guess I must suffer through it. I'm only nineteen, and I keep hoping I can save enough money to escape.

Who am I kidding? My life's a mess. And it's always going to be this way.

"He's got it all wrong." A deep masculine voice comes from behind me.

Startled, I spin around on the log before getting to my feet, and I'm stunned at what I see. The man in the designer suit is standing in front of me. The one who's been lurking outside the diner every day this week.

"Who's gotten what wrong?" I mumble.

Illuminated by the candlelight, he looks even more handsome up close. His jawline is square, his eyes a bright green, and his dark hair is neatly combed back from his face.

What's he doing here?

"That man with your mother. You don't just start banging a pussy straightaway. You must warm it up first. It makes the experience so much more pleasurable for both participants," he answers and then winks at me.

I open my mouth to say something but can't find the words. He's shocked me into silence. That wasn't the response I was expecting to hear from him. Then again, I wasn't expecting him to be here in the first place.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” I finally manage to ask.

“My name is Eaton Armstrong. And I’ve come to collect what’s mine.”

EATON

“*I*’ve come to collect what’s mine.”

I’ve waited what has felt like a lifetime to say those words, but it has been precisely eighteen years. It was my twelfth birthday when I first learned the truth, and I’m thirty today. The fourteenth of May. I rub the ring on the little finger of my left hand. It was my mother’s ring, which I had adapted to fit me. Stroking it helps me think.

“What do you mean? There ain’t nothin’ here for the likes of you. So you can kiss my ass.” The young girl in front of me is on her feet, hands on her hips, staring me down. “We ain’t got nothin’ of value here. Unless you want a turn with my mother.”

She looks me up and down, trying to be tough, but she’s not scaring me. I can see the fear in her soulful, brown eyes. Her long, brown hair is scraped back into a tight ponytail, and she smells of fried food. She’s pretty, even though the waitress uniform she’s wearing does nothing to disguise the fact she’s all skin and bones.

“Well I ain’t got all day,” she continues her rant and stomps her foot. “You need to be fixin’ to leave.”

I’m not bothered by her words, but the southern drawl grates on my nerves. The open vowel sound of “i”, normally

pronounced in the front of the mouth with the front of the tongue, and the “eee” sound, again normally made by pushing the tongue up and forward, both move to the back of the mouth and tongue in a Texan. It makes words such as ‘pen’ and ‘pin’ sound identical.

What the hell was my father thinking?

Has he gone totally insane?

I’ve no idea where I’m even going to begin.

Clearing my throat, I stand up to my full height.

“I’m not fixing to go anywhere, Shelby Jones. As I said, I’ve come for what’s mine, and *that* is you. So be a good girl. Pack a bag of belongings, if you have any, and let’s go.”

Her mouth drops open. “Are you fucking nuts or something? I’ve no idea who you are. I’m going nowhere with you. You can fuck off right now.” She spits in my direction, luckily she misses. “Fucking pervert.” I can feel a migraine beginning behind the back of my eyes. Seriously, I don’t have time for this. “Well then, fuck off-”

Before she has time to finish her diatribe, I grab her jaw tightly, so she can’t speak. “If you say that swear word again, you’ll regret it.” Her eyes go wide with fear. “That’s a much better response. Maybe this won’t be so hard after all.”

No.

Wrong.

She brings her knee up quickly, aiming for my groin – big mistake.

I’ve been trained in martial arts ever since I started to walk. Swinging her around, I send her flying forward into the

side of the dilapidated trailer, she calls home, and pin her in place with my muscular body. She has no way of moving now.

“Listen, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. But as I said, I’ve come to collect what’s mine. *You are mine*, and I’m not leaving without you. So grab a bag and let’s go.”

“W-Why do you want me?”

She sounds terrified. Her voice quivers with fear. Good. She needs to learn from the start I’ll be the one in charge here, not her.

“It’s not that I want you, Shelby. It’s more *you* belong to *me*. You always have, and now it’s my thirtieth birthday, I’m allowed to collect you.”

I can feel her heartbeat against my body. It’s rapid. I just wish the smell of stale restaurant odor wasn’t lingering, because there’s something about having her pinned to the trailer wall that excites me.

“How can I belong to you? I’ve never even met you before. You’ve gotten the wrong person. I live in a trailer, and I’m bettin’ from the fancy suit you’re wearing you don’t.”

A chuckle escapes my throat. “You’re right about that. I live in a mansion in Vegas. I’ve never been to a place like this before and never will again after today.”

I loosen my grip on her, waiting to see what she’ll do. She doesn’t move. I make the decision to step away from her. Give her the space she needs to take in everything I’m saying.

“Shelby, I don’t have the wrong person. *You are* mine, and it’s time to go.”

“Do I have any choice in this?”

She turns around to face me. I can see the tears in her eyes. For all the bravado and tough talk, and despite the obviously shitty life she has, she is an innocent. Maybe this will work. I take a few steps backward.

“No, you don’t. There’s a lot more going on here than you realize. But I’m not prepared to go into all of that yet. All you need to know is you’re mine, and I’m not leaving here without you.”

I pause for a minute. She looks like she’s about to pass out. I can only imagine the thoughts going through her head. I don’t ever act impulsively, but I have tonight.

“Look at where you’re standing, Shelby. This bears no comparison to where I’m taking you. I’ve already told you I live in a mansion in Vegas. That alone should have you wanting to come with me. You won’t have to work, fight for food, or watch your mother have sex with men to get her next fix.” She looks toward the door where she and I both know her mother is selling her body. “Your life can be so much more.”

“But I don’t know you or anything about you.” She looks down at her feet and then back at me, straight in the eye. “Will you hurt me? You say I’m yours? What does that mean?”

I shut my eyes and compose myself. “No one will touch you but me. As for hurting you, that will depend on how you behave. Spit at me or try to knee me in the groin again, and you will be punished as you have seen.”

A single tear drops down her cheek.

“Let me get a couple of things.”

I nod my agreement and reluctantly let her go inside, knowing what she will see. The walls of the trailer are so thin I can already hear the fake moaning of her mother as her client

fucks her. A few moments later, Shelby returns. She has nothing with her but a couple of books. They appear to be about animals. I motion toward them with a flick of my head.

“If my life had been different, I would’ve liked to have been a vet,” she explains. “I can still dream about that. It will keep me sane in this new life you’re gonna give me.”

I nod my head to indicate she can bring the books, then I gesture toward my car. Defeated, she slowly walks toward it before stopping and turning back to me.

“I’m a virgin.” she announces as I open the car door for her.

“I know. I’ve made sure of that through the years,” I reply as she gets in the front passenger side.

I slam the door shut and walk around to the other side of the car, quickly pulling out my phone from my pocket. I send a message to my friend Max.

Stand down. She’s coming freely.

He replies instantly.

She really must be desperate.

I type out my response.

That’s why my father put her here.

SHELBY

I know I should fight against what's happening to me. I should scream and shout and have the police take this freak away and lock him up where he belongs. But when he slammed me into the trailer, I realized I had no say in what was happening. I was going with him whether I liked it or not. Maybe he's right. Maybe he's offering me a better life than the one I'm used to. It couldn't be any worse.

"Will you tell my mom where I've gone?" I question as he drives us away from the trailer.

"She will be informed," he replies looking forward, concentrating on the road.

"Will she be looked after?" I shut my eyes, worrying what will become of my mother now. What if she overdoses and isn't found for a long time.

"Do you want her to be looked after?" Eaton still doesn't take his eyes off the road. His words sound cruel and cold.

"She's my mother, no matter what," I snap back.

He turns his head momentarily. "Do you want her looked after, or do you want her saved?"

"S-Saved?" I stammer, not understanding what he means.

“I mean, put somewhere safe and helped off the drugs. That sort of saved. Or do you think she’s too far gone. Be honest with me, Shelby. I’ll only do the latter if you believe it will work.”

I think for a moment. Is there any hope of my mother being saved? I’ve tried numerous times, but it’s never worked. But then again, I’ve never had the money to give her the treatment she needs. My father’s death destroyed her, but there have been rare moments when she’s been a mother to me. From brushing my hair before bed every night to the occasional cuddle and chat that we still have even now. It’s a sign to me that she’s not completely lost.

“I think she can be saved. It won’t be easy. She’s got mental issues, but sometimes I see glimpses of my mother still,” I respond.

Eaton nods his head.

He presses a button on the wheel of the luxury car we’re in. It smells brand new and completely clean. It’s a strange odor to me, almost overwhelming.

“Hello,” the deep tone of a masculine voice answers at the other end of the call.

“Maxwell, can you arrange for Miss Jones’ mother to be taken from the trailer and treated for her issues, please.”

“Of course. Tonight?”

“Yes, please.”

“What about the man she’s with?”

Eaton looks at me. I shiver as I remember what my mother’s doing right now. I feel sick, and I start rubbing my stomach.

“Deal with him in the manner he treats women,” Eaton responds and hangs up the call.

“What does that mean?” I query.

“Do you want the truth, or do you want the answer that won’t scare you even more than you are right now?” Eaton doesn’t turn to face me as he speaks. He keeps looking forward as he turns the indicator on before turning turn left into, what I guess, is a private airfield.

“He beats my mother.” I remember the numerous times my mother has been left black and blue after being with him. I should be scared because I know Eaton has just asked Maxwell, whoever he is, to beat my mother’s client up. I’m not, though. “I hope it hurts him.”

Eaton pulls the car to a halt in front of a plane. I think it must be a private jet, not that I know much about aircraft. I’ve never flown before, but this plane looks a lot smaller than the passenger jets I’ve seen.

“It will,” Eaton responds.

He doesn’t look at me as he gets out of the car. I sit in silence in the front seat, clutching tightly to my books. They were left in a trash can outside the library in Pharr a few years ago. They describe the anatomy and medical details for dogs, cats, and rabbits. I know them back to front, but I want to keep them with me. I like to dream that one day I’ll help animals.

“Out,” Eaton orders as he opens my door, making me jump.

I scramble quickly to obey his orders. He motions a man over with a flick of his finger. “Take Miss Jones’ belongings onto the plane.”

The man tries to take the books from my hands, but I refuse to let go, and we have a brief tug-of-war over them.

“No please. I want to keep them with me.” I cling tightly to the books.

Eaton cracks his neck. His nostrils flare.

“Give me the books, Shelby, or I will forcibly take them from you and burn them.”

“Please, don’t.” I whimper. “Please, I need them.”

“Then give them to me.”

I reluctantly hand over my precious books to Eaton, and he passes them straight to the man he’d beckoned forward. I watch carefully as the man takes them and goes up the steps of the plane before disappearing.

“Where is he takin’ them.”

“He is securing them for the journey. You’ll get them back when we arrive in Vegas.” Eaton holds his hand out toward me, and I tentatively take it.

“Why can’t I keep them with me?” I ask desperately.

“Because we’ll be busy on the flight.”

My stomach drops. Am I about to head down the same path as my mother. Tears start to fall down my face as I follow Eaton up the steps to the plane. I stumble on the third one, and Eaton catches me. He sees my tears.

“Behave, and you won’t be hurt. Just remember that.” He wipes away my tears before moving me ahead of him so he can guide me better.

“Holy shit!” I exclaim out loud when I enter the plane. I’ve never seen anything like it before. “This place is like a

palace.” Forgetting what is happening to me, I run over to where two seats are situated on either side of a wooden table. “Is this real leather?” Looking at Eaton, I caress the smooth fabric.

He rubs at his temples. “What have I told you about swearing? It isn’t fitting for a lady.”

Scoffing, I stop stroking the seat. “Since when have I been a lady.”

In two quick strides, Eaton reaches me. He grabs my jaw tightly; it’s still a little sore from when he did it earlier.

“I mean it, Shelby. If I hear one more swear word out of your mouth tonight, I will wash it out with soap and water. Do you understand?” He emphasizes the last few words to leave me with little doubt he will do exactly as he threatens.

“It’s not easy to stop something when you’ve been doing it all your life.”

“Try hard.”

“I will,” I relent, and he releases my jaw.

“Sir.” An air hostess appears next to us. “Can I ask you to take your seats, please? We’re ready for takeoff.”

“Of course.” Eaton nods his head to the hostess and motions for me to sit down.

I obey quickly, not wanting to get any more bruises on my already tender jaw.

Try not to swear. Try not to swear. I repeat the doctrine in my head.

Suddenly, Eaton reaches over me, and I flinch.

“You need to put your seatbelt on,” he explains and takes both ends of the belt either side of me and clips them together. I’m glad he’s doing it because I’ve no idea what I’m supposed to be doing.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“How long is the flight? I’ve never been on a plane before.”

“It’s just under three hours. A short flight.”

“Okay.” I look out of the window. I can’t see anything but the dark airfield around us. “Is this a private airfield?”

“It is,” Eaton responds as the air hostess brings him a glass of what looks like whiskey—it certainly smells of strong alcohol—and places it down in front of him with a packet of nuts. She hands me a glass of water and some nuts as well.

“If you need anything during the flight, just call me,” the hostess offers and disappears behind a curtain.

The plane starts to move, and I grip the armrest tightly, my nerves really starting to get the better of me.

Eaton smirks. “We’re taxiing to the runway. It’ll be a few minutes before we’re in the air.”

“I don’t think I can do this,” I announce as I start feeling completely flustered, and my heart beats rapidly.

What the hell am I doing? I’ve just gotten on a plane with a man I don’t know. I’m leaving my home. How do I know he’s going to do what he promised and help my mother?

“I want to get off,” I scream and start to try and undo the seatbelt. “How do you work this thing? Stop the plane!”

Eaton seems to ignore my panic and words. He sits back in his seat and shuts his eyes.

“Please. Let me off,” I beg.

I feel the plane turning, and my stomach does the same.

“Let me off,” I scream, louder and louder.

Suddenly, the plane starts to speed up, getting faster and faster.

“Please.” I whimper, tears falling from my eyes as pure panic sets in.

The engines around me roar, and I feel the bottom of my stomach plummet as I’m pushed back in my seat and the plane lifts from the ground.

What have I done? I can't get off now.

“It’ll be all right.” Eaton grabs my hand as we soar into the sky.

I’m not sure why, but the warmth of his big hand around mine comforts me momentarily, but then the plane starts to turn, so it’s now heading back to the airfield.

“What’s happenin’? Are we going down? Are we gonna crash?” My ears pop and all I want to do is curl up into a small ball and hope it’s all over quickly.

“The plane has to turn, to head in the correct direction. We’ll level off soon. There’s nothing to worry about.” Eaton tries to reassure me.

“Easy for you to say. You know what’s happenin’. This just feels all wrong.” The plane turns again. “Make it stop.” My ears pop again. “How are you not gripping tight to anythin’.”

He squeezes my hand. “Shelby, I’ve flown more times than you’ve probably had hot meals. I don’t need to grip tight to anything because there’s nothing to worry about.” He picks up his drink and brings it to my lips. “Have a mouthful of this. It will calm you down.”

“Or make me vomit all over you.”

Eaton quickly moves his glass away from me.

The plane adjusts again, and I feel it level off. Everything falls silent apart from the sound of the engines and my rapid breaths. It stays this way for a few minutes before a sound beeps. I look toward the front of the cabin and notice that the strange, red sign, which has been glowing since before takeoff, has now gone blank.

“What does that mean?”

Eaton takes off his seatbelt. “It means that unless we hit any turbulence we can walk around.”

I shake my head. “No, you’re all right. I’m gonna stay with my backside in this seat until we’re back on the ground and I can get off this contraption.”

Eaton gets out of his seat and holds his hand out to me.

“No, you will undo your seatbelt and come with me,” he orders.

I look around the plane. I’d noticed the cream leather seats before and the solid oak table, but now I’m calmer, I can see the walls are white and there are drapes in a burgundy color at the windows. Toward the back is a section separated by a door. I can’t help but fear what’s behind it.

“Shelby, I don’t have all day,” Eaton says impatiently.

Pulling at the belt around my waist I manage to figure out how to open it. My legs feel like jelly after the takeoff. I just want to sleep. I'm wiped out, having worked all day and with everything that's happened to me since.

"Where are we going?"

I push myself out of my seat and take his hand. Its warmth isn't as comforting this time. Especially as Eaton seems to fill the plane with his masculine presence, towering over me.

"To the bedroom," he responds, and finally, my legs give way.

EATON

I manage to catch Shelby in my arms before she falls to the floor of the plane.

Women are so temperamental.

I scoop her up into my arms and carry her into the bedroom area at the rear of the plane. Laying her down on the bed, I return to the main cabin and fetch her a glass of water.

When I walk back into the bedroom, she's sitting up on the bed, looking terrified.

"I-I..." She stammers. "I-I... please."

"Stop letting your mind run wild, Shelby. You may be on a bed, but I'm not going to touch you. I'll only do that when you ask me. I've brought you in here because you smell of fried food, which I can assure you isn't remotely attractive. I want you to shower and change your clothes." I pull open a drawer and retrieve a pair of leggings, underwear, and a t-shirt. All the clothes have been especially purchased for Shelby in her exact size. "Remove your dirty clothes."

I stand there impatiently tapping my foot when she doesn't move.

"Undress. Here. Now." She slides forward on the bed, her legs dangling over the side. The plane begins to bank to the

right. Her eyes go wide. “The plane’s maneuvering again. Now do as I ask.”

“Will you turn around?”

I let out a sigh of frustration.

“I’ve already told you, Shelby, you are mine. Strip now.” My tone is rigid. “If you delay any longer, I will strip the clothes off you myself. The smell of greasy food is not pleasant,” I threaten and cross my arms over my chest, to show her I mean business.

“But I’ll be naked?” She waves her hands down her body.

“And? I’ve seen a woman naked before. I’ve seen many. I’ve fucked many. I’m sure you’ve got nothing that’s going to send me into a sexual frenzy. Now do as I instruct. I’m in charge here, Shelby, so get used to it.”

I can feel the migraine building again at my temples. I’m one of the most powerful men in Vegas. I’m not used to people telling me no, or trying to argue with me. Many who’ve tried have ended up with a bullet in them.

Shelby snorts with frustration.

“I’m startin’ to regret coming with you,” she huffs and starts to remove the tight fitting shirt and long pants of her work uniform.

“We both know you really had no choice in that decision,” I remind her.

I open the door to the bathroom and turn the shower on, making sure the temperature isn’t too hot or cold. There are various bottles of shower gel and shampoo in the small room.

Turning back to Shelby, I see her he standing by the bed with her panties still on. Her hands are covering her small

breasts, and I wince when I see how thin she is. Her ribs are protruding from her body, and there's very little fat on her. She looks like a gust of wind could break her into two.

“How often do you eat?” I frown.

“I eat when I can. It depends on what leftovers I'm given from the job.”

“We'll change that. I'll get a nutritionist to prepare a diet to help build you up. I don't want to feel like you'll snap in half whenever I come near you. Now remove your underwear and get in the shower.”

She winces again, and that's when I notice the hair on her legs. I shut my eyes and rub my forehead in frustration.

“Is the hair on your legs an indication of what is beneath your panties?”

“I don't have the money to look after myself. You're just gonna have to deal with it,” she snarls back, insulted by my comment.

“I will have it dealt with tomorrow. Now underwear off and shower.”

She stares me down again. I love her defiance, even if it's going to cause me lots of trouble.

I point at the shower, leaving her no doubt about what will happen next. She allows her hands to slip from her breasts and removes her underwear. Then grabbing the change of clothes I'm holding, she pushes past me, jumps in the shower, and closes the door in my face before I have a chance to register what's happening. She's spirited, this one. I like it, and it will make the next few weeks even more fun.

I collect her dirty clothes and throw them in a basket in the corner of the room. They'll be washed and returned to her, but she'll never need to work in that diner again.

I remember the day I was first told about Shelby. It was my twelfth birthday.

"Eaton, there's something you must know."

My father is sitting on the other side of his study in his comfortable armchair, smoking a cigar. I don't like the smell of them and have already vowed I will never smoke one. They smell like old man, but my father is far from that. He's powerful and strong.

I'm lying on the floor with a book. It's a gun manual I have to study for a test I've been told I have to pass in a few weeks.

"Yes, sir." I look up at him.

"It's important, Eaton. Close the book. I want your full attention."

I nod and quickly do as I'm instructed.

"What is it?" I shuffle onto my knees, so I'm sitting directly in front of him.

He places the cigar down in an ashtray on the table beside him and reaches inside the pocket of his jacket. He pulls out what looks like a piece of paper. When he turns it around, I see that it's a photograph of a baby. I've seen a few babies in my life; most of them are ugly, and don't get me started on the noise they make, but this one is quite pretty. I assume it's a girl because she's wearing a pink outfit. She has a little tuft of dark, curly hair, but it's her doleful brown eyes that capture

me the most. It's as though she's looking straight at me, drawing me in.

"Do you know who this is?" My father questions, and I shake my head in response.

"Words, Eaton." He frowns.

"Sorry, sir. No, I don't know who it is."

"This is Shelby, and one day she will be yours to do with as you wish." He gives me the photo.

"I don't understand." I take the photo with a shaking hand. I'm really confused.

"You will in the future." He smirks. "Keep the photo, I'll give you more as she grows. Now, get back to your studies. You can't fail this test."

"Yes, sir." I place the photo down next to the book, which I open again.

I try hard to concentrate on the weapons I need to learn about, but my attention keeps being drawn back to the picture of the baby. I know in that moment something within me has changed. The fact that she is mine slowly starts to sink in. My life's path is already set in motion. I don't have a say my future, but neither will she.

"Is this better for you?" Shelby's voice breaks into my reflection.

She stands at the bathroom door in the clothes I selected for her. Her long hair is wet, but tied back in a plait that hangs down her back. I inhale deeply, the smell of fried food has gone, replaced with a lavender body wash.

“Much better.” I smile. “Get into the bed,” I order.

Shelby opens her mouth to argue with me but closes it again and bites her lip.

“You promise you aren’t gonna do anything to me?” she questions.

“I gave you my word. Anything I do to you will be consensual. I’m not a monster.” Grabbing the corner of the bed sheets, I pull them back. “Get in, Shelby.”

Reluctantly she climbs onto the bed, and I place the sheets over her.

On the table next to the bed is a glass of water and a pill the air hostess placed there earlier at my instruction. I hand them both to Shelby. “Take this.”

She shakes her head. “No thank you. I don’t take drugs.”

“You’ll take this one,” I instruct.

“Eaton, please. I don’t want to.”

“Shelby, do as I say. This will help you rest. We’re going to be flying over an area known for its turbulence. I don’t want you running around the plane, screaming that you want to get off. I have urgent work I need to do, so I don’t want any unnecessary interruptions. Now take the pill, enjoy the sleep, and wake up feeling refreshed.”

She purses her lips together angrily. “I have no choice?”

“You don’t.”

She opens her mouth, and I pop the pill inside. Then she takes a drink of water and swallows.

“Open your mouth. I want to check the pill has gone, so you can’t spit it out the second I leave this room.”

She opens her mouth wide. There's no sign of the pill.

“See, I know when I don't have a choice.” She pulls away from me and turns over in the bed, so her back is to me.

Feisty, but learning quickly.

“If you need anything, I'll be in the main cabin.” I push off the bed and make my way to the door.

“Eaton.” Shelby's voice sounds from behind me. “That's the first and only time you'll force me to put anythin' in my body I don't want.”

“Believe that if it helps,” I respond, shutting the door behind me as I leave.

Mine, Shelby Jones, mine, to do with as I want.

SHELBY

I turn over in the bed, stretching and yawning, but I don't open my eyes. That was probably the best sleep I've ever had. I guess we must be landing in Vegas soon.

That's when I realize that the whirring noise of the plane's engine has stopped. Cracking open my left eye, I look around the room.

"What the fuck!" I jump from the bed.

I'm no longer on the plane but in a massive room, someplace else. The walls are pristine white, and the flooring is a luxurious oak with a gray and white patterned rug positioned beside the humungous bed I've been sleeping on.

The bed is bigger than the trailer I live in. It has to be a super king. The furniture is antique and there are cactus plants dotted around. But it's the windows either side of the bed that take my breath away. They are floor-to-ceiling in length and covered with white draped voiles. Reaching out, I pull one open.

"What the fuck?" I repeat.

Outside is the most perfect green grass I've ever seen, but it's what's in the distance that shocks me—there's desert for

miles and miles. I can't see any other homes. Just endless sand with the occasional cactus.

"The bastard has drugged me and brought me to the middle of nowhere," I curse.

Spinning around, I make my way to what I hope is the door to the bedroom. I tug at the handle, turning it, but it doesn't open. I'm locked in. I don't know whether to panic, cry, scream, or try to kick the door down. I decide against the latter as it looks too thick and sturdy. Instead, I pound my fist against it.

"Let me out, you can't keep me a prisoner."

A deep laugh comes from the other side. Eaton's clearly enjoying this. I really can't read him. He doesn't want to hurt me, yet I'm locked in a bedroom.

"Let me out, you asshole. You can't keep me the fuck in here," I continue to rant.

The laughter stops, and I hear the keys in the door as it's unlocked. Quickly I open it wide and instantly regret it when I see the look on Eaton's face.

"What did you just call me?"

No, I'm not in the wrong here. I don't know what that pill was he gave me, but he drugged me and locked me in this room. He's the one with the crazy issues.

"You can't lock me in here. You have a twisted view of women. I'm not gonna let you control me like this. I have my own brain."

His tongue licks across the top of his lips. "I've warned you before about your language. I don't like repeating myself. You've done nothing but rage and protest since I met you at

the trailer. Clearly, you are unhappy with this arrangement. Why did you agree to come with me?"

"You told me I had no choice in the matter. I thought you'd kill me or my mom if I refused. But if you're gonna continue being an asshole, then I'm gonna go back to Pharr." I go to push past him, but he grabs my ponytail and drags me back into the room. It hurts like hell.

"Let go," I scream, trying to kick out at him, but he's so much stronger, and I'm thrown onto the bed.

I try to get up again to run, but he's on top of me, pinning me down with the weight of his body. His legs prevent mine from kicking out, so I do the next best thing and scream loudly in his face.

He growls with annoyance before slamming his lips down on mine.

It shocks me into silence.

My first kiss.

He's not gentle. The slight stubble on his chin brushes against my soft flesh and adds to the experience. I should be disgusted with him doing this, but I find myself heating at my core. Seriously, I can't believe I'm excited by this. There's something wrong with me.

Eaton pulls back from me. A wicked look on his face.

"Are you going to be quiet now, or do I need to do that again?"

For a split second, I open my mouth to scream at him, not because I want to attract attention from someone who might help me, but because I want him to keep kissing me. I think better of it and purse my lips tightly shut together.

“Now, that was a difficult decision for you, wasn’t it?” he says as he lifts his hand from where it’s pinning mine to the bed. I’m thankful I’m still wearing the clothing he gave me when he strokes over my breast and down between my legs. “Warm, and I suspect wet. Just as I thought.” He smirks.

I squirm around under him, not wanting him to touch me. My anger rises again, flaring my nostrils. But before I can tell the asshole what I think of him, he climbs off me, and pulling his phone from his pocket, he makes a call.

“They can come in now,” he informs the person answering and then hangs up.

I turn my head nervously toward the door, dreading who’s about to enter.

Eaton laughs at me again. “I don’t know what smell I prefer from you—fear or sexual excitement.” I snap my head back to look at him and see he’s gently stroking his fingers over his lips, the lips he just kissed me with.

I bring my hand up to my lips and scrub them furiously.

“Jerk,” I whisper under my breath.

A commotion on the other side of the bedroom door draws my attention back to whomever Eaton has just summoned into the room.

It’s nothing like I feared, though. Two well-manicured women enter with a trolley full of what appears to be beauty products.

“Mr. Armstrong.” They both nod their heads toward him in greeting.

One of the ladies steps forward, and standing at the foot of the bed, she remarks, “I can see what you mean. She is

beautiful but does require a bit of work.”

The other woman comes to stand next to her and says, “We’ll keep everything natural. She doesn’t need a lot of enhancements.” She lifts my hand and examines it carefully. I don’t look after my nails. Most of them are broken, and the few that aren’t have grease caked underneath. She curls up her nose in disgust. “Do you want these kept short and clean, or should we add extensions to make them a little prettier until she can grow her own naturally?”

“I’ll leave that to your expert judgment, Cecilia,” Eaton responds, and I pull my hand back.

Cecilia appears to be the older of the two women. Her blonde hair is pulled back off her face in an elaborate twist, and her face is covered in makeup, but it looks completely natural, so I can’t tell her actual age. She’s wearing a uniform—a black tunic top, with a logo of an orchid in pink on the chest, and a matching black pair of pants.

The other woman has brown hair pulled back in a simple ponytail. She’s dressed in dark blue jeans that sculpt to her body like a second skin. On her top half, she’s wearing a plain white t-shirt that emphasizes her beautiful tan. I’m jealous because, even though I have Mexican ancestry, I’m always pale as I never get to spend time in the sun.

“Lena will stay and help you with whatever you need. I have a few meetings to attend, so you have a couple of hours,” Eaton addresses Cecilia before he turns his attention to the other woman. “Lena, you have my permission to discipline her if needed, although I’d like to think Shelby and I have come to a bit of an agreement, and she might even enjoy being pampered for a few hours.”

I am frozen to the bed, unsure of what is going on. Pampered? I thought he was about to strangle me a few minutes ago. I swear this man is bipolar.

“Any issues call me or Max,” Eaton concludes.

Lena bows her head, acknowledging his instructions.

He leans over me again. “Be good, my little butterfly. You’re about to emerge from your cocoon. Enjoy and relax. If you’re good, I’ll let you have your books back tonight.”

My books. I suddenly realize they aren’t in the room with me. I’d forgotten about them with everything else that’s been going on.

“I give you my word. I won’t misbehave. Just don’t lock the door, please.”

Eaton looks across to Lena, and she nods her head in agreement.

“I’ll keep it open for now.”

Eaton leaves the room without another word or a glance back at me, and I let out the breath I’ve been holding for some time.

“Please, you must help me. I need to get out of here.” I scramble off the bed, but the woman named Lena stops me.

“And where would you go?” she questions. “Do you even know where you are? Look out of the window. There’s nothing but desert out there.”

“You can help me. You could drive me to the nearest town, and I’ll find a bus.” I pause on that thought. I don’t have any money with me. Not a dime. “Or I could go to the police.”

“Shelby, the nearest place is Vegas, and the Armstrong family owns the police there. Get on the bed and let Cecilia give you a makeover. This place isn’t so bad. Eaton is a good man, even if he’s a little bossy. He’s not going to hurt you. He saved me. He just likes having things his own way. Do as he tells you, and you’ll be treated like a queen. In fact, you will be his queen,” Lena explains, letting go of my arm.

“I have no choice,” I reply, my spirit and determination to escape broken by the reality of my situation. “I have no choice,” I repeat.

Why did I get on that plane?

What propelled me to leave with a man I’d only just met?

I know. I know exactly what made me do it.

The prospect of something different from the miserable existence I was living.

I’ve made my bed, so now I just need to lie in it.

EATON

“*W*here is he?” I announce as I enter the main office at Myriad, my family’s casino, accompanied by Max, my bodyguard and best friend.

I run Myriad for my father while he looks after other aspects of the Armstrong empire. The casino is the largest and most popular on the strip. The curved white, brick building dominates the Vegas skyline and sits central to the other casinos surrounding it. On the roadside, there’s a massive lake that has regular water and light shows. Inside, the ceilings are lined with stunning glass flower displays, adding to the opulence.

I took over the running of the casino from my father when I turned eighteen, and I’ve completely redesigned it over the years, strengthening the business.

“In the cellar,” the casino manager, Seb, states.

He’s worked for me since I took over, and I trust him implicitly. He’s shown his worth on more than one occasion. Plus he knows what I’m capable of if he messes with me.

“I’ll head there now.”

The cellar is the place we take anyone who likes to think they can play the casino at its own game.

“How much did he steal in the end?” Max questions Seb.

“Just short of a million,” Seb replies.

I crack my neck to the side. I didn't want to leave Shelby alone today. I wanted to watch while Cecilia and Lena did her makeover. I wanted to hear her scream when they waxed her pussy, and I was looking forward to her moans of pleasure when she sees how pretty she can be when she's not covered in grease and smelling like fries. But instead, I've been called away to deal with someone who's dared to try and steal a million dollars from me. In the grand scheme of my business, it's not much. I can lose a million dollars a day and not care less, but no one steals from me. I need to send a message.

“How are we playing this?” Max walks beside me, his long legs keeping pace with me.

He's been with me for as long as I can remember. His father was a bodyguard to my father, and it seemed only natural Max became mine, especially as we grew up learning the business together.

“He picked the wrong day to steal from me. I don't want to be here. We send the strongest message.” I pause at the entrance to the cellar and turn to face Max. “With Shelby here now, we need to be careful. When people find out who she is, they'll all want a piece of her. I want her protected and under surveillance twenty-four hours a day.”

“Don't worry. Lena's looking after her. I taught her everything she knows.”

I smile at the pride in my friend's tone. Max saved Lena, and they fell for each other and are now married. His affection for his wife is strong. She's the only one who can bring out his softer side.

“I don’t doubt Lena’s abilities. I’m more worried about Shelby’s abilities to follow rules. She’s going to need a lot of instruction.”

Max claps me on the back. “And I’m going to enjoy watching you train her. She’s a tough cookie. I think your dad would have been better hiding her away in Vegas than in a city with so much poverty. It’s given her an inner strength neither of us will ever understand.”

I rub my forehead. “Tell me about it. Let’s get this over with. Hopefully, I’ll get back before they finish waxing her pussy. I need to hear the language that comes out of her mouth.”

Without another word, Max and I put on our game faces and make our way into the room. Two security guards stand either side of what can only be described as a computer nerd who’s been chained to a chair in the middle of the room.

Our captive’s thick rimmed glasses sit low on his nose. His dark, unwashed hair is parted and smoothed down at the sides. The shirt and pants he’s wearing look like they’re from the seventies, which is probably the decade he was born. That makes him quite old, compared to the modern-day computer geeks who usually try to attack my business.

“Mr. Belfield, it’s good to finally meet you.” He looks up at me as I speak. His eyes going wide. “You’ve been a problem for a couple of weeks now, but not enough of an issue to cause me major concern. Only a million dollars, that’s a pitiful amount to steal from me. You should have gone for a billion at least. It would make what happens next worth the pain.”

“P-Please, M-Mr. Armstrong,” he stammers with nerves and jumps in his seat when Max slams the door to the room

shut. “It wasn’t me. You have the wrong person.”

“That’s what they all say, but you were caught red-handed, accessing my servers, and you have my money in your personal bank account. I’m afraid there’s no question of your guilt.” I walk around as I speak, circling the chair he’s chained to.

“You can take the money back. Please, Mr. Armstrong. I won’t do it again. I didn’t realize who I was stealing from. Please. I promise.”

I laugh. It’s an evil sound and fills the room. “I already have the money back, Mr. Belfield, plus interest for my loss of earnings. I think the high life you’ve been trying to live, using other people’s money, will be difficult with nothing left in your savings account. Thank you for the generous rates of return.”

Max leans against the door, his feet crossed at the ankles. He knows I enjoy getting my hands dirty, so he’ll stand back unless he’s needed. The two security guards have moved to the corners of the room as well. One stands next to a wall containing a glass fronted cabinet full of old-fashioned knives, axes, and swords. A perfect wall decoration for a place called the cellar.

“Please. You’ve gotten your money back. Your men have already taken my computer. Let me go back to my family. You are a respectable man, Mr. Armstrong. I made a terrible mistake. I won’t do it again.”

“I know you won’t,” I respond as I slam my hand down on the arm of the chair he’s tied to.

With a quick movement, I pull my gun from the holster underneath my jacket and point it straight at the center of his

forehead. I press it hard against the thin layer of flesh covering his skull.

“No one steals from me, Mr. Belfield, and gets away with it,” I continue. “I may have got my money back, but there needs to be consequences for your actions.” I pull the hammer back, cocking my weapon. “You should have realized that when you stole from me. You’ve put yourself and your family in danger. Goodbye.”

My finger hovers over the trigger. The man is cowering in front of me. He’s even pissed his pants. I start to laugh.

“Shooting you would be too easy.” Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Max moving across the room to the cabinet on the wall. He takes out one of the axes, already sharpened and ready for me to use. I pull the gun away from the thief’s head and make it safe before putting it back into my holster. “But, letting you live with the consequences of what you’ve done will send a much stronger message. It will be a warning to anyone who might be tempted in the future to take what’s mine.”

This is the part of the punishment I like, the sick and twisted part. The sadistic side of me takes over. Max hands me the axe while one of the security guards unlocks the chains securing our captive to the chair. Max grabs one of Mr. Belfield’s arms and holds it straight out to the side while the other arm is re-secured.

I hold the axe up, and Mr. Belfield realizes what’s about to happen to him. His begging gets louder and more intense, but it falls on deaf ears as I bring the blade of the axe down on his wrist, severing his hand from his arm.

“An old-fashioned punishment for a thief, but one that sends an effective message. Don’t you agree, Mr. Belfield?” I

hand Max the axe while ignoring our captive's cries of pain. Then turning my attention to the security guards, I order, "Clear up this mess, and sort him out before sending him back to his family. Ensure he never owns a computer again. As for the hand." I kick it across the floor toward them. "Make sure it's used to send the right message."

They both nod in agreement.

"Max, let's go. I've got another form of torture I'd much rather be watching."

SHELBY

“Come near me again with those wax strips, and I’ll shove this...this...” I look down at the implement in my hands, which is no doubt an instrument of further torture.

“Curling iron,” Cecilia responds, a wax strip in her hands and a sigh of frustration on her lips.

Lena rolls her eyes and takes a seat at the dressing table.

“I’ll shove this curling iron up your ass while pitching a hissy fit. You don’t get to cause me pain. If Eaton wants me waxed, he can go to hell. I’m all natural. Full stop!”

“Shelby, the first time hurts, but after a while, you won’t even notice it. You need to relax. I promise this is the only part that hurts. The rest will be fun. I don’t think anyone has ever pampered you before; let me be the first. And not because Mr. Armstrong has demanded it, but because you deserve it.” Cecilia places the wax strip down and gestures for me to return to the bed.

“You can do the nice stuff but leave my pussy alone. Give me a razor, and I’ll shave my legs.”

I really don’t want to be subjected to anymore waxing. I’ve burned my hands in hot water and on the stove at the

restaurant, but that pain was nothing in comparison to having the hair pulled straight off my pussy.

“I was in your position.” Lena pushes up from the chair she’s sitting in and wraps her arms around her chest. “Probably even worse. I didn’t even have a trailer to live in. I spent my nights on the streets because it was better than being at home with an abusive father.”

“Lena.” I step forward unsure what to do or say. I’ve only known this woman for an hour, and that’s a very personal thing to reveal.

“It’s all right. I’ve come to terms with it, but only thanks to Max and Eaton. Max and I are married. I went through the beauty treatment when I first came here. I had my pussy waxed, and you know what? It hurt like hell, but afterward I felt free. I felt like a normal person for the first time in ages because someone cared enough to do something for me. I know that sounds strange because Eaton and Max are strong men. I also know Eaton has told you that you are his. In your mind, that probably means so many bad things, but in reality, it’s not. He will treat you like a princess if you give him a chance. Neither of those two men will do bad things to you, not like my father used to do to me.”

I feel the tears prick in my eyes. I thought my life was bad, but it’s nothing in comparison to what Lena went through. I never really knew my father. I may have lived in poverty, wondering when my next meal would be, but I’ve never been abused.

“I’m sorry. I think I’m just a bit overwhelmed with everything. Yesterday I was wondering whether I’d go home and find my mom overdosed, and today I’m God knows where in a room so big it’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen. I should

be more grateful. I'm sorry." I place the curling tongs on the dressing table as I make my way back to the bed and nod toward Cecilia, confirming she can continue what she's doing.

"You will feel overwhelmed for the next few weeks, Shelby, and not just because someone is looking after you for the first time, but because Eaton has strict rules. He's not a man to be messed with. You are his, no matter what. Accept that and do what he says."

"Okay."

I lie back down on the bed while Lena's words echo around in my head, consuming me with concern for her and worry that I need to obey Eaton. I know nothing about him, which scares me.

I'm so caught up in my thoughts, I don't even realize Cecilia has finished waxing all over my body until she says, "All done with the horrible stuff. Now let's get on with the fun stuff. We need to sort those nails. There's nothing better than a nice manicure to make a person feel special."

Cecilia holds out a robe for me to wear. I slide my arms into it, looking down at my now totally hairless body. It's strange, I've never thought about shaving before. A razor blade seemed like an unnecessary expense. However, I like how my legs look now. Reaching down I stroke them. Smooth to the touch.

"I must admit you were right about the waxing. How often do I have to suffer it, though?"

Cecilia laughs. "Every three to six weeks, depending on how quickly the hair grows back. I'll start you on some permanent hair removal treatment, which will provide you with a more long-term solution."

I gulp. “Permanent! How much is that gonna hurt?”

“Not at all. Don’t worry.”

Cecilia motions for me to sit at the dressing table and begins to do my nails. I feel a bit disgusted when I see how much grime she removes from underneath them. It’s another part of my body I’ve not looked after.

“What is Eaton’s actual job?” I ask Cecilia as she pushes back my cuticles and applies false nails to a couple of my fingers where the nails are badly broken. “I’ve only seen this bedroom, which is massive, and his private jet. He must be very wealthy. I get the feeling he has lots of staff working for him.”

I’m feeling a bit more relaxed with this treatment, and I want to know about the man who everyone keeps telling me I belong to. Cecilia glances toward Lena, and a look I can’t interpret passes between them.

Lena answers. It appears Cecilia is only here to carry out the beauty treatments.

“What do you know about Vegas?” Lena asks.

“Er...it’s like the capital city of casinos. One of the richest places in America.” I might not have a fantastic education, but there are certain things I do know, mainly from listening to tourists passing through the diner.

“And Eaton told you we’re in Vegas?”

“Yes, although judging by the fact there’s nothing but desert around us, I’m thinking he might have been lying. I was told there were hotels and buildings everywhere.”

“No, he wasn’t lying. We’re in his mansion on the outskirts of Vegas. There’s acres upon acres of land here, and the

nearest neighbor is miles away. It's very private, the way he likes it, but it's close enough to the city for him to do his business. He owns one of the biggest casinos on the strip." Lena opens the curtain as she speaks, giving me the view of the endless desert again.

I'm not sure whether to be scared or happy that the nearest neighbor is miles away. We really are in the middle of nowhere.

"The strip. That's the main street in Vegas, isn't it?" I question. Trying to clarify what I know in my head.

"It is."

"Well, I'll be, he's probably richer than I thought. I once watched a film where a group of people stole one hundred and sixty million, I think it was, from a casino. I wasn't born when they released the film originally, but I managed to sneak into the cinema during a special anniversary performance. Someone had shown me a picture of Brad Pitt performing in it, and I wanted to check if he was just as hot on the big screen." I chuckle.

"I know the film." Lena sucks on her bottom lip. "He is hot in that film. But millions are of little consequence to Eaton. He deals in billions, Shelby. Which is why no one messes with him."

I can't even contemplate a billion dollars. I would struggle imagining the worth of ten thousand. I'm lucky if I make a hundred a day. All that money doesn't give Eaton the right to buy me and my obedience, though. I'll make sure of that.

We all turn our heads toward the door when Eaton enters the room unannounced.

"Have I missed the waxing?" he asks bluntly.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Armstrong. You have.”

“Damn. I was looking forward to that.”

“Pervert,” I mutter and instantly regret it.

Eaton’s nostrils flare. His eyes darken.

“Everyone out, except Shelby.”

Thankfully, Cecilia has just finished my nails. She and Lena make the way to the door.

As she leaves, Lena mouths at me. “He won’t hurt you. Trust him.”

I nod back, hoping Eaton hasn’t seen.

“I’m sorry.” I get to my feet. “I didn’t mean that in a bad way. It’s just a little strange to want to watch me get waxed.”

Eaton comes up to me and pushes me against the wall. His large frame covering me so I can’t move.

“You don’t get it, Shelby. I want to watch everything that you do or that’s done to you. So many of them are firsts for you, and they all belong to me. Now get on the bed.”

“Please, what are you gonna do to me?” I whimper.

“Get on the bed, and you’ll find out.”

EATON

“*W*hat are you gonna do to me?” Shelby questions as I stand back.

“On the bed.” I repeat.

Reluctantly, she moves across the room and sits on the edge of the bed.

“Lie down,” I order.

I’m still angry as a result of Mr. Belfield taking me away from one of Shelby’s firsts. I know I should leave the room. I should go to the gym and take my frustration out on some exercise equipment or the heavy punching bag. Maybe I could even get in the ring with Maxwell. He’s probably just as frustrated as I am, having to deal with that idiot this morning. I can’t leave, though. I need to do this. Not just for me but for her. She needs to start learning she is worthy of being someone.

“Are you gonna hurt me?” she asks as she lies down.

I can see her shaking as she grips the sheets underneath her tightly, trying to stop the tell-tale sign of her nerves.

“What did Lena say to you as she left the room?” I respond with a question.

I'm still wearing my suit jacket, and while I wait for her response, I take it off and place it neatly over the back of the chair at her dressing table. I no longer have my beretta on me. I removed it and the holster before I came in here. I don't need to wear it in my home. It's the most secure place in the world, more so than my casino and even the White House. Besides, Max will be standing outside the room with his own weapon. I kick my shoes off and leave them next to the chair where my jacket now hangs.

"She told me you won't hurt me, but the fact you are taking your clothes off is scaring the life out of me. You promised me, Eaton. You said you wouldn't touch me." I can hear the fear in Shelby's voice as it cracks at the end of her sentence.

"I'm not going to touch you." I sit on the end of the bed. "But you are going to do something for me."

"You want me to suck you off?" Shelby starts to shake again. She scrambles away from me and curls herself into a tight ball on the bed. Her knees tucked up to her chest, and her arms wrapped around them. "I'm not a prostitute. Just because my mother is doesn't mean I am as well. You can't make me do that. I won't do it. Please. If you must punish me, do it in a different way. Beat me. Just don't make me do that."

I have no intention of making Shelby do that. I was just going to inspect the result of Cecilia's ministrations, currently hidden under the dressing gown Shelby is wearing. I don't intend to touch her, and I don't want her to touch me either.

She's knocked me sideways with her fear and the way she speaks about oral sex. She would rather be beaten than give a blow job. My fingers instantly cover the ring that was once my mother's. I stroke it to give me comfort and temper down the

migraine threatening to erupt. I know the problems Lena had with sex as a result of what her father did to her. I never expected Shelby to have developed similar fears from living with a prostitute. My father did put her in the right situation to keep her pure after all.

“Have you ever touched yourself?” I question, softening my expression this time.

She shakes her head, informing me she hasn't.

“Why would I want to? Sex is all about a man's pleasure, not a woman's.”

“Shelby, give me your hand.” I hold my hand out to her, and she hesitantly places hers in mine. “I want you to make yourself comfortable on the bed. Keep yourself covered. Then I want you to take this hand, and placing your fingers on your pussy, I want you to stroke your sex. Run your fingers between the lips, and find the place that makes you feels good.”

She shakes her head, no.

“Yes. Do it. What else did Lena tell you about me?”

“She told me that you'll make me your princess. That you only want to make me happy.”

“Lena talks too much,” I reply. Then I do something completely out of character—I let go of Shelby's hand and turn around, so I'm no longer facing her. “Do as I ask, Shelby.”

I feel the bed behind me shift, and I hear Shelby run her hand over the silk covering of her robe. It's a quiet sound, barely audible, but I hear and even sense it. My cock hardens in my pants. Damn.

“What do you feel like?” I ask, desperate to know.

“It feels strange. Wet.” Shelby exhales a deep breath. “It feels good. Surely that’s wrong.”

“What were my first words to you last night?”

“You must warm it up first. It makes the experience more pleasurable for both people.” Shelby’s breath quickens.

“Yes, that’s right. You’ve never touched yourself there before, so you don’t know how good it feels. You’ve never loved your body. I know you think sex is only about pleasing the man, but it isn’t. It’s also about the woman’s pleasure. Push a finger inside yourself, Shelby. Feel your body. Learn all about it.”

My voice has turned gravelly with my own arousal. I want nothing more than to grab my cock and throttle it, but I’ll not touch myself in front of Shelby. This is all about her. That doesn’t stop me from turning my head to face where Shelby is lying on the bed, though. Her eyes go wide when she sees me, and she stops the rhythmic movement of her hand.

I shake my head, no, and she starts to touch herself again. I can’t see anything other than the movement of her hand under her robe. Licking my lips, I watch the moment she slips a finger inside herself. She bites down on her lip and undulates her hips. The gown slips open slightly. It’s dangerously close to giving me a view of what’s happening underneath it, but tantalizingly the gap is not wide enough.

“Go faster,” I order.

My eyes meet hers and capture her in my attention.

“It feels so good,” she moans in pleasure.

“Faster,” I repeat, my gaze not leaving hers.

“It’s too good.” Shelby moans breathlessly. “I have to stop. I can’t do this. I can’t...”

“You can’t what?”

“I can’t.”

“Tell me, Shelby. What can’t you do?” I question.

“It’s wrong.”

“Nothing is wrong with this. Let go of your fear, Shelby. It’s your body, and your pleasure. Embrace it. Learn it. Love it,” I urge, knowing she is getting close.

With that reassurance, she throws her head back, and her body erupts into the most beautiful orgasm I’ve ever seen. Her body shudders, and moans of pleasure fly from her lips. I drink it all in.

My cock calls for relief in my pants, but he’s not getting it here and now.

As her orgasm subsides, Shelby suddenly realizes what she’s done and scrambles back into her fetal position.

“I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Yes, you should, and I want you to do it regularly over the next few days. I can’t please your body if you don’t know what you like.”

“You can’t touch me. This...” She waves her hands around the room. “It’s just a different form of prostitution. Call it what it is, Eaton. You’ve bought me. I can’t be a prostitute. I can’t be my mother. Get out!” she screams.

“Don’t-”

I don’t have a chance to finish my sentence before she jumps off the bed and picks up an ornament from the bedside

table. She holds it high in the air ready to throw it at me.

“Last chance, Eaton, get out!”

“I was going to make this easy for you, but you’ve just chosen the hard way.” Frustrated, I stomp from the bed and collect my jacket and shoes. “You will be dressed for dinner at six. If you aren’t, I will come here, dress you myself, drag you into the dining room, and force feed you.”

I slam the door shut behind me, locking it as I hear the ornament she was holding in her hand smash against it.

SHELBY

I can't believe I just did that and how good it felt. It was wrong, so wrong. I've never heard sounds like that come out of my mouth before. The moans my mother makes when she's with a client have always sounded fake, but there was nothing fake about mine.

I look down at the shattered pieces from the ornament I've smashed. I dread to think how much it cost. I shouldn't have done it. It's a waste. I bend down to pick up as much of it as I can and put it in the trash.

Over the next few hours, I take time to explore the room I'm locked in. There's a walk-in closet lined with clothes, shoes, underwear, and accessories. The smell of the leather of some of the handbags has me purring with delight; I've never smelled anything like it before and feel instantly guilty when I leave a dirty thumb print on one of them. I can't believe this is all for me, but I also can't stop myself wondering what I will need to do to keep it. I can't repeat what Eaton made me do today.

I put the thought out of my head as I dress for dinner. I've only ever seen Eaton wearing smart suits, but I'm not going to get dressed up. It's not who I am. I put on a pair of blue jeans and a polo neck, white wool sweater. I'm struggling with how

cold my room is. Coming from Texas and with no air-conditioning in the trailer, I'm used to the heat. I'm sure if I go outside, it will be just as hot here, being in the middle of the desert, but in this building, it's freezing.

I found a curling iron during my exploration of the room, so I decided to curl the ends of my long, brown hair. I like how it looks. Just as I'm putting the finishing touches to my appearance, the door is opened, and Lena enters the room. I'm glad to see she's wearing jeans still, but she's changed her top to a black one.

"You look pretty," she offers, and I thank her with a smile.

"Eaton didn't tell me what to wear. Is this all right? I wasn't sure if I should choose one of the more formal outfits."

"No, you're fine. Eaton and Max wear suits all the time, except when they have a very rare day off. I prefer more casual clothes, and they've never complained to me. I like to be comfortable."

"Same here. Besides, I don't think I'd be able to walk in some of the high heel shoes that go with the dresses.

"Oh, high heels are an experience." Lena laughs.

We both fall silent for a moment.

"Is he really angry at me?"

She shakes her head, no.

"He wasn't angry. He's just concerned."

"I can't be a prostitute for him." I'm adamant.

"He doesn't want you to be one. Trust that anything he does for you is to help you."

Lena motions for me to leave the bedroom. I hesitate at first. This has become my safe place. I've no idea what's outside that door. Taking a deep breath, I follow her out into a gigantic hallway. There are numerous closed doors lining it, and I instantly want to explore them.

I continue to follow Lena as she leads me into a massive lounge, full of leather sofas, a feature wall with a floor-to-ceiling fireplace, and a television so large it's almost a cinema screen.

"Holy fuck, this place is bigger than the trailer park I live in." I shout out loud and then realize I've sworn again.

I clap my hands over my mouth and look around for Eaton quickly. I'm hankerin' for something to eat and don't want to risk him punishing me with no food.

Lena chuckles next to me. "I used to swear like a trooper as well. You grow out of it."

"Hopefully soon. I don't want any more punishments."

"Oh, sweetie, you'll soon learn that the punishment is the best part." She winks at me.

Lena leads me through the lounge. I glance around as I walk, trying to take everything in. There's a strongly masculine look to the décor. It could do with a few more soft furnishings. There are no photos anywhere. I'm suddenly curious about Eaton's family. Lena mentioned his father earlier, and I wonder about his mother.

As we enter the next room, the sound of chairs scraping along a wooden floor alerts me to the fact Eaton and Maxwell are already waiting at the table for us. Maxwell pulls the chair out next to him for Lena and pushes it back in once she's seated.

Eaton pulls out the nearest chair to him and gestures for me to sit down. I suspect he thinks I'll refuse, and I give him a wry smile. The truth is I'm more concerned about the lavish table settings than who I'm sitting beside. There are so many knives and forks as well as numerous different glasses, and even plates at the side of the cutlery.

"Shelby, please sit," Eaton instructs.

"You know, I'm still not feeling well. I could take a little bite of something to my room." I start to head toward the door I just entered.

"Sit." Eaton growls, and I know I need to obey him.

I quickly scramble to the chair and take a seat. I don't want any more punishments tonight, even if Lena says it's the best part. I just want to eat and then be allowed to curl up in bed with my books.

Eaton pushes my chair in and take his own seat once again.

I lower my head toward him. "I've never sat at a table like this before," I whisper. "I don't know what anything is for. Please can I just go back to my room. I don't want to cause any trouble."

My hand is shaking so much I place it on the table to try to steady it. Eaton covers it with his own.

"No, you are going to eat with us. I will explain everything. This is something you will need to learn. You'll be expected to attend lots of functions with me." He squeezes my hand, presumably for reassurance, and then releases his hold and places his hand in his lap. "Hands and elbows off the table."

"All right." I want to argue more, but I decide against it.

A door opens and two people in livery walk in.

“You have waiters?” I question.

“Not all the time. Tonight is special,” Eaton replies.

“Why?”

“We are welcoming you, Shelby.”

Eaton leans back as one of the waiters places a dish in front of him. I barely recognize anything on it. When I turn to mine, however, I’m glad to see a bowl of soup, although I’m not sure what flavor it is.

“You will have to eat different food from us for a while. I have a nutritionist preparing your meals. She’s advised to keep things very plain for the time being. Your body’s not used to some of the rich foods we’re eating. You also need a lot of carbohydrates to build you up. You’re virtually skin and bones, and you’ll need to have a bit more meat on you for what I have planned. Lena will be providing you with an exercise plan as well. The soup is leek and potato.”

“I...I...don’t understand.”

“Shelby, you’ve barely been eating, and when you have, it’s mostly been foods that are not good for you. Anything too rich too soon will upset your stomach.” He points to a spoon in my table setting. “Use that one. Hold the soup spoon by resting the end of the handle on your middle finger, with your thumb on top. Dip the spoon sideways into the soup at the near edge of the bowl, then skim it away from you toward the back of the bowl. Sip from the side of the spoon and don’t slurp.”

I try to do as Eaton instructs, and on the first attempt, I drop the spoon in the soup, splashing the hot liquid over the pristine table covering. The waiter standing behind me offers another spoon and takes the dirty one away. I finally get the

hang of it and take my first mouthful of the soup. It's the most delicious thing I've ever tried. I can't stop the moan of delight that escapes my lips. Eaton groans next to me, and Lena smiles my way.

"Fewer noises like that as well," Eaton informs me.

"I'm sorry. It's really good. So much better than cold fries."

The rest of the meal passes without further incident. Eaton allows me a small glass of wine with my main course of plain chicken, vegetables, and potatoes. I savor every morsel.

During the meal, I learn that Maxwell is Eaton's bodyguard but also his best friend from childhood. A lot of the conversation is focused on things I don't understand, including details about the casino and plans for my future. It's all a bit overwhelming, especially as I feel stuffed from all the food.

"Eaton." I turn to him as he drinks his coffee. I refused a cup because I want to sleep when I return to my room. "You said I could have my books back today if I behaved. Will they be returned, please?"

I'm feeling lost without them. They're the only possessions I brought with me from my home.

"You didn't finish your session with Cecilia. She needs to come back tomorrow," Eaton replies bluntly, bringing his coffee to his mouth. It smells so much better than the cheap coffee we serve in the diner. "But you've done well tonight and surprisingly haven't spilled any food down you. Although, it has to be said, the tablecloth has fared less well."

He places the coffee cup down and clicks his fingers at one of the waiters. The man opens a drawer in a mirrored

sideboard and hands a small package to Eaton. My heart deflates as it's not big enough to contain my books.

Eaton hands the package to me. I take it and remain still.

"You may open it."

"Thank you." I pull back the delicate tissue paper, and I'm shocked to see it contains an up-to-date version of one of my older manuals.

"I thought it was about time you learned more modern techniques."

I shake my head, the doubts flooding in.

"I can't accept this. My old ones are fine."

"Don't argue with me, Shelby. We've had a good evening. Take the book and enjoy learning something new." Eaton waves toward Lena, "Take Shelby back to her room. Make sure you lock the door."

Lena gets to her feet and motions for me to stand as well. I look down at the book in front of me. It will update me on so many things. I'm desperate to read it, but I've already enjoyed a meal I haven't earned. I'm struggling to know what to do.

"Shelby." Lena is at the door and calling me.

I've made my bed; I need to lie on it now.

My thoughts from the flight here come back to me. Eaton hasn't done anything to hurt me since he grabbed my jaw on the plane. He's been very generous and kind, and I've given him nothing in return.

I slide my chair back and get to my feet.

"Thank you for the book. I'll let you know what new things I learn." I nod goodnight to him and Maxwell before

following Lena out of the room.

Lena pats the book as I step back into my bedroom.

“It’s a gift, nothing more. Enjoy it.”

“They have so much money...so much power. What made you decide to accept what they gave you?” I ask.

“I just realized I was worth it.”

Lena shuts the door behind her as she leaves my room, and I hear the door being locked.

“Accept I’m worthy. That’s a tall order because I’ve never felt worthy before,” I mutter to myself.

EATON

“*T*hat went well.” Max finishes his coffee and sits back in his chair.

“Don’t start.” I fix him with a scowl.

I’m not used to people testing me. Everyone automatically does what I tell them. Shelby wants to question everything, though. I’m finding it challenging. It’s not what I’m used to, and I hope she quickly learns to understand her role in this world.

“Mr. Armstrong.” My butler enters the room.

I have several staff on hand in the mansion—a butler, a cook, cleaners, and the two waiters who double up as security guards when needed. I don’t need to lift a finger, and I don’t want to. My business takes up most of my time. “Mr. Armstrong, senior, is here to see you.”

I groan. My father, just what I need now.

“Put him in my office. I’ll be there soon,” I instruct the butler, and he nods acceptance and disappears.

“What do you think he wants?” Max questions.

“I know exactly what he wants, but he’s not going to get it.” I push my chair back and get to my feet. “He wants to

inspect Shelby, but I'm not letting him anywhere near her just yet. He's the last person she needs to meet."

"I agree with you there. Do you want me to keep an eye on her?"

"Please."

I leave the dining room and make my way through the house toward my office. When I push the door open, I find my father sitting at my desk and reading the papers on it.

"I hope you've dealt with him." He tosses the information I was given about Mr. Belfield stealing from the casino across my desk.

"A message was sent."

"Good."

"How can I help you, sir?" I've addressed my father as sir for as long as I can remember. He's never been Papa or Daddy. He's always been sir.

"You picked the girl up?"

"I did." I take a seat in the chair on the other side of the desk, facing my father.

A decanter of whiskey sits in front of him. I pour two glasses and push one toward my father. He picks it up and takes a large mouthful of its contents. It's the finest whiskey from Scotland, aged for many years in a cask purchased by my grandfather, whose father was Scottish. We have some sent over regularly.

"And where is she?"

"Currently she is locked in her room. I suspect reading a book on veterinary science." I take my own sip of the

warming, amber nectar.

“Why is she not in your bed, waiting for you? You did marry her, didn’t you? We need to get on with this, Eaton.” My father’s eyebrows furrow, and I know he’s angry.

“I said I would do this my way, sir, and a shotgun wedding is not the way.”

“I don’t care what you think. I want you married to her before the end of the week. It’s the only way we can get her inheritance. This is my business, and for a long time, it’s been divided. I’ll always regret going into business with her father. He played me from the very start. We need to get back what is rightfully ours. He stole it from me, and as a result, his little girl will pay the price.”

I hold my hand up to silence my father. I wouldn’t have done it when I was younger. I would have been beaten black and blue for showing such disrespect, but as he’s aged, he’s become frailer, and for a man of only sixty, he looks at least ten years older. It’s probably because he’s a heavy smoker and doesn’t look after his body, something I will never let happen to me. He may still oversee the business, but I’m stronger now and can take a few more liberties.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I will not be married to Shelby by the weekend. You hid her away all these years. You left her with a mother who is a drug addict and a whore. She’s weak from malnutrition and has a lot of complex issues. I will do this my way, and that means gaining her trust first.”

My father screws his face up. “You don’t need to gain her trust. You just need to marry her and get her pregnant. I’ll get back everything that was taken from me, and she can go back to her old life. This isn’t going to be a permanent marriage for you, Eaton. Shelby Jones is a means to an end. That’s what her

scumbag of a father did to her. Jesus, he even made his wife a prostitute. She was a lovely woman until she met him. God fearing and deeply involved in the community. He turned her into a whore who opens her legs for drugs.”

“And you had nothing to do with that as his business partner, profiting off of anything you could get your hands on.”

“Don’t talk back to me, boy.”

My father and I are sparring now.

“Why did you leave Shelby with her mother? Why not arrange for us to grow up together?”

“I wasn’t going to pay for that bastard’s daughter. She deserved to have it tough because of what her father did to me.”

My father gets to his feet and makes his way across the room to where I have a picture of my mother. She was murdered when I was twelve years old. Shot in the back of the head, execution style. I was so young I don’t remember the details. I know the case was never solved, despite my father’s attempts to find out who did it. All I remember is that the warmth in my life disappeared over night.

My father was always too busy to look after me, so I was shipped off to various boarding schools, the best ones money could buy, to get the finest education. In addition to the usual subjects, I was also taught about my father’s business by the guards he sent to look after me.

From an early age, I learned the casino was the only legal arm of the Armstrong empire. I saw the drug shipments. I saw the black-market sales. I even saw the girls being shipped off to places unknown. Compassion and love ended in my life the

night my mother died, but Shelby is mine. I always protect my assets, which is why I won't marry her and get her pregnant until she understands what's happening. I will get back what her father stole from mine, but I will do it my way.

"You're just going to have to accept that we'll be doing things my way. Shelby's so malnourished I doubt she even has periods, so I doubt she can get pregnant even if I tried."

"I want to see her. Bring her here now," he demands, turning away from the picture of my mother.

I shake my head, no.

He turns back to the picture again.

"You know I always thought it was her father who killed your mother. He was jealous of our relationship, and how much we were in love. There isn't a day goes by I don't miss her. I wish you could have known her better."

I've often theorized about Shelby's father being the man who killed my mother. It would make the most sense, given how he betrayed my father and locked away half of the business until Shelby came of age and I married her. It's cost the family business billions over the years. One day, I know I'll have to tell her all about this, but that won't be soon. There's plenty of time for her to learn the truth, but I will make sure, as my father insists, she's my wife and pregnant first.

"I wish that too. I will make sure the Jones family pays for what was done to us, but for now, Shelby remains under my lock and key. I don't want you meeting her and letting her know her family history. She needs to learn it when the time is right. "

My father slams the photo down.

“I want to see her.”

Again, I shake my head, no, but this time, I get up from my seat and make my way around to my father’s side of the desk. I flick my laptop on and open the surveillance app I have for my mansion. My father comes to stand by my side as I bring up the feed to Shelby’s bedroom. There are three cameras—one in her main bedroom, one in her closet, and the final one in her bathroom. Shelby is sitting on her bed reading just as I told my father she would be.

“Does she know you’re watching her every move?” he questions with a chuckle.

“I’ve been watching her every move on camera since she turned eighteen. The regular reports from your spy were not informative enough.”

He leans in to look closer at the screen.

“She is thin. I’ll give you that. Pretty girl, though. She’ll be good to fuck.” My father picks up his glass of whiskey and swigs what’s left in one go before putting the glass back down on my desk with a thump. “You have a month, Eaton. I want her to be your wife in exactly thirty days, or I will have to take matters into my own hands. I want my money back, and she is the key to getting it. Do your duty for our family.”

Without another word, my father leaves. I pick up the remains of my whiskey and sit back in my chair to drink it while watching the live feed from Shelby’s room.

SHELBY

The second I return to my bedroom, I collapse onto the bed and open the book Eaton has given me. I can't believe how its contents differs from the other books I own. The techniques used to look after animals have all been updated. The way to treat a cat with damaged claws is completely different from the method I've read before. It's amazing.

I flick through all the pages of the book, taking in everything. I don't know how long I've been reading, but I can barely keep my eyes open. I know I need to shower, so I reluctantly put the book aside and make my way into the palatial bathroom.

There's a freestanding clawfoot bath to one side, and opposite, a walk-in shower big enough to hold a party in. There's also the largest sink and vanity unit I've ever come across. The cabinets are filled with various lotions and potions, including makeup. There's everything I could ever wish for but reluctantly must step away from. I'm not worthy of these items, because the cost is too great. I refuse to offer my body in exchange.

I undress and put my clothes in a large, wicker washing basket and mentally make a note to ask Eaton or Lena where I can wash my dirty laundry. I guess he has a washing machine

in this place, so I won't need to visit the laundromat like normal.

I turn on the hot water and step inside the shower cubicle. This is the best shower I've ever been in. It's so warm and comforting. I tip my head back to allow the water to tumble over my face and down my back. I could stay in here all day, letting the water wash away all my worries and fears. When I bring my head forward again, I see a light pink bottle containing shower gel in front of me.

It's not wrong to use the shower gel, is it?

Surely it's been placed in here for me to use. Besides, I doubt shower gel costs that much.

Whoever this Chanel No 5 is, they would be stupid to make their shower gel very expensive. No one would buy it.

I squirt a pea sized amount of the gel into my hands and bring it up to my nose. It smells deliciously floral. I love it. I rub a small amount onto my body, paying attention to my arm pits. The small amount I took isn't enough, so I grab a little bit more, enjoying the smell now filling the shower.

I let out a long moan of contentment. Maybe I could get used to living in this place. I'm not my mother. I know my own mind because it's not damaged from years of taking illegal drugs. Maybe Eaton is right, and sex isn't all bad. I remember the feelings from earlier, the way my body pulsed with pleasure. I definitely want to feel that again.

Biting my lips with nerves, I slowly move my right hand down my body and between my thighs. I stroke gently at the lips of my sex, parting them and stroking my fingers over my most sensitive flesh. The warm water continues to thunder down on me, increasing the sensation. I rest my head against

the side of the shower as I flick my fingers faster and faster over the place that feels the best.

My breath is picking up, and when I shut my eyes, all I can visualize is Eaton. I see him standing in the street outside the diner, his piercing, green eyes watching my every move. I see him at the end of the bed earlier, his eyes thick with lust and barely visible under hooded lids. I should hate these visions. I should want to banish them from my memory, but I can't, because he's given me a gift—he's shown me the strange and wonderful pleasure my body can experience.

“It isn't wrong,” I repeat to myself, over and over, as I surrender to my orgasm.

It's even more intense than last time, and I feel my legs turning to jelly. I lower the temperature of the water to try to allow some cooler air to pass over my heated body. I can barely breathe.

After a few minutes, I feel myself starting to calm. Tiredness hits me again. It's been a whirlwind twenty-four hours. I need to sleep. Stepping out of the shower, I wrap myself in a towel and make my way into the bedroom.

I sit down on the bed, and the next thing I know, it's morning, and Cecilia is being ushered into the bedroom.

EATON

*I*t's been a week since I brought Shelby to the mansion. She's still locked in her room most of the time, mainly for her own safety, but I can watch her whenever I want.

She's brought herself to orgasm twice more since that first night in the shower. Those videos have been removed from everyone else's sight. They're for my eyes only and have become my most viewed. I also haven't seen my father since his ultimatum. I will marry Shelby when I think the time is right. My father has managed to survive nineteen years without her half of the business; he can wait a few more months.

"Have we got the figures for last week's takings yet?" I question Max, who's sitting opposite me in my office.

"I'll chase them again later today. We should have had them by now."

"I don't like people messing me around. Inform them that if I don't have the figures by this evening, their jobs are on the line." I snap back at him.

"I'll be sure to let them know you're on the warpath," he replies with a chuckle.

"I don't need snide remarks from you," I growl.

“I’m just worried you’re a little tightly wound at the moment.” Max knows me better than anyone. I can’t hide a thing from him.

“Maybe I should do what my father wants and just drag Shelby down the aisle. She’s nothing more than a means to an end.” I sigh heavily. Sitting back in my chair.

“You won’t do that.”

“Won’t I?”

“No, the fact she is yours means something to you. It puts her under your protection, and you won’t see her hurt as a result. It’s the way you are. It shows you do have heart in there...somewhere.”

“It’s not a heart that can love, Max. It never will be. Love doesn’t exist for me. I know it’s what you and Lena have together, but you’re both lucky.”

“I never said you should love her. I know you better than that. But she is yours, and you won’t let anyone else have her. It’s in your nature to be possessive. You were the same with your toys as a child. I always wanted to play with your cars, but you never let me near them.”

It’s my turn to laugh this time. “And I still won’t let you near my cars. I’ve seen the way you drive. You’d wrap my Ferrari around a tree in the first few minutes.”

“I had one little accident, and you’ve never let me live it down.”

“I’m sure you would feel the same. Where’s Lena today?”

“With Shelby, they are becoming good friends. It’s nice for Lena to have another female around. I think she gets bored with just the two of us.”

I know for a fact Lena does find us boring company. I'm glad she has someone else to talk to. "I hope she's letting Shelby know that sex is fun. If my father wants her pregnant within a few weeks, Shelby's going to have to get used to the idea very quickly."

"I'm sure Lena is saying all the right things. She loves sex. You've seen us do it enough times to know that."

"I have. Actually..." A thought hits me. I get up from my chair. "Follow me."

As always, Max obeys. He's only ever once not followed my rules, and that was to save Lena when I said he shouldn't get involved. I hadn't realized the extent of his feelings for her at the time. He was right, and I was, for the first and only time in my life, willing to admit I was in the wrong. He still got a beating, though, for ignoring my instructions.

We make our way to Shelby's room. She and Lena are sitting on the bed watching television. Shelby has been doing a lot of that as she didn't have a tv in the trailer. She's developed a love of documentaries, especially those involving animals. Lena gets up from the bed and goes straight to Max when we enter. Shelby stays on the bed but turns the television off.

"Come here," I instruct.

Fear washes over her face as it usually does when I talk to her.

That will always be a good thing.

Shelby slides from the bed and comes to my side. I move around to stand in front of her. I gently stroke my hand down her cheek. She's put a little weight on since she arrived here, and she looks better for it. Her face is no longer gaunt, and the dark circles have disappeared from around her eyes.

“I know what you’ve been doing when you’re alone in this room.” I lean forward and whisper in her ear. “I told you you’d enjoy learning about your body.”

When I pull back, her face registers perfect shock.

“I-h-how?” she stammers.

“That doesn’t matter. It’s time for your next lesson. Max, take Lena over to the bed, undress her, and then remove your own clothing.”

My best friend obeys my instructions as I spin Shelby around, so her back’s flush against my body. Her pert rear is resting against my cock, and my arms are wrapped around her, holding her close to me.

“What’s happening?” Shelby is shaking under my touch. “Please, I don’t want to see this.”

“You do. Trust me. You were disgusted by the thought of having to suck me off, so I want you to see that it’s not a bad thing. Oral sex can be pleasurable for both people. Watch them, Shelby. You’re getting to know Lena. You already know she loves Max. Watch how good this can be.”

Max has finished undressing Lena and is now removing his own clothes. Shelby gasps when she sees his cock. Fleeting jealousy, another first, hits me because it isn’t mine she’s looking at, but it’s still a first I get to keep for myself. My own cock hardens in my pants, and I know she can feel it when she tries to struggle away from me. I hold her firm.

“No one will touch you except me. Watch, my butterfly. Max, sixty-nine.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” Max responds with a chuckle.

He pulls Lena onto the bed. As he does so, I see her look toward Shelby to check she's all right. She then moves her attention from Shelby to me. I nod for her to continue, and she settles beside Max. He lies flat on his back, and Lena climbs on top of him, positioning her head at his cock and her pussy at his mouth. She runs the tip of her tongue over Max's cock, and he reciprocates by licking her core.

"Shelby, what you've seen in the past involved only the male getting off. But the woman can also find this pleasurable."

"I don't want to watch this. *Please!*" Shelby protests and tries to free herself again, which only causes me to increase my grip on her, bringing her closer to my body.

"Watch," I repeat as Lena takes Max's cock deep into her mouth. "Watch how much they are enjoying this. He does wonderful things to her with that cock, and she's savoring it. The same goes for Max; Lena's pussy brings him great pleasure, and he's worshiping it. He's pushing his tongue inside her and flicking it over her clit. It's the most sensitive part of a woman's sex. It's the bit that feels good when you rub it, Shelby. I bet yours feels tender now. Watching is fun, isn't it?" I put my head down to her ear and whisper. "Do you want to try?"

"N-No." she stammers quickly. "No."

"One day." I press a kiss to the tip of her ear, and she whimpers.

Lena groans in pleasure and increases the speed she's sucking Max's cock. She takes him fully into her mouth, gagging when he hits the back of her throat. My cock hardens even more. I can imagine Shelby doing the same with my

cock. Her big brown eyes staring up at me as she chokes on my length.

That will happen soon. Maybe I need to do as my father orders.

I can tell that Max and Lena are both getting close to their orgasms. The noises they make are louder and more urgent.

“See how happy they are. Can you hear their sounds of pleasure? Listen. They’re both about to orgasm.”

“We shouldn’t be watching this. It should be private between them,” Shelby protests, but I notice she’s not turned her head away or tried to shut her eyes. She’s mesmerized by what she’s seeing.

Max pushes two fingers inside Lena’s pussy, and she orgasms immediately. This triggers Max’s own release, and wrapping her mouth around the head of his cock, she swallows down every drop of his cum.

Shelby is shaking in my arms. I spin her around to face me, to give Max and Lena a moment together. She has tears in her eyes.

“Was that really so bad?” I question.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she pleads, a single tear tumbling down her cheek.

“Because I can. Because you’re mine,” I reply.

“You’re gonna want to have sex with me, ain’t you?” There’s defeat in her voice.

“Eventually.”

“Will you just get on with it and stop torturing me like this.” She looks back over her shoulder at Lena and Max

before turning to face me again “I can’t go anywhere. I’m stuck in this room waiting for you to tell me what I can and can’t do. I know I chose to come with you. I understand what I’ve gotten into. This is the rest of my life. I just wish you’d fuck me and get it over and done with. At least I can start playing the role of prostitute then.”

I shake my head still angry at the way she views herself. She doesn’t know anything. I’m just as trapped in this as she is. I don’t even want to get married, but I have no choice. Love is just a fairy tale. It’s not real. Marriage is a business transaction. That’s all this will ever be. But we might as well have a bit of fun while we can.

“You know nothing, Shelby Jones. There’s so much you need to learn. I’ll never treat you like a prostitute, but I’ve got as much say in this arrangement as you have.” I look past Shelby. “Max, Lena, get dressed. We’re going out.”

“Where are we gonna go?” Shelby asks as I grab her hand and pull her out of the room.

Keeping a tight grip of her hand, we make our way through the house. I’m walking so fast Shelby needs to run to stay with me, and when we get to the front door, I slam her back up against it.

“Where are we going?” I laugh, and it sounds completely evil, even to my ears. “We are going to face the truth together. I’m going to show you just who your father really was.”

SHELBY

I've read that animals' moods can't fluctuate enough for them to be called bipolar. They need chemical stimulation for that to happen. Eaton Armstrong isn't a dog, however, and I'm beginning to think he's got mental issues. One minute, we're watching his friends have oral sex. The next, I'm dragged into a car, and he's driving like a maniac toward some destination unknown. He's madder than a wet hen.

"Slow down," I yell.

He just growls at me, so I shut my eyes, hoping to God he doesn't crash the car. I can't even think about trying to catch a glimpse of my surroundings. I'm petrified. My hands wrap around the edge of the seat, and I pray.

The car screeches around a corner, and we finally come to a stop with a jolt. I open my eyes, hoping we haven't hit something or someone. Thankfully, I think we've reached our destination. Although when I look around at all the gravestones in front of us, I realize this is not going to be a joyful experience.

"Out of the car," Eaton snarls.

Self-preservation kicks in, and I quickly scramble from the vehicle. I read the name of the cemetery on the sign at the entrance.

“M-My father is buried here,” I stammer.

“Unfortunately,” Eaton grumps. “But it’s not him we’re here to see. As soon as I can get his grave removed and dumped with the scum of the earth somewhere else, I will.”

I’m shocked to hear the way he speaks about my father. The hatred is pulsating from him. I’m not stupid. I know my father wasn’t always a good man. But to witness someone exhibiting such revulsion toward him is shocking. My feet plant themselves firmly on the ground as Eaton grabs my hand tightly and tries to pull me into the cemetery.

“No,” I mumble, scared.

“Yes. I’ll drag you kicking and screaming if I must.”

“Tell me here,” I beg.

“No, you have to see it for yourself.”

I shake my head.

“Please,” I beg.

I’m frozen to the spot with fear of what I’m about to learn. The tales I’ve told myself over the years, not knowing anything about my father, are going to be revealed as childish imaginings. I know it. The daddy and daughter trips we went on together. The laughter he elicited from me with his silly jokes and impressions. Us, all together, as a happy family with my mother sober and smiling. The fact he died a hero saving lots of people. I know in reality none of it’s true, but in my heart it is. I can’t bear to have my cherished stories revealed as fake.

“Move, Shelby. Last chance.”

I allow Eaton to pull me behind him. He stomps in front of me at such a rapid pace I’m running to keep up. How do men

manage such big strides? I'm wearing sneakers, but I'm barely able to stay on my feet.

We make our way through the cemetery. It's well maintained. All the graves are neat and tidy. Some are small, and others are elaborate in style. The deeper we go into the cemetery, the individual graves make way for family mausoleums; a sign of the wealth in Vegas. I wonder where my father is buried. I've never seen his grave, but I'm not about to ask Eaton.

The largest mausoleum looms in front of us, and I know without a shadow of doubt that it's the one we're heading to. Eaton pulls me into the building and throws me onto the floor. My knees whack hard against the cold marble beneath them. I dare to look around, and my eyes are immediately drawn to a pair of ornate statues of peace and serenity, decorated in gold leaf. Eaton walks forward to a large tomb in the center of the room. He bends down and places a kiss on the lid.

"Hi, Mom. I've brought someone to meet you."

I didn't know his mother was dead. It explains so much and not enough at the same time.

"I'm sorry, Eaton. I didn't know." I push to my feet and look at the inscription on top of the coffin.

Eliza Armstrong

Died October 31, 2004

Loving wife to Richard Armstrong

Devoted mother to Eaton Armstrong

Such needless death that will forever haunt those who loved
her.

My hand flies to my mouth and stifles the sob that emerges from it. Not just at the tragedy of Eaton losing his mother so young, but also at the date of her death. I know little about my father's death, but one thing I do know is the date, and Eaton's mother died less than a week before him. Let it be a coincidence I plead inwardly.

"You've seen the date then." Eaton straightens up but leaves his hand on top of the coffin.

I nod my head to say yes.

"You know the date of your father's death?"

Again, I nod affirmatively.

"Tell me." He speaks through gritted teeth. His eyes are dark, almost black like the devil.

"Less than week after your mother's," I manage to say as I walk closer to the coffin and place my hand on top of it—more to keep my legs from giving way than for any other reason.

Shutting my eyes, I take a deep breath. Then opening them again, I stare directly at Eaton.

"How did she die? It says needless. Was it cancer?"

He snorts, his brows furrowing in a deep scowl.

"It would be better for you if it had been." He looks away from me again and strokes over the word 'mother' on the coffin. "My parents were hosting a party. I'd been there for a while, but as a twelve year old, I found it all very boring. I'd gone upstairs to my room and was playing computer games when I became aware of an argument in the garden. I didn't hear what was being said, but there were lots of raised voices. I looked out of the window and saw my mother and your father shouting at each other. I knew I needed to tell my father.

The situation made me uncomfortable. No one but my father was allowed to shout at my mother the way yours was that night, My memories are hazy after that.

The noise of the party drowned out the argument, but not the sound of the gunshot. I recall making my way downstairs. My father and a few of his friends were standing over my mother when I got outside. There was blood everywhere. I remember it being all over my father's hands as he desperately tried to save her, but it was too late. She was already gone."

He strokes the word 'mother' on the coffin again as his voice breaks on the last word. I grip even tighter to the tomb as I try to understand what is being said. My father and his mother were arguing...

"He shot her?" I question with a loud sob.

Eaton nods. "No one witnessed the gun going off, but when I told my father about the argument, it was obvious who was to blame. Your dad disappeared only to resurface as a dead body less than a week later, and you and your mother were shipped out of Vegas that night."

"Did your family have anything to do with his death?" I question, needing answers to try to piece together all the spiraling thoughts in my head.

"No," Eaton responds straight away. "Your dad and mine were partners. They did everything together. They were best friends. They joked that one day you and I would marry and unite the families so they could be brothers for real. Your father betrayed mine." Eaton slams his fist down on the tomb, and the echo of the dull thud fills the mausoleum. "He *killed* my mother." He comes toward me, anger vibrating through every bone in his body. "If I'd watched for a few more

moments, I would have seen him shoot her. I would have seen her die alone as the coward ran away.”

I try to step backward, to get away from the almost rabid animal prowling toward me, but I move the wrong way and slam into a marble wall. Eaton traps me there, his big body covering me and pinning me in place.

“You think you are mine so you can be my prostitute.” The corners of his mouth curl up in a malevolent smile. “No, that would be too easy. You are mine, Shelby, because of her,” he shouts and points to the tomb. “I was never able to get revenge on your father for taking away my mother. The woman who looked after me and helped me retain some sanity. She kept me human when my father wanted to turn me into the monster he is and your father was. If she were still alive, everything would be different, but she’s not. Your father took that away from me. He’s to blame, and I will have my revenge. Not on him, though. On you! You’re mine, Shelby Jones, and every day when you see me, I want you to know how much I *hate* you. I’ve been patient so far, but my father’s right. I need to show the world you are back where you belong. At my feet, groveling for whatever scraps I deem suitable to give you. Get ready, Shelby, because from now on, you’ve got the monster your father and mine created.”

EATON

*A*fter dropping Shelby back at the house, I make my way through the crowded streets of Vegas to Myriad. The roar of my car's engine has people jumping out of the way so I don't hit them. Max is trying to keep up with me in the car behind. I didn't want to travel with anyone else.

Pulling the vehicle up to the main entrance, I throw the keys to the nearest valet and make my way inside and up to the bar.

"I'll have a whiskey on the rocks. The best stuff."

The bartender instantly recognizes me.

"At once, Mr. Armstrong."

The drink is quickly made and placed in front of me. I drain the glass in one long gulp.

"Another."

The bartender nods.

"Are you sure you want to do this here?" Max appears at my side.

"Don't worry, I'm not that stupid. I'll go to my office after this drink."

Max nods.

“Actually, I’ll go to my suite instead. Bring me a girl. I want to fuck. Being stuck with Shelby for as long as I have, I need to get rid of some of the tension.” My dick hardens in my pants at the thought of getting laid.

“I really don’t think that’s a good idea either.” Max’s brows furrow together.

“I don’t pay you to think for me,” I snap. “I pay you to look after me and get me what I want. Now go.”

Max gives me a shake of his head and walks away. I don’t need anyone telling me what to do today. I’m so on edge I’m pretty much ready to explode.

I motion for the bartender to get me another drink, and when it arrives, I get to my feet and make my way through the hotel to where I have private rooms.

They are hidden away from the rest of the hotel guests and include my own gym and swimming pool as well as six luxury bedrooms, alongside a massive kitchen and lounge area. They are decorated the same as the rest of the hotel—modern, light, and airy, with colorful glass accents.

Once inside my rooms, I take my suit jacket off and throw it casually over the back of the sofa. Normally I would make sure it was folded neatly, but I’m too stressed. Picking up the glass of whiskey again, I finish it in one gulp. I crack my neck, trying to relieve the tension, before I make my way back to the sofa and collapse on it.

“Damn, I really need a lay.” Rubbing my hands up and down my face, I groan loudly.

“Hopefully I can help you with that.” The soft feminine voice comes from behind me. Turning my head, I see Max has

done exactly as I requested and brought me one of my favorite girls, Elodie.

With a flick of my finger, I motion for her to join me on the sofa. She's wearing a tight-fitting dress that leaves little to the imagination. Her tits are pert, and the erect nipples are showing through the silk fabric of her top. She slides up until she's kneeling next to me and wraps an arm seductively around my neck.

"What can I do for you?" She licks her lips, and my cock stands to full attention.

"Everything, but first, suck me off, then I might last a little longer when we fuck. It's been a long week."

Shifting my hips, I lie back on the couch to allow Elodie to remove my hard cock from my pants. She strokes around the tip of it, and it feels so good.

"I don't like it when you're this stressed." She runs a ruby tipped finger along my brow. "It gives you lines on your face, and that worries me. You're so handsome. It's horrible to know someone is stressing you out."

"And that's why you're here, to take that stress away." I place my hand at the back of Elodie's head and push her down so she can wrap her plump lips around my dick. "Talk later, suck first."

I close my eyes and let Elodie work her magic. She licks my length, wraps her dexterous tongue around it, and swallows me whole within her warm and welcoming mouth. It's just what I need. Especially after watching Max get sucked off earlier. Why can't Shelby understand that sex is a beautiful thing?

She needs to accept she'll be on her knees for me for the rest of her life!

The vision of that pops into my head. The terror on her face when I told her the reason she's mine.

"Oh, fuck!" I exclaim loudly.

I need Shelby to be terrified as I shove my cock in her mouth. I need to hear her little moans when she realizes how big I am. Her gags as she struggles to take me down her throat.

My mind fills with images of her little pink tongue that flicks out every now and then when she's thinking. I can see it twisting around my cock. It's too much. Without warning, I come straight into Elodie's mouth. Reality sets in as to what just happened. I wasn't thinking about Elodie or getting pleasure from her sucking me off. I was thinking about Shelby the entire time. In my imagination it was Shelby, not Elodie, who was pleasuring me.

"Fuck no." I push Elodie away from me, and she tumbles into a heap on the floor.

"What's the matter?" she queries, her eyes going wide. "Did I do something wrong?"

I jump to my feet and shove my dick back into my pants. It's still fucking hard, despite just coming. It's all Shelby's fault. She's mine. I've been too fucking lenient with her. I should have just been the monster I truly am and fucked her into oblivion. My father is right. I need to marry her and get her pregnant as soon as possible. I've been weak.

"Shit, shit, shit." I step over Elodie, not bothering to help her up. "Max will sort you out. I need to be somewhere else." I make my way to the door of the suite of rooms.

"We're not fucking?"

I turn back to look at her.

“We’re never fucking again.”

Reaching for the door handle, I fling it open. I’m done with this bullshit. Shelby’s father murdered my mother, and it’s about time she paid.

SHELBY

*A*fter I'm brought back to the house by Eaton and left alone, the panic quickly sets in.

I need to get out of here.

My father killed his mother. I can't, no, I don't want to believe it, but I saw the look on Eaton's face. I know it's true. I guess it explains so much.

Taking a few deep breaths, I look around the room. "Think, Shelby! It's the only way you are going to save yourself."

There's a vase of flowers on the dressing table.

"God help me for I'm about to sin." I pray before grabbing the vase.

I drop the flowers onto the floor, and holding the vase tightly in both hands, I hide behind my bedroom door.

"Lena?" I call, "I need help, please." I don't need to add fake panic to my voice. It's already there.

My door is opened, and I brace myself before bringing the vase down squarely onto Lena's head.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." I whimper as she falls to the floor, unconscious.

I want to check that I haven't killed her, but I don't have time. I grab her keys and make a run for it to the main entrance.

My hands fumble over the set of eight keys. Which one opens the front door? Panic sets in even more. Eaton said he had a state of the art security system. What if I need codes as well as keys? I just need to escape and get away from here. I'm shaking.

Eaton's words reverberate in my head, and they seem to steady me this time.

"I was never able to get revenge on your father for taking away my mother. The woman who looked after me and helped me retain some sanity. She kept me human when my father wanted to turn me into the monster he is and your father was. If she were still alive, everything would be different, but she's not. Your father took that away from me. He's to blame, and I will have my revenge. Not on him, though. On you! You're mine, Shelby Jones, and every day when you see me, I want you to know how much I hate you. I've been patient so far, but my father's right. I need to show the world you are back where you belong. At my feet, groveling for whatever scraps I deem suitable to give you. Get ready, Shelby, because from now on, you've got the monster your father and mine created."

I manage to open the door, and there doesn't seem to be any additional security. I thank my lucky stars, or rather Eaton's arrogance in believing he was safe with just a key. Pushing it wide open, the heat of the Nevada desert hits me immediately. Even though I'm wearing a short, pink skirt and black, strappy top, the temperature is overwhelming. I know it's stupid to be running into the desert without water or any protection from the sun.

Seeing a fleet of vehicles parked in a line, as though they were in a showroom, I wonder if Lena has access to one of them, not that I have a driver's license. I locate a suitable key from the bundle as I make my way over to the cars. I click the fob, and one of the cars beeps and the door opens. I let out a huge sigh of relief. I might just get away with this. I have no money or ID, but if I can find a police station, I could be safe.

Getting in the drivers side, I find I'm sitting in a sleek red car. I don't know what make it is, but on the hood is an emblem of a horse jumping up with an Italian flag above it. I stare at the controls.

“What the fuck do I do?”

The panic is rising again. I know Lena could wake at any moment. I dart my head left and right trying to figure out how to start the vehicle. I finally see a big, red button marked engine start. I slam my finger down on it, and the engine roars to life with a thunderous noise that startles me for a second. What type of car is this? My boss at the diner drove me in his car once. My mum could never afford one. He explained to me how to drive, but I've never actually done it myself.

“Feet.” I remind myself quickly. “Left foot to the side, out of the way, and put your right foot on the far-right pedal. The other one stops the car.” I slam my foot down on the gas pedal, but all that happens is an even louder roar of the engine. “What am I forgetting?” I look over my shoulder to the front door. Still no one. “Shit, maybe I killed Lena. No, I can't think about that right now. Release the handbrake and put the car into drive.” I shout out as I remember.

Once the brake is off, I shift the automatic gear dial to 'D'. I still have my foot hard down on the gas, though, so the car

lunges forward at great speed. I can't control the steering wheel.

“Shit, shit, shit!” I scream as I career over the designer garden and back onto the driveway at high speed. “No,” I screech as a large car drives straight toward me. I can see Max at the wheel—his eyes wide as Eaton’s head pops around the front seat from the rear of the vehicle.” I try to veer left, to drive around them, but Max matches my move. “Get out the fucking way!” I yell at them. “Please,” I sob.

My plans of escaping fade away. I have a split second to make my decision. I know I won't get past them, so I slam on the brakes, but it's too late as the two cars crash into each other. The sound of metal on metal and glass smashing is deafening.

Thankfully, even though it felt like I was traveling at speed, it really wasn't that fast, so I'm not injured, and I'm sure the two occupants in the other car are safe.

Before I have time to think, the door to my car is pulled open and Eaton is standing there. His eyes are dark as charcoal, and the sweat beads peppered over his brow reveal the anger coursing through him.

“Out,” he growls.

I shake my head. “Let me go home.”

He doesn't reply but simply reaches into the car and drags me out like a rag doll. He swings me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and stomps toward the house. I try to struggle and escape, but he has a tight hold on me. I can't move or do anything except thump his back with my hands in the hope he'll put me down. As we enter through the front door, I see Lena standing there with her hand on her head. Blood covers

her hand. I'm relieved I didn't kill her, but then the reality of my situation sinks in, and I realize I could be the one who's dying very soon.

"She hit me with a vase." Lena shakes her head.

"You should have known better than to let that happen," Eaton scolds her. "Max," he shouts behind us. "Deal with Lena's incompetence."

"Consider it done." Max replies, and I look up at him.

Max's face is contorted with anger as well. I know instantly it's not directed toward Lena, though, but toward me for hurting her.

I mouth to him, "Tell her I'm sorry."

His nostrils flare, but I don't get a chance to see any further reaction as Eaton continues his journey through the house with me over his shoulder. We pass the room I'm staying in and move to the rear of the house, to an area that looks like it isn't used very often.

Eaton carries me down some stairs with me still thumping his back and asking to be released. The lighting is dark, but I can see enough to know he's taking me into some kind of cellar.

"What are you gonna do to me?"

Eaton doesn't respond. He just keeps walking until we reach a door that he pushes open. He flicks a small light switch on with one hand, giving me a chance to wiggle a bit more to try to escape, but all my efforts fail.

He carries me into a dimly lit room that has a bed against one wall, and he throws me onto the hard mattress with a thud.

“Ouch.” I cry as my body jars. “What are you gonna to do to me?”

Eaton still hasn't spoken to me since he ordered me out of the car. He walks to the top of the bed, and grabbing my right hand, he places a metal cuff around it and secures it to the metal bed frame before I realize what's happening. He then swiftly moves to the other side and does the same to my left hand as I start to thrash around on the bed.

“Let me go,” I scream.

I'm about to launch a barrage of expletives in his direction, but I know, even in the insanity of the moment, how angry they make him. I'm kicking my legs up and down on the bed, but I can't match his strength. He has my left leg in his hand and cuffed to the bed with ease. The right leg suffers the same fate.

“Let me go, Eaton. You can't do this to me.” I try to protest, but I know it's futile. I'm completely at his mercy. “What are you gonna do?” I stare directly at him as he looks down at me. In this moment, I could believe he was the devil himself if I didn't know better. Or maybe it's true. Some say the devil walks among us. “Please, Eaton,” I plead one more time.

He just smirks and shakes his head. “Too late.”

He lifts my skirt and rips the panties from my body. My heart stutters. He's going to rape me. Take what he wants. He is a monster, and this is his revenge. He reaches for the belt in the waistband of his pants but then shakes his head. Instead, he kneels down at the foot of the bed and places his head between my thighs and level with my pussy. I try to squirm and get away, but it's useless. I'm trapped.

“I’ve been wanting to do this since the moment I first saw you. Now I can.” Eaton dips his head down between my legs and licks the length of my sex. I bite my bottom lip, so I don’t make a noise, and shutting my eyes, I try to block out what he’s doing to me. This can’t be happening.

“Please, please, please,” I whisper. Hoping it will soon stop.

It’s embarrassing and makes me feel like I’ve become my mother. This man hates me, but here he is with his face buried in my pussy, licking me and sticking his tongue inside me. I want it all to end, but then he begins to move his tongue faster, and the first hint of a sensation I can’t describe hits me. It’s not horrible. In fact, it makes me forget this is a punishment. It feels too good to be wrong. Despite biting my lip, I can’t stop the groan that escapes from my throat. It’s deep and lusty. I’ve never heard my mom make a noise like that before.

What is Eaton doing to me?

The pleasure within me continues to grow until it reaches a crescendo, and I can’t hold in the sensations inside me anymore. It feels like the orgasms I’ve been giving myself, but even better. My body pulsates on the bed, and I squeeze my legs together to keep Eaton where he is so I can get as much pleasure from him as possible. Eventually the pure bliss subsides, and I’m left with a heady feeling of floating.

Eaton lifts his head from between my thighs. I don’t want to look at him, but my post orgasmic body betrays me, and I find myself staring anyway.

Pure menace glitters in his eyes as he runs his fingers over his lips and then licks them clean with the tongue that has just been inside me.

“Good to see you aren’t as dried up as your mother probably is. You damn near drowned me.”

He reaches out and touches my pussy again. I shudder at how sensitive it feels.

“Revenge was never about killing me, was it?” I question.

He shakes his head. “Finally, you’re getting it.”

Without another word or look back at me, Eaton stands up and leaves the room, turning the light off before closing the door behind him. I’m left in the dark, still chained to the bed with my pussy soaking wet from my own pleasure.

EATON

“*H*ow is Lena?” I ask Max as I walk into the kitchen and over to the coffee maker to make a large Americano.

I’m going to need caffeine to get through the rest of the day now I have Shelby’s taste on my lips.

“The doctor is with her. She needs a couple of stitches.” I wince at how badly Shelby has hurt Lena. “I don’t know what you said to Shelby, Eaton, but she really wanted to escape.” Max raises an eyebrow at me.

Taking a seat at the white marble topped table, I cross my left leg over my right and place the mug of coffee down on a black slate table mat.

“I told her the truth about her father, nothing more. She’s the one who’s overreacting.”

“Were you all gruff and threatening revenge when you told her?”

“Maybe.” I blow on the top of my coffee and take a sip, allowing the caffeine to relax me. “I’ve been nothing but kind to her. I didn’t ask for this to happen. I could quite happily take what’s mine, with minimal fuss, and send her back to Pharr.”

“If that’s the case, why don’t you just do what’s needed to get the money. I’m guessing, she’s cuffed to the bed in the cellar room. Did you fuck her?”

I shake my head and bring my fingers to my lips, “No, not fuck with my cock.”

“You’re going soft!” Max rolls his eyes.

“Don’t say that again, or I’ll be forced to show you I’m never soft with anyone, including my best friend,” I warn.

Max bows his head in acknowledgement of my warning. I motion for him to grab a coffee and take a seat at the table with me. He makes an espresso and joins me.

I look down into my coffee and then back up at him.

“Have I told you the age difference between my parents?”

He shakes his head.

“When they first married, they told everyone that my mother was twenty-one. It made it easier for her to be around the casino and the fact my father was thirty-three. There was still an age difference but not as bad as the reality. My mother was only seventeen. That’s a sixteen-year age gap. I think you know the rules as well as I do. They only could marry with their parents’ consent, proof of living in Nevada, and a court order. I guess my father paid someone to overlook the age gap. She was far too young. Her body wasn’t fully matured, I think my mother must have fallen pregnant pretty much on her wedding night because I was born nine months later. My mother suffered a hemorrhage as she gave birth to me. I was a big baby. Nine and half pounds. They had no choice but to remove her womb, and so I was my parents first and last child.”

“Shit, I didn’t know.” Max looks at me astonished.

“It’s not something my father and I really talk about. But it’s the reason I won’t push Shelby into anything without her consent. Even though she’s a couple of years older than my mother was when she married, Shelby’s body is malnourished and not fully matured. I’m not a complete monster. I saw the pain in my mother’s eyes because she couldn’t have any more children. She was sad I didn’t have any siblings to support me with whatever my father put me through, not that I would have let that happen. I would have protected them from him. I guess she felt it might have kept me a bit more human. She didn’t realize she was the only one capable of doing that.”

My coffee has cooled down now, and I bring the mug back up to my mouth and drink the remainder in one go. The caffeine helps tamper down the anger I’m feeling again at the loss of my mother—the only person who could have stopped me turning into my father.

“Now I understand why you’re fighting your father on his insistence of a speedy marriage.”

I snort a laugh. “Yeah, my mother put a tiny bit of compassion in me.”

“Only a tiny bit?” Max finishes his espresso with a smile on his face.

“Again, you tell anyone else, I’ll have your balls.”

“You know anything you say is safe with me. We’ve known each other too long for that to change.”

“We really have.” I push my chair back as I stand up and head over to the sink where I leave the cup for the maid to wash up. Turning back to Max, I lean against the counter. “This doesn’t mean Shelby has earned a reprieve, following her escape stunt. She’s the one who wants me to be a monster.

I guess it makes it easier for her to justify leaving her home in the company of a stranger without hesitation.”

“I don’t think you gave her much option, remember.” Max stands and puts his cup in the sink.

“She could have run screaming from me. I would’ve had to chase her. You were ready with the tranquilizer darts. Besides, I think she’s done me a favor by running today. It’s made me realize she’s a coward just like her father. It will make it easier for me to get my revenge on her. You know cowards are my one true hate.”

“I don’t know of one who hasn’t been punished by you yet. But equally, Eaton, you haven’t stopped touching your lips since you walked into this room. Are you sure this is the right sort of revenge? I mean I know she’s terrified of sex because of her mother, but what if she starts to enjoy it. If she came all over your face, it proves she’s not averse to it at any cost.”

I hold my hand up to silence Max. He stops talking immediately.

“This is most definitely the right sort of revenge. If she starts to enjoy what I do to her, it’ll make it all the easier when she realizes this is just a means to an end.”

Without listening to another word he has to say, I make my way out of the kitchen and toward my office. Reaching out to sweep open the door, I realize I have been touching my lips inadvertently.

Max was right, this isn’t going to be as easy as I thought. How can I hate someone so much but still want to bury my head in-between their legs at the same time.

SHELBY

I'm not entirely sure how long I've been in this room. It doesn't have any windows, and there's no natural light.

Lena brings me food, selected from my prescribed diet, and a change of clothes each day. She was the one who released me from the handcuffs a short time after Eaton left me. I apologized for hitting her with the vase, and she accepted. She told me she'd gotten lots of sympathy from Max, so she was happy.

Other than a few brief conversations with Lena, I've had no interaction with anyone else. I don't know if that's been a good thing or a bad one as it's given me the opportunity to think about the last time I saw Eaton, and what he did to my body. I wanted to say no, but he didn't give me a choice...or did he? My body reacted to him in a way I've never experienced before. I came for him. I was soaked from what he did to me. It shouldn't have happened.

The walls of the room are white and without any decoration. There's no furniture, other than the bed I'm currently sitting on while reading the vet book Eaton gave me. The mattress is nowhere near as comfortable as the one upstairs but still more luxurious than my one in the trailer.

I get up and make my way into the small en-suite bathroom. It contains a sink, toilet, and shower. There's no clawfoot bathtub like the one in the other room. Everything is white and purely functional. This is probably more the sort of room I deserve for agreeing to live with a man I didn't know.

Jesus! Even the four, plain walls of this room are better than where I used to live. It's far more than I deserve.

I think I'm going insane. It's all too much.

I use the toilet, wash my hands, and return to the bedroom to find Eaton standing there, leaning casually against the main door to the room. I've not seen him in probably a week.

"Hello, Shelby, how are you?"

"I'm fine thank you. I could do with another book. I've finished this one," I reply curtly.

"And what will you do to get it?" He smirks, and it turns my gut.

That's the sort of comment my mother gets from her clients. Is he going to treat me like a prostitute now? I'm not sure I can handle that. I turn away from him.

"Shelby, look at me."

I refuse.

"Shelby," Eaton demands, and I know I don't have a choice. I slowly turn around and place my hands on my hips.

"What?" My voice is terse.

"Tell me the thought that just went through your head?" Eaton pushes off the door and shuts it behind him.

"Have you come here just to torture me, or is there another reason for your visit? I'd prefer to be left alone. I get it. You

hate me and want to punish me for my father killing your mother. I'm well aware of that now. If you are gonna rape me or kill me, just do it. Get on with the revenge. I'll never be truly yours, despite what you insist."

Eaton lets out a loud laugh. It fills the small room. "Killing and raping you would be too easy. Besides you seem to say yes to whatever I want to do with your body." He nods his head in the direction of my pussy. "Have you fully recovered from that orgasm yet? It was a pretty intense one."

"Fuck you," I respond, raising the middle finger of my right hand in the air to emphasize the point.

Big mistake!

Before I realize what's happening, I'm flat on my back on the bed and the cuffs are secured around my wrists and ankles again.

How could he manage to do all that before I had a chance to protest?

Or, am I allowing him to take control because I liked what he did last time?

Yes, I'm losing it!

"What have I told you about swearing?"

"Fuck you," I respond again, this time raising the middle fingers of both hands as far as the cuffs will allow.

"Don't test me, Shelby. You know you'll come off worse."

Eaton is wearing a suit. I've no way of telling the time, but Lena has already brought me breakfast and lunch, so I think it's probably late afternoon, which means he's just returned home from work. He removes his tie and folds it neatly before placing it at the end of the bed.

“Now, Shelby, I asked you a question. What thought went through your head when I asked you what you would do for another book?”

I want to kill him!

But maybe I'll wait until after he makes me orgasm again because my pussy is already humming with anticipation.

I'm insane.

He's driven me mad!

“I think you know exactly what went through it. I'm not a prostitute. I won't do things to you, to get a book. I'd rather stare at the blank ceiling for months. “

Eaton laughs again.

“Do something to me? Shelby, can I ask you something? Actually scrap that. I *will* ask you something. Have I made you touch me in any way? Who *here* has been experiencing all the pleasure? I know it's not me. My dick thinks it's never going to get lucky again. If I touch in between your thighs, will you be wet already?”

Ashamed, I turn my head away from him, knowing that if he did touch me, he would find me wet.

“That doesn't mean I want this,” I reply. “Mind and body are two very different things. I'm sure there are other girls or even your own hand that can give you what you need.”

Eaton grabs my chin and turns my head back to face him. His hold is firm. I can't pu;; away.

“I do have access to other girls and my hand, but I won't use them. You're not a prostitute, Shelby, you're mine. There is a difference.”

I want to protest, but I can't. I know the reality of my situation. I'm not a prostitute like my mother. I'm not giving in to Eaton because I need a fix of drugs. My mother has no interest in sex whatsoever and doesn't engage with her clients. She has an available pussy for them to come in. I wonder what goes through her head when it's happening.

My situation is different. I'm giving in to Eaton because of the way he makes my body feel. I must remember that he hates me, though, otherwise I might lose myself to him completely.

I'm not insane.

I'm a fool.

One who is craving pleasure with a man who hates me.

"I am yours," I tell him, and I mean it.

A lone tear tumbles down my cheek at the reality of my situation. I'm his, but he'll never truly want me or be mine.

Eaton captures the tear with his finger, and bringing it to his mouth, he licks it away.

"You're the one who wanted the monster," he reminds me as he walks away from the bed.

A few seconds later, he returns with a bag he must have brought in when I was in the bathroom. He reaches inside and pulls out a pair of scissors.

Butterflies flutter in my stomach.

Nerves or excitement?

"Accept your punishment. And you will be rewarded. That's how you'll earn anything from me."

He takes the scissors and cuts down the center of the black t-shirt top I'm wearing. Despite the intensity of the situation, a

chuckle leaves my lips.

“What?” he questions.

“I’m just thinking of all the money you’re gonna waste, cutting up the t-shirt you bought for me.”

He leans down next to my ear and whispers softly, “Maybe I shouldn’t replace it. Always leave you naked in the house.”

I slam my mouth shut to prevent giving him any further ideas.

“Don’t worry. I’ll have a replacement bought and in your wardrobe by tomorrow. Not that you’ll be seeing it anytime soon. I need to make sure you aren’t going to crash another Ferrari and attack Lena again.”

“I won’t hurt Lena. But as for the car... I hope it cost you loads of money to repair.”

Eaton laughs again as he cuts my bra down the middle, exposing my breasts to him. They aren’t big, but I’ve noticed they’ve become a little fuller, as have my thighs and butt, since I started my new diet. I like the way the extra weight looks on me. My ribs don’t protrude quite as much anymore.

“Shelby, do you actually know what a Ferrari is?” I shrug my shoulders, wishing I could cover myself up. I don’t like being exposed, even if it means I might get to orgasm. “The particular car you crashed was worth two point six million dollars.” Eaton places the scissors down and raises an eyebrow at me.

“Shit!” Is the first thing that comes out of my mouth. “And you just leave it lying around on the front drive. Lena has a key. Oh my God. Are you insane? I mean, surely it should be locked away in a secure garage. Why would you ever risk driving it? That’s just crazy money.”

“I have two,” Eaton replies.

“No, no, no.” I’ve stopped caring I’m topless in front of him now, worried sick at the cost of the car I crashed. “Two point six million dollars for one car. Five point two for both, and I crashed one. You’ll never let me out of this room again, and I don’t blame you.” I shudder at the thought before it occurs to me what he just told me. “You have two!” I spit out in shock. I can’t imagine having that sort of money, let alone spending it on a car. No, spending it on two of the same model. “Please tell me you have them in different colors?”

“Yes, red and yellow. The best colors. The one you crashed will be easily fixed.”

“Oh, that’s all right then. No need to worry.”

I suddenly gasp as something tight is attached to my left nipple. It stings at first. And I struggle against the bed trying to get it off. Raising my head, I can see a silver clamp fastened to my nipple.

“Take it off,” I demand. Eaton smirks at me and attaches another one to my right nipple.

“Take them both off,” I demand again.

He ignores me and steps back to admire what he’s done to me.

“What are they? They hurt,” I complain.

“They will at first. They’re nipple clamps.”

Eaton’s watch buzzes. I’ve learned previously that it’s connected to his phone.

“I’m afraid I must take this call. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Eaton!” I shout after him as he leaves me alone in the room. “Eaton!”

I’m handcuffed to the bed with clamps on my nipples. They hurt...but they sort of don’t. I relax back on the bed. The sensitive flesh where the clamps are attached is tingling.

How can this man treat me like this?

This is his revenge. This is my punishment.

So why am I desperate for him to come back and punish me some more.

EATON

I don't have a phone call to take. My Apple Watch was buzzing to remind me to drink some water, but I wasn't about to tell Shelby that. Not when she'd look so pretty wearing nipple clamps. She needs to adjust to them, and by leaving the room for a few minutes, I'm giving her the space and time to do that.

"You all right?" Max appears around the corner, his hand wrapped around his mobile.

"Just waiting." I smirk.

He rolls his eyes, knowing full well what I'm doing; he was with me when I bought my new toys.

"While you're waiting, it's the Duke of Oakfield on the phone." Max nods toward his mobile. "He's in Los Angeles and wants to meet up about the artwork you requested. He says he's got an opportunity coming up in the next few weeks to acquire it if you're still interested."

I nod my head. "Arrange a meeting in a few days. I'm still interested."

"I'll sort it immediately."

Max wanders off, and I make my way back into the room to check on Shelby. Cuffed to the bed, wearing a short, white

skirt with her black top and bra both cut in half, exposing her breasts, she's a beautiful sight. But it's the clamps on her nipples that excite me the most.

"An important call?" Shelby addresses me. There's a slight tension in her voice.

"Yes, very important. I'll need to go to LA in a few days. I hope you'll behave while I'm away."

"I hope you'll take these things off me before you go."

I shrug my shoulders. "I might. How do they feel?"

"They hurt," she replies quickly with a tremor to her voice.

"You sure about that?"

Moving over to the bed, I run my fingers lightly over the swell of her delicate breasts. I cringe at the memory of her being little more than skin and bones when she first arrived here. She looks as if she's increased from a B cup to a C cup since she started eating properly. It suits her. Plus, it gives me more to play with.

"Don't," she protests and tries to wriggle away from my touch.

I can see she's still fighting in her head with what's right and wrong, but she knows I won't hurt her and her body must be humming with excitement by now. Grabbing one of the nipple clamps, I gently tug on it. A small groan of pleasure leaves her lips.

"Please don't," she pleads again, but I don't listen. Instead, I flick at the other clamp.

"Did you ever have any aspirations as a child? Ever wanted something more? Was there a subject at school that grabbed your attention?" I question.

Shelby is my captive audience. I've read about her and and observed her on camera, but now I want her to tell me about herself.

"I was told by my teachers I was smart, but I barely went to school and only just about managed to graduate. I was too busy having to work and scrounge to make sure we had a roof over our heads and enough food to eat. I think you know that only too well," she replies before shutting her eyes.

I'm not sure if she's trying to block out my questioning or she's concentrating on the sensations from the clamps I'm still playing with; maybe it's a bit of both.

"But when you were there, did any subject interest you?" I'm persistent if nothing else. I could do this all night.

Why do I even want to know the answer to this question?

This woman is nothing more than a means to an end for me.

An inconvenience that has been in my house for over two weeks, disrupting everything.

And why has she been disrupting everything?

Because I can't get her out of my head.

I stop playing with the clamps and walk away for a moment.

"Biology," Shelby shouts out.

It hits me that she must have thought I'd stopped playing with the clamps because she wasn't answering my questions, rather than because of my own stupid doubts and frustrations pulling me away.

Taking a deep breath, I flick one of the nipple clamps, and I'm not sure whether it's to reward her or punish her. I think the lines are becoming blurred. This woman crashed a two point six million Ferrari, and I don't care.

"That doesn't surprise me. I know you care about animals."

"I do. They are much nicer than humans."

"I'll give you that."

"What was your favorite subject?" Shelby asks.

No one has ever asked me a question like that before. When I was growing up, all my father cared about was my progress with the extracurricular lessons he arranged for me, covering topics such as fighting, swindling, and illegal activities in general,

"I think this one might surprise you. I enjoyed art. I don't mean creating it, but I liked researching artists and forming my opinion on their works."

I'm shocked at the frankness of my answer. I've never even told Max what I've just told Shelby. Although he probably knows already. He knows me better than I know myself.

I must stop this conversation now.

I return to the nipple clamps and pull harder on them.

"Art. I don't believe that," Shelby continues, so I pull even harder.

She gasps, and I thrust my free hand in-between her thighs, pushing aside the fabric of her panties to expose her sex. I refuse to answer any more questions.

“Dream career, if not a vet?” I part her folds and run a finger along her slit to the nub of her clitoris that’s waiting desperately to be touched.

“I’ve never considered any other careers, apart from being a waitress. I’ve never been allowed to have those kind of dreams. What about you? What if you weren’t a mafia boss?” Her response is breathless, her orgasm approaching rapidly.

Don’t answer.

Don’t answer.

“I wanted to be a pilot when I was younger. I love flying.”

Shit!

I have to stop this.

I move my hand quicker. Rubbing her clitoris so fast I don’t give her a moment’s respite as one orgasm rolls into another.

“Eaton, please,” she cries out with exhaustion.

Leaving the clamps still attached to her nipples, I remove my fingers. Her orgasm is glistening all over them.

“No more questions.” My voice is strict, unwavering. “I ask them. You answer. Understood?”

She shuts her eyes again and turns her head away from me.

I leave her lying there, open and on display, and make my way out of the room. I’ll send Lena to clean her up.

I pause at the door.

“Remember, Shelby, I will never hurt you but don’t expect compassion from me. That died with my mother.”

Slamming the door shut behind me, I race toward my bedroom. My cock is straining in my pants. I need relief.

By the time I've entered my room and the door is closed, my shirt is on the floor and my shoes are kicked off.

I'm a neat freak. What is going on?

I remove my pants and underwear before I reach my plush, marbled bathroom, and standing naked in front of the double sink, I wrap my hand tightly around my cock, needing release.

I've not done this since Shelby arrived.

Why the fuck not?

Twisting my hand up and down my shaft, I rub my thumb around the sensitive tip, smearing pre-cum over the head. Faster and faster, I pleasure myself, but when I look in the mirror, I don't see my face. All I see is Shelby, her blue eyes staring back at me as I come into my free hand.

This must stop.

Shutting my eyes, I breathe deeply to calm myself.

There's only one thing for it.

I wash my hands, getting rid of the evidence of what I've just done, and before dressing again in fresh clothes, I send Max a message.

“Change of plans. We leave for LA tonight. Pack for a few days.”

SHELBY

The days and nights merge into one as I remain locked in the small room. I've not seen Eaton since he left me handcuffed to the bed, and according to Lena, he's away on business. Personally I think he's hiding from the truth of what happened between us. I can still feel the pleasure between my thighs and hear the honesty on my lips...and on his.

Eaton is right. Physical touch isn't as bad as I thought. Nothing that feels so good can be that bad for you. My thoughts turn to my mother. She must be really broken to sell her body for the drugs she craves. For the first time in my life, I cry for her. What my father did ruined so many lives. I hope Eaton has kept his word, and she's somewhere safe and getting help. I must remember to check with him when he returns.

A commotion at the door drags me away from my reflection. Wiping my eyes, I stand ready to greet my visitor. I'm hoping it's Eaton, but most probably it's Lena. I'm shocked when the door opens, and a man I don't recognize is standing there. His facial features are like Eaton's, but older and more weathered. With his graying hair and stern expression, he looks like he's had a hard life.

"Mr. Armstrong. Please, I must ask you wait for Eaton to return home. He's asked that Shelby has no visitors except

me.” Lena appears around the door and tries to block the man from entering.

“Quiet, woman. I make the rules not Eaton. Now get out of my way.” The man, who I now realize is Eaton’s father, grabs Lena by the arm and throws her out of the room. She lands in a heap on the floor but quickly tries to scramble to her feet. “Stay down or I will make you.” Mr. Armstrong raises his hand to Lena.

“It’s all right, Lena.” I step forward not wanting to see her get hurt.

I’ve put her through enough pain when I hit her with the vase.

“Sensible girl.” Mr. Armstrong winks at me.

It sends shivers through me. Eaton tries to be a monster, but I can tell this man in front of me is truly evil, and I’ve only known him for less than a minute.

“I’ll call Eaton at once.” Lena nods at me.

I respond with my own tilt of the head. Lena disappears, and I try to stand tall and steady against the imposing man.

“Turn around in a circle,” he commands. “I want to inspect you.”

Your father killed his wife. Remember that.

Be polite and do as you’re told.

I don’t feel tempted to disobey this man as I do Eaton. Somehow, I know Eaton would never truly hurt me. His father, though, I can feel the anger and disgust for me radiating off him.

I do as he orders and turn slowly around in a circle. I can feel his eyes on me the entire time. I'm glad I chose to wear cut off leggings and a baggy t-shirt today, rather than one of my outfits with a short skirt. When I come back round to face him, I see a hunger in his eyes. It repulses me.

“At least my ex-business partner was able to do something right. You'll produce handsome children to continue my legacy.”

I don't know even how to answer that statement. It never occurred to me that Eaton might want to have children with me. I thought I was just here to be a slave to whatever whim he favors at any given moment. The whole point of this fucked up life I've been thrust into is so Eaton can have his revenge.

“That silenced you, didn't it. Your only here for breeding.” Eaton's father laughs at me. It's harsh and malevolent. “My son should have married you already, but then he's always been a disappointment to me. I blame your father for that. Killing my wife changed my son forever. It made him a cold-blooded killer when he needs to be for the business, but when it comes to doing the right thing for the family, he's gone soft.”

Married!

What the fuck!

Cold-blooded killer.

My legs go weak, and I reach out a hand to the nearby bedpost to steady myself.

“Eaton really hasn't told you any of this, has he?” Again with the sadistic laugh. “No wonder he was trying to keep me away. Mind you, I suppose he needs to train you first to be respectable. You're probably used to spreading your legs for

any man who thrusts a bit of money your way, just like your mother. Why else would you agree to accompany a stranger as easily as you did?"

"That is enough!" I shout back at him. The anger within me ignites into a destructive fire of words. "I'm nothing like my mother, and I will not be spoken to in this way. I will not be marrying your son. I will not be spreading my legs for him or anyone else. I understand he wants his revenge, but I will not be disrespected. Please leave." I turn my back to him, indicating to him he's dismissed.

Big mistake.

He storms across the room and swings me around so I'm facing him. His thick fingers grip tight to my jaw, and he pulls me closer to him. Stern lines of anger mark his face, and his pupils flash dark and foreboding.

"Don't ever speak to me like that again, girl. You have no idea who I am and what I'm capable of. Your father ruined my life. For the last eighteen years, I've been waiting for this moment. I will have my revenge, and you'll be destroyed by the end of it."

His face is inches from mine now. The thick scent of stale tobacco is on his breath. It's mixed with a hint of woody bourbon. It makes him even more dangerous because I don't know how much alcohol he's consumed. His fingers dig into my jaw, and I know they'll leave marks

"You will be marrying my son and spreading your legs for him," he continues. "I will make sure of it." Spittle covers my face as he speaks. "Even if I have to hold you down while he does it. It's the only way I can get back what your father took from me."

In a swift movement, Mr. Armstrong throws me onto the bed. My head slams back against the iron headboard, and the sound of the impact reverberates around my head for a few seconds. Bile rises in my throat with the fear of what will happen next. I'm terrified of this man. His hatred for me is so strong. I know he plans to extract his pound of flesh from me for the murder of his wife. My father's actions have driven his former best friend and business partner insane.

“You think you belong to Eaton. That's what he's been told since he was twelve. When you were born, your father and I joked that the pair of you would get married to each other, but that's when we were on friendly terms. I needed Eaton to believe he owned you. He was more than happy to accept because he hated your family. Your father was an evil genius. He was a liar, thief, and murderer, and his sins will be revisited upon you.” I can no longer make any sense of what he is saying to me.

I try to shift on the bed so I can sit up and defend myself against the accusations being thrown at me. I barely knew my father. He died when I was still a baby. How can I be held responsible for his actions. My legs feel weak, and my head hurts. All I can do is lie here and suffer this onslaught that's the result of years of frustration and pain.

“He murdered my wife, and he stole my money. He tied it up in all sorts of contracts and legacies, but the most despicable thing he did was to make your inheritance conditional on the birth of a child. I've only been able to get access to the money he set aside for you until your child is born. That's why I'm disappointed my son hasn't fucked you and married you yet. We need a child from you. You're nothing but a vessel. A means to an end. Eaton will do his duty, and he'll do it within the week or there will be

consequences. I will have what is mine. I will have my revenge. I will become the most powerful man in Vegas. I will rule, and you will be a slave to our plans. Get ready, Shelby. You made the wrong decision to come with Eaton. The life you left behind in Pharr was better than the one you're going to have."

Without another word, Eaton's father leaves me alone on the bed. I'm shaking. Terrified. Eaton has been playing games with me. Making me believe things, convincing me pleasure can come from intimacy. Why would he do that when all he wants is to use me for money.

Use me for money.

I am my mother.

The betrayal cuts deep, and I shut down.

EATON

“*W*hat are you doing here?” I demand angrily as my father walks out of Shelby’s room.

Lena stands at my side, Max’s arm protectively around her to stop her from shaking. We walked through the front door a few moments ago to find her terrified and trying desperately to call us.

As soon as Lena told me my father was with Shelby, I was heading toward her room. I don’t trust my father with Shelby or any woman, to be honest. Since my mother died, he seems to have lost all compassion.

“Eaton, it’s good to see you. Why aren’t you married?” He’s quick and to the point.

“What have you done to her?” I question my father, and with a flick of my wrist, I motion for Lena and Max to check on Shelby.

As they disappear into the room, I guide my father away. I don’t want to speak to him. Even though I’ve spent the last week trying to forget Shelby and the way she makes me feel, I’m desperate to check on her to make sure my father hasn’t hurt her, but I need to get him out of my house first.

“I’ve just put her in her place.” My father laughs.

“If you’ve touched her,” I warn.

“Don’t forget your place, son.” My father’s face turns from smiling to fury in an instant. “I will do what I want to that little bitch. Her father killed my wife.”

“And my mother,” I retort. I’m not in the mood to back down today.

“Then why in the hell haven’t you married her and got her pregnant with your child? She doesn’t need to consent. That’s not in the will. Get it done today.” My father shouts at me.

I shake my head.

“I told you I would deal with this my way.”

We are standing by the front door to my house. I open it and motion to my father to leave. He doesn’t get the message, though. Instead he hangs around, clearly wanting to have an argument with me because I’m not doing as I’m told for once in my life.

“And I’ve grown tired of you dealing with it your way. Enough is enough, Eaton. I want what is mine.”

My father leans into me. I remember the days when that would scare me as he was taller and bigger than me, but as we’ve both aged, I’ve overtaken him in size and stature, just not power, *yet*.

“And you will get it, but in my own time. I’m the one who must marry this woman.” I pull my hands through my hair in frustration.

“I’m sorry, Eaton, but it’s time I forced your hand. Shelby will be presented at Myriad’s annual ball next week. I expect you to be married by then or at least engaged. We’ll show the

rest of the Vegas underworld who's in charge. I've fended off the rumors for long enough."

I shake my head.

"Not happening, sir. Shelby will not be at that ball."

My father grunts in frustration.

"I'm not asking you to bring her, Eaton. I'm telling you. She *will* be there. If you don't bring her, then I will come and get her myself and tell everyone assembled that you are married and she's carrying your child. I'm done with your delaying tactics. I've had to wait a long time to get what is rightfully mine, living with the stigma of what her father did to our family. The embarrassment he caused by not only murdering your mother but forcing us into this stupid wait for our money. I will no longer be a laughingstock among the elite of Vegas, because of that man. I will get what's mine...what I am due. Now do your part and fuck that woman. Or are you not man enough to do the right thing for your family?"

"Don't." I hold my hand up at my father. "Don't question my commitment to getting what is rightfully ours. My entire life I've stayed away from any woman I might have had a chance of falling for because I've always known I had no choice in who I would marry. I have a duty, and I will honor it. I will get what is ours, but I won't hurt Shelby in the process. I may hate her and the genes that created her, but I will not force any woman against her will. I may be a cold-hearted bastard, but I'm not that sort of man. I don't need to rape her to get what we want. She's already on the verge of giving it to me freely."

I feel sick saying these words to my father. Respect for women is the one thing I learned from my mother. Yes, I've slept with a lot, but they've only ever been the ones who love

sex and were willing, and there's plenty of them available in Vegas. I don't need to rape anyone, and I can't. I won't break them like my mother was. She was too young to be married and get pregnant. I can't do that, not even to Shelby. I stroke at my mother's ring on my little finger. A flashback of her hits me.

"Eaton, come here, my lovely little boy." She holds her arms out to me, and I run into them, and she strokes my hair.

I can't be more than six years old, wearing shorts and a t-shirt. It all feels so familiar.

"Yes, Momma."

"I want you to know that whatever happens, I will always be with you and love you. There'll be so many difficult moments in your life, but always think of me and what I would do. It will help you to make the right decisions."

"I will, Momma." I look up at her. She has tears in her eyes and looks sad. "Don't be upset, Momma. I will love you always. I'll be a good boy."

"I know you will. But don't just be kind to me, Eaton. Be kind to all women, no matter what your father says. He's got a different view of how women should be treated." She runs her hand over my cheek before pulling me in for a tight embrace. "I wish I could explain better. When you're older, I will. Just promise me that you'll treat women the way you would want your mother to be treated."

"I promise, Momma."

I don't fully understand what my mother is saying, I wish I did, but I'm too young. I make a vow, though. I promise to make sure she's always treated like a queen because she

deserves it. She's my mother—my everything, and she'll be at my side forever.

“This isn't a love affair. You're sounding like a wimp. This is a means to an end, and I'm so glad I've informed her of that before she gets any illusions that there can be anything more. We need to get the child, and then we can be rid of Shelby. She'll make a small fortune on the sex market. She's pretty. Shame she'll be used goods and not have a tight cunt. You don't need to make it romantic for her, Eaton. Fuck her tonight. Take her and get her pregnant. I want that child. Even nine months is too long to wait. I wonder if we can get the baby cut out of her as soon as it's viable. I'll ask my doctor.”

“No,” I protest at once. “I can't believe I'm standing here having this conversation with you. I've told you I will do my duty, but I will do it in my time. I will not be forcing anyone to do anything or cutting babies from wombs. You told me Shelby is mine, and I intend to keep her by my side forever, just as you told me I could all those years ago.” I'm so on edge, my hands are shaking.

“You're so weak,” my father huffs.

“No, I'm strong because of my mother. She gave me some humanity and the ability to see right from wrong. You've never once been a father to me. You've never once allowed me to even call you that word. I'm merely an employee being told what to do. I understand my place, Mr. Armstrong. You will get you want, but so will I.” I motion toward the door again. “Now please leave. If I must take Shelby to the ball next week, I have a lot of preparations to make. She's still little more than trailer trash in many respects. Something that is *your* fault. Something that *you* failed to realize could damage our family's reputation. Revealing her to our rivals is a risk. It could even

lead to her being taken by one of them during the evening. We are not the only family interested in her inheritance. Even if I get her pregnant, an abortion can be had or an accident could lead to a miscarriage, and a marriage can always be annulled.”

“I shouldn’t have let your mother turn you soft. Maybe her dying so young was a blessing. There’s no telling how weak you’d have been if she was still around,” my father snaps back.

“Get out.” I don’t want this man near me anymore. I’m going to do something I’ll seriously regret if he doesn’t leave immediately. “Shelby will be at the ball, but everything else is on my terms. You’ve waited a very long time for this. A few more months or even a year will not hurt. You’ll get your money, but know this, power is earned not bought.”

“I’m already the most powerful man in Vegas. I just need the money to consolidate my position,” my father snarls back at me. “Watch your position, boy, because I can take everything you have away from you if you don’t do as required.”

My father shakes his head at me in disappointment before leaving. Turning around, I send a fist flying into the wall, smashing the plaster around it.

“Fuck!” I scream out loud.

“Okay, I think you need to chill.” Max’s voice comes from behind me. “Have you done any damage to yourself?”

I pull my hand out of the wall and check for broken bones by flexing it. Blood covers the knuckles, but I can move all my fingers.

Turning around to face Max, I wipe the blood onto the jacket of my dark gray tailored suit and reply, “No, is Shelby

all right? Did he hurt her?"

"She wants to see you. I think an explanation is needed. She's angry." Max looks down the corridor to where Shelby's room is. "Why don't you just do what your father wants? I've seen you do worse in the cellar. All you need to do is marry and fuck Shelby, and he'll get everything he wants. You can go back to being the quiet, aloof man who works himself to death and doesn't let anyone get in his way. It's a lot easier to protect you, and it'll mean I have a lot less mess to clear up." He nods toward the hole in the wall behind me.

I shake my head and let out a weary snort of laughter. "That's the thing about this whole situation, Max. The reason it's so bloody insane. I don't know why I can't do that. I just know I can't because my feelings toward her are changing. And that scares me more than anything ever has in my life."

SHELBY

“*Y*ou promise he didn’t hurt you?” Lena looks all over my body. “He’s a vile man, not that I’ll ever tell Eaton or Max what I think. He gives me the creeps whenever he’s near me. I can see so much of my father in him.”

I reach out to take Lena’s hand to reassure her I’m fine. I know her father abused her, and seeing the way Mr. Armstrong pushed her around, I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d do the same given half the chance. I can’t help but wonder how Max and Eaton would react if that happened. They both care a great deal for Lena from what I can see.

“I’m sorry he pushed you.” I feel bad that Lena keeps getting hurt because of me.

“Don’t worry about me, Shelby. I’ve suffered a lot worse. I’m more concerned about you.”

“I’m fine, honestly. I’m even more angry with Eaton now, though. His father informed me of a few things I should have been told from the start, but Eaton neglected to mention them.”

I’m still trying to process that the only reason Eaton wants me is so he can get his hands on a load of money when I give birth to his biological child.

“He told you about the will?” Lena looks up at me, biting her lip nervously.

I let out a long sigh of frustration. “Am I the only person who doesn’t know about it? I thought this was all about revenge not money. It makes everything different.”

“How?” Lena looks at me confused. “Revenge or money. Surely it doesn’t change anything. You are Eaton’s no matter what. He’s never going to let you go.”

“It makes all the difference. My father killed his mother. I can understand his hatred of me, and his need to punish me as the only surviving relative of my father. But carrying out that punishment for money ain’t something I can accept. That ain’t revenge.”

I let go of Lena’s hand, and sliding from the bed, I straighten my clothes. I’m ready to face Eaton now.

“I understand. I think I even agree with you. Just don’t be too hard on Eaton. The fact he’s refusing to marry you on his father’s terms suggests to me there’s more to this than just the money.”

Lena rises from the bed just as Max and Eaton appear at the door.

“Lena, come and help me unpack,” Max addresses his wife. “We’ve got a new painting and need to find somewhere to hang it.”

She nods and follows him from the room, leaving me alone with Eaton. I can’t even look at him.

“Did he hurt you?”

I shake my head, no. I refuse to speak to him after what I’ve just learned.

“So, we’re back to nonverbal responses then.”

I remain silent.

“You know what happens when you act like a petulant teenager.” Eaton’s voice is stern, but there’s a sense of mischief in it as well.

I’m done with the games.

I won’t do this for money.

Even if it’s not me earning it.

“I’m done playing your games, Eaton Armstrong. Enough. No more.” As I speak, I poke him in the chest with my middle finger. “You should have been honest with me from the start. I told you how I felt. You’ve made a mockery of everything I stand for. You are a sick, sadistic, fucking asshole just like your father. Do you even care that your mother is dead, or is it just about the money for you?”

I know I’ve gone too far when Eaton’s eyes flash wide at the mention of his mother. His nostrils flare, but I don’t wait for the anger to explode from him.

“You know what, Eaton. Go ahead and fuck me!” I take control for the first time, and reaching for the belt in the waistband of his pants, I start to undo it. “Let’s get this over and done with. You can fuck me, marry me, and get me pregnant. Then you can have all the money your heart desires, which I’m sure will make you and your father the happiest people in Vegas, if not the planet. After all, that’s what this has been about from the start. It was never about revenge. That was just a load of crap. You want the same two things all men want. Money and power. That’s all this has ever been about.”

I finish unfastening the belt of Eaton’s pants and reach for the zipper. His cock is hard under my hand. A moment of

sheer terror floods me, but I temper it down. This will end, here and now.

“Come on, Eaton. Let’s use that erection and make a baby. What’s a baby worth? A million? Two? Three? Fuck me so I can go back to Pharr and live the life I was destined for and not your sick fantasy. I can end up just like my mother.”

Eaton stops my hand just as I’m about to reach through the open zipper to feel his cock for the first time.

“Ten billion.” He wraps his fingers around my hand and pulls it away from his body.

“W—What?” I stammer, not sure what he’s talking about.

“Ten billion. That’s what a child with you is worth to me.”

I pull away from his hold and rush as far away from him as I can within the confines of the room. My breaths come out fast and furious. I can barely regulate them as I struggle with a panic attack.

“No, no.” I shake my head, tears forming in my eyes.

I can’t comprehend that amount. Then I remember what Eaton’s father said about the money my father set aside for me in his will. I’ve been living in a run-down trailer all my life, struggling for food, education, clothes that fit, warmth in the winter, and cool air in the summer. I’ve struggled for everything, and the entire time I had ten billion attached to my name, but in the control of the Armstrong’s.

“Shelby.”

“No.” I hold my hand up to Eaton as he steps toward me. “Don’t you come near me. How could you be so cruel? You and your father. My life ain’t yours to play with. I didn’t ask for any of this.”

I'm still struggling to breathe. My entire body shakes as I pace up and down, trying to understand everything I've been told. This is worse than hearing my father killed Eaton's mother. The emotions are overwhelming. I can't do this anymore. I want to go back to the world I know—the comfort of the trailer and Betty. At least that life never left me feeling this way. I wipe my eyes, calm my breaths, and face Eaton.

“I mean it, Eaton. Get a priest, marry me now, and *fuck me*. I don't want this anymore. I'm done. All I ever wanted was to be a vet so I could treat sick animals, but my father and your family took that dream away from me. Let me go, Eaton, please. I'll give you the money. I'll sign anything you want. I just want to go back to being me again. Please.”

Eaton steps closer to me. I don't have the strength to fight him anymore. I let him bring me into his muscular arms. As much as I hate him, I need comfort.

“I'm sorry, Shelby. Please believe me. I never wanted you to find out from him. I should have told you.”

He cradles me close to his chest. His breaths are calm. He's warm and welcoming, even though I don't want him to be. I hate this. I hate what he does to me.

“I was twelve when I was first told about you,” Eaton continues. “My father showed me a picture of you as a newborn, and even though I didn't understand what he meant, my father told me you were mine. Every year after that I was given a photo of you and a report on your progress. It's creepy as fuck when I think about it now, but it allowed me to get to know you from afar. I hated witnessing the harsh realities of your life. When I was old enough to visit, I used to leave treats for you by the trailer, hoping your mother wouldn't find them. Nothing special—candy, pencils, a jumper when needed. Then

when you started working at the restaurant, I'd go to your boss and leave money with him to give to you as tips for extra food. It was my way of helping. I hated seeing you suffer when I knew you'd eventually give me so much."

I think back to my time as a child. I remember the candy treats and even a big thick sweater I found outside the trailer one particularly bad winter. I could never explain them. I thought it was just luck or some magical fairy who was trying to help me. Knowing it was Eaton makes so much more sense. He was with me all my life. I just didn't know it. I guess we were linked from the start, but it doesn't change the fact he only did it for the money.

I find a strength deep inside me and push him away.

"No matter what happened in the past, it doesn't change the fact that all this is about money. I can't agree to that, Eaton. I mean it. I want to go back to Pharr. I want you to look into how I can give you the money without the need for a wedding and a baby. I'm sure there must be a loophole in my father's will."

He shakes his head. "My father had the best lawyers pull everything apart. Marriage and a child are the only way you can inherit and sign your inheritance over to me."

"We really don't have a choice. I don't have a choice." I shut my eyes. "Eaton, do what your father demands. I want this all over. I want to go home. Even if it's back to a trailer. At least it's real and not about money."

"I'm sorry, Shelby. I can't do that. If you'd asked me to marry you that first night I picked you up, I would have done so without hesitation, but now, I can't."

"Please," I beg.

Eaton leans forward and presses a kiss to my lips. I taste every element of passion in the kiss, and it leaves me weak in the knees. I soften in his arms even though my brain is telling me I should still be angry with him. I let go and surrender to him as he kisses me again before he pulls back.

“I’m sorry. I’m never going to let you go, and for the first time in my life, I’m not ashamed to admit it’s not because of the money. It’s because I’ve tasted you. Here.” He places a finger on my lips. “And here.” He places his hand over my sex. “You’re ingrained in me now, and I couldn’t give you up even if I could. In the beginning, I wanted you for revenge, but that has come back to haunt me because now I just want you, completely and utterly. I want every part of your body, and all your firsts. Nothing is going to stop me. I mean it, Shelby. You’re mine, and I’m never giving you up. I’m not going to let someone take you from me, and I can’t let you walk away. You’re mine, forever.”

Eaton leads me to the bed, and I follow willingly. His words have flooded all my senses. He’s been with me all my life. He’s ingrained in me as well. I realize I couldn’t walk away now if I tried. I’m kidding myself thinking I could.

He sits beside me on the bed and strokes my face, wiping away the tears that have been endlessly falling since he entered the room and confirmed the truth of our situation. He leans forward and kisses me again. The kiss deepens, and my arms wrap around his neck to bring him closer. Finally he pulls his lips away and rests his forehead against mine.

“Sleep, Shelby. It’s been a long day.”

“Eaton.” I’m confused.

“I told you I would only have you when the time was right, and after the truths you’ve learned today, it’s not now. We both

have so much to think through, to get straight in our heads. I need to prove to you I'm worthy of you and that revenge and money haven't consumed me. I need to be certain there are no more secrets between us."

He steps away from me, and I feel the loss of his warmth. I instantly wrap my arms around my body to give me comfort.

"Sleep." He nods at me before leaving the room.

I fall back onto the bed, curling into a tight ball. So much has happened today, and to try and process it all will probably take me a lifetime—maybe that's not long enough. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to understand my father or the reason he put me in this position. This is a nightmare I'll never wake up from.

EATON

Surprisingly I feel calmer over the next few days in the lead up to the ball. I return Shelby to her original bedroom, and we spend a lot of time together getting to know each other properly. I answer her questions, and she answers mine. I still can't believe I'm talking about myself. I've never done that before, even with Max.

There's something about Shelby that makes me want to open up and be a different man. It doesn't mean I'm going soft. No. Anyone who messes with me or the casino will still get what's coming to them.

It's a shame I can't deal with my father like that so we don't have to go to this ball tonight. Watching Shelby being prepared for the evening is the only thing helping me get through this. She's been waxed again, her hair and makeup done, and she is currently in a white dressing gown while a voice coach is with her, trying to improve her Texan accent so she blends in with the Vegas rich and powerful. Cecilia is beside her, debating on what dress will be the best one for Shelby to wear.

"Keep your posture straight, shoulders back, open the ribcage and repeat after me. Freshly fried flying fish, freshly fried flesh. Make sure you sound out all the letters, start and

finish,” the voice coach instructs, she’s been trying to get Shelby to say you all rather than y’all for the last hour and hasn’t been successful yet. I don’t think she’ll ever stop saying it, but to be honest, it’s growing on me.”

Shelby cough then pulls her shoulders back.

“Freshly fried flying fish, freshly fried flesh.” The words are spoken slowly, deliberately, and perfectly. But I know she’s never going to be able to speak like that all evening.

“That was excellent. Now I want you to say it a bit quicker.”

“Freshly fried flying fish, freshly fried flesh.” Shelby repeats the words at a slightly faster speed, and they still sound perfect.

“Now we’re going to make it a lot harder. I want you to keep repeating it and speed up each time,” the voice coach instructs, and Shelby nods her agreement.

I watch the rise and fall of Shelby’s breasts as she inhales deeply.

“Freshly fried flying fish, freshly fried flesh. Freshly fried flying fish, freshly fried flesh. Freshly fried flying fish, freshly fried fish. Freshly fried flying fish, fresh fish fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

It doesn’t go exactly to plan, and I can’t help but laugh as Shelby stomps her feet and waves her hands in the air as she tries to get it right. She looks like a petulant toddler having a tantrum.

“Stop it.” She frowns at me. “I’m trying so hard here, but my tongue gets all tied up. I’m gonna embarrass you tonight.”

Stepping toward her, I grab her by the waist and pull her to me. The vocal coach moves aside and pretends to talk with Cecilia.

“You could never embarrass me. You’re forgetting I don’t even want to go to this event tonight. I would much rather stay home and lick you out.”

“Eaton.” Shelby’s eyes go wide at my crudeness.

Cecilia chuckles. “Lucky lady.” She winks at me and returns to perusing the dresses with the voices coach.

“You can’t say that in front of people.” Shelby continues to protest.

“I can say what I want. I thought we’d established that.”

“Why do I have a feeling it will be you embarrassing me tonight.” Shelby rolls her eyes.

I give her a big cheesy grin. “I mean it, Shelby. I don’t want to take you to this function tonight. I don’t want to introduce you to the darker world of Vegas life. It will be dangerous. You are not to leave my side, not even for an instant. If we do get split up for any reason, Max and Lena will be right behind you.”

“And what if I choose to run away?”

I’m still holding Shelby at the waist. Her eyes twinkle with mischief as she speaks.

“I will find you. I will always find you,” I promise, and I mean it. “Mine.” I tap the tip of her nose.

She nods, but I can tell there’s still doubt behind her eyes. I don’t have time to address it as Max enters the room.

“We need to leave in ten minutes.” He looks at Shelby, who still isn’t dressed. “We’re on a strict time schedule.”

I know. I wave him away. “Make sure Lena is ready.”

“Will do.” Max nods and then leaves.

“Well, I think I know what dress Shelby should wear,” Cecilia announces as she steps forward holding a bright red dress. It’s silk, long in length, and has thin straps at the shoulder. It will be a perfect, tight fit for Shelby’s body, and it matches the red tie I’m wearing with my formal suit.

“Put it on,” I tell her.

I give Shelby privacy while she dresses by turning away from her. A few minutes later, she tells me to turn back. As I do, my breath is taken away. She looks stunning. Better than I had ever dreamed. My cock hardens instantly in my pants. It’s going to be a long night.

“What do you think?” Cecilia questions. “Is it the right vibe for what you’re hoping to demonstrate tonight.?”

“Definitely!” I lick my lips. “You’ve exceeded yourself this time.”

“Well, the package I had to work with didn’t need much help.” Cecilia chuckles. “I’m just going to get a drink, and then we’ll come back and tidy up.”

Everyone leaves the room, except for Shelby and me.

“I’ve never worn anything so beautiful.” She stares at herself in the mirror. “It’s quite a change from my waitressing uniform.”

“That’s one outfit you’ll never have to wear again,” I tell her.

She looks over her shoulder at me. Her eyes are heavily decorated with makeup that brings out the brown in them. “I’m just a doll to show off tonight, aren’t I? That’s why I’ve been made to look so pretty?”

“My father is all about status. He wants to be the most powerful man in Vegas. In many ways he is already, but your father damaged that reputation. No one knew where you and your mother went after your father died. We’ve managed to keep that a secret. Tonight is all about showing our rivals that you’ve been under our control all along. It’s not going to be easy for you. It’s going to cause a big commotion when you walk into the room, and everyone’s eyes will be on you all night. This is the biggest thing to happen in Vegas for a long while, and I’m sure you know how massive things can be in this city.”

Shelby nods and turns around to face me.

“What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. We’re going to rock the city’s foundations tonight. We better go. Max will shout at you if not.”

I can tell she’s trying to hide her nerves. It can’t be easy.

“There’s one thing, first.” I pull a hypodermic needle from inside my jacket pocket.

“What’s that?” Shelby questions, her brows furrowing in concern.

“There’s a small tracker inside. I need to inject you with it.”

She shakes her head.

“Shelby.”

“I know. I have no choice.” She rolls her eyes.

I place the needle down on a nearby table and take my phone out of my pocket. Then pulling up the tracking app, I pass the phone over the back of my hand, and it beeps. I show her the phone.

“No, you don’t have a choice. I will inject you with it, but I want you to know that it isn’t only you who has one. I do, as well as Max, Lena, and my father. You could say we’re a little security conscious around here. It’s purely for safety. Nothing more.”

“I know. Maybe when I get a phone, I can get the app put on it and track you.” Shelby laughs.

I snort my response. “Yeah, that’s not happening!”

“Okay, where does it need to go?” she questions.

“In the back of your hand.”

Shelby holds her hand out for me, and having put my phone away, I pick up the needle again. Removing the casing, I inject the tracker into her hand.

“Ow.” The soft response comes.

“I’m sorry.” I genuinely feel bad for hurting her.

“It’s okay. Come on. Let’s go do this, Mr. Armstrong. Let’s send shockwaves through Vegas!”

SHELBY

*M*y stomach churns with nerves as we walk up the stairs to the casino and into the main entrance. My heels click on the marbled floor, and the opulence of the décor is doing little to calm my nerves. The suited staff acknowledge Eaton and then scurry away to continue their duties. People are everywhere. Noise is everywhere. Shouts of success come from the direction of richly decorated tables laden with poker chips. Everyone is relaxed and happy.

“Are you all right?” Eaton places the palm of his hand at my back.

“This is all yours?” I answer with a question.

“Yes,” he replies.

“It’s beautiful.” I tilt my head backward to look at the glass flowers on the ceiling. Red, blue, green, purple, pink, and yellow. “Wow. I don’t want to know how much that cost.”

“A fair bit. It really completes the décor of the hotel, and it’s a massive attraction for visitors.”

I stop, mid-step, and take a longer look at the glass flowers.

“I don’t know if I can do this. This place isn’t me. I’m used to trailer parks and dingy diners. I’m going to embarrass

you. This is a bad idea. We need to go.” I begin to panic.

Eaton pulls me close to him. “No, you’re wrong. You were born for this world. It doesn’t matter where you grew up. Forget your past and embrace what you’re becoming.”

“It’s crazy. A few weeks ago, my life was so different.” I take a deep breath and look toward the glass flowers again. “Let’s go.”

Eaton takes my hand and guides me deeper into the hotel to a ballroom full of candles and white fabric. There’s noise, excitement, classical music, and chatter all blending together. But when we enter everything falls silent, and everyone looks our way. Eaton squeezes my hand tightly.

“Remember, stay with me, Lena, or Max at all times.” Eaton repeats his instructions as his father walks toward us with an entourage.

“My son.” Eaton’s father warmly embraces him, and Eaton reciprocates in a manner that tells me it’s a complete act. “And your beautiful fiancée. Shelby, it is wonderful to see you again.” His father leans forward and kisses me on both cheeks. I swallow down the smell of stale cigars. Eaton’s hand wraps around mine again, firm and commanding, and a low growl reverberates in his throat.

“Mr. Armstrong. Lovely to see you again,” I reply with a false smile.

I ignore the comment about me being engaged to his son. It’s not true but is clearly the story he’s telling tonight.

Eaton’s father makes a point of taking my left hand.

“You aren’t wearing your ring?” he questions, looking sternly between Eaton and me.

Eaton's brows are furrowed, and his nostrils flare with anger. He opens his mouth to speak, but I place a hand on his arm to silence him, fearful of what he may say.

"I'm afraid the jewelers didn't get it back to me in time, Mr. Armstrong. I needed it re-sized. I'm sure Eaton will see to it that we are refunded for such an inconvenience. But my lovely fiancé still wanted me to sparkle with diamonds tonight."

I pull my hand away from Mr. Armstrong's grip and point to the diamond choker at my throat. Eaton presented it to me after injecting me with the tracker earlier. I think it was a fair trade, even when he said it was rented for the night and not to get too excited about keeping it.

Looking around the room at the silent crowd watching us, I add, "I'm sure there are many who would think this stakes his claim on me more than a ring."

Eaton's father turns around and claps his hands in excitement.

"Drinks, music. This is a party, and we are celebrating my son's impending marriage to the only daughter of Daniel Jones. Finally, she has returned to our Vegas family."

Everyone is still silent.

Mr. Armstrong motions again for music, and the band starts to play. He walks away from us, strutting like Betty does when I give her a special treat such as a drop of cream.

"Are you all right?" Turning to Eaton, I check on him.

"Thank you." He nods at me. "I wasn't expecting him to introduce you that way. I'm sorry."

“Why? In effect, we are engaged, even it’s not official. We’re engaged to be married because that’s what needs to happen.”

“But it needs to happen in our own time, and not so my father can demonstrate his power to an assembled crowd.”

A waiter steps forward and offers us a glass of champagne. Eaton takes one and downs it, before replacing the glass and getting another for himself and one for me.

“I think I might drink it a little slower than you, if that’s all right.” I chuckle, trying to lighten the mood.

“I think that would be wise.” His frown finally turns into a smile. “The only person who takes away my control is my father. I hate it, but there’s nothing I can do about it.” Eaton sighs heavily. “Come on, let’s go mingle, and then I can get you home and lock you in your bedroom again where I know you’re safe.”

“So romantic.” I roll my eyes and take Eaton’s hand.

He guides me deeper into the room, stopping occasionally to introduce me to people and to accept their congratulations. I will never remember any of their names or faces, though. It’s all a blur of making sure I’m beside Eaton and trying to remember my elocution lessons. I think I only slip up twice with a y’all.

We reach the center of the room, and Eaton pulls me toward the dance floor.

“I don’t know how to dance,” I dig my heels in.

“It’s all right, Shelby. We don’t have to do anything fancy. I just want to have a moment alone with you.”

Eaton pulls me against his body, and we move slowly together in time to the music. I feel like a princess in a fairy tale. Except this is nothing like that. This is all for show—the outfit, the jewelry, the dancing. It's to show everyone I belong to him. The doubt of my situation seeps into my mind again.

Why did my father do this?

A cough comes from behind us, and those dancing around us part to reveal a man who looks to be Mexican in origin. He has a similar stature to Eaton. Max and Lena are at our side in an instant, along with several other guards. And the man has his own entourage join him in a standoff.

Eaton pushes me behind him.

“Diego, I wasn't aware you were invited tonight,” Eaton addresses the man.

“I'm surprised you didn't know. Your father was quite insistent that I came.” Diego looks over Eaton's shoulder toward me. “I can see why now.”

Eaton pushes me even farther behind him.

“I would ask you keep your eyes off my fiancée.”

The fact Eaton addresses me as his fiancée tells me the man before us is a big threat. From across the room, I can see that Mr. Armstrong has been surrounded by his own bodyguards and is watching us intently.

“After all these years, you finally find her. Just when she reaches the age when she can be married. Any one would think that was a lucky coincidence, but I know your family too well. All these years, your family has denied knowing where she is. Now it's clear you had her hidden away somewhere.”

Diego takes a step forward, and out of the corner of my eye, I see Max reach into his jacket. I may be naïve about some matters, but I'm fully aware he's reaching for a gun should it be needed.

“We never denied anything. Maybe it was you and your family who didn't search hard enough. I understand that's been an issue before within your businesses.”

This time, it's Diego's men who reach for their guns. The tension in the room is palpable, and several people have moved to take shelter behind tables and marble pillars. I keep my body pressed against Eaton for reassurance.

“Are you lying to her as well? Does she know exactly what you are? What you do?” Diego questions. “And does she accept it?”

Eaton doesn't respond to the taunts. “You've shown your face, Diego. You've seen the reason my father wanted you here. This is my casino, and I think it's time for you to leave.”

Diego lets out a loud laugh that fills the room with its malevolence.

“I take it that's a no then. Shelby, I don't know what this man has promised you, but it's all lies. He wants you for the money. For what he can get from you, and when he's done, you'll go the way of most women he uses. You'll be smuggled around the world as a sex slave to the highest bidder. If you don't want that to be your future, then come with me now. I'll make sure you're protected from the monsters that are the Armstrong family.”

I can't believe what I'm hearing from Diego. I knew Eaton was no angel but smuggling women?

“And what about the people you smuggle out of Mexico as slaves to the western world,” Eaton snaps back.

The world I’m in now is completely fucked up.

I take a step away from Eaton, but he grabs me and pulls me to him, so I’m standing at his side.

“We can continue slinging accusations at each other. No one in this room is in any doubt as to the illegal activities we engage in to improve our income. Casinos are just a front.” Eaton growls at his rival. One of those Eaton warned me about.

Better the devil you know than the one you don’t.

But Eaton’s sold women as sex slaves?

“I tell everyone, here and now.” Eaton continues. “Listen up, all of you. Shelby Jones is *mine*. I will not be letting her go.” Eaton wraps his hand around my neck. It’s a controlling gesture, and my instant reaction is to try to struggle against him, but the words that come out of his mouth next have me stopping in an instant. “My cock will be the only one that will ever pound her pussy until she comes all over it. My tongue will be the only one to flick over her clit. Her sweet mouth will welcome only my cum down her throat. My heirs will come from her body. She will never be sold or given away, because *she* is *mine*. And if anyone wants to dispute that, I will destroy them. I will rip them apart and enjoy every moment of it before returning home to fuck Shelby covered in their blood.”

My body heats at Eaton’s words—there’s promise and defiance in them. Rather than scare the fuck out of me like this declaration should, it reassures me. Eaton will fight and kill to

protect me. My breaths quicken, and I can feel I'm pulsating between my thighs at his deep tones and threats.

"You see the way she reacts to me." Eaton presses a kiss to my cheek, and I can't help the lustful groan that leaves my lips.

This is a show I never thought would happen tonight.

Vaguely I'm aware of Diego moving away, defeated by Eaton's words and our display of passion.

Eaton moves his hand from my neck to grab my arm in a strong grip.

"We're leaving," he tells me.

We move swiftly through the ballroom. No one gets in our way. No one tries to stop us. He leads me into a quiet corridor, and that's when my sensibilities return.

"Stop, Eaton." I pull myself to a halt and shake my head. "Tell me everything. I'm not leaving here with you until I know exactly what sort of man you are."

EATON

Diego ‘fucking’ Fernandez will die, slowly and painfully, for the stunt he just pulled. His family has always been a thorn in the side of mine. But to openly try and take Shelby from me in public was a big mistake. Max will capture him tomorrow, and despite the war it will start, we’ll take him apart, one pound of flesh at a time.

“Tell me everything.” Shelby’s insistence floods into my fiery rage. “Is it true you smuggle women for sex?”

“Shall I get the car?” Max questions.

I shake my head. “No, open up my rooms upstairs.”

“Eaton.” Shelby isn’t happy at being ignored.

I put my finger to her lips to silence her.

“Wait.” I turn my attention back to Max. “We’ll come upstairs in a minute. I’m going to take Shelby to the cellar first.”

Max nods and walks away from us with Lena at his side.

“What’s in the cellar?” Shelby asks.

“The place where you get to know who I really am.” I motion for Shelby to follow me into the lift. I key in the

special code, and we descend in silence to the basement. The lift stops, but we don't get out.

"Did my father smuggle women?" Shelby asks in the silence.

I shake my head, "No, and neither do I. It is a part of the family business, though. I deal with the casino and security. My father runs the other aspects of the business, and yes, some of my money comes from those activities. Your father was involved with drugs."

"Is that how my mother got hooked on them?"

The lift doors open.

"I can't answer that. I was too young to tell if she took them or not, but I suspect she did, given the world they lived in and her current addiction."

"Another fault of my father." Shelby lowers her head.

I take her hand and lead her out of the lift and down the dark corridor underneath the vibrant hotel. Opening the door to the cellar, I allow Shelby to enter first. Her eyes go instantly to the glass cabinets on the wall that contain my collection of swords and knives. The weapons of torture I use to send messages to those who try to steal from or threaten the casino.

"Please tell me those are just for decoration?" Shelby looks at me. Her eyes wide open.

I shake my head. "I may not be involved in some of the darker aspects of the business, but that doesn't mean I'm a saint. I like things my way. I'm a mafia boss, Shelby. I attended the best boarding schools, not just to receive a good education but to train how to fight and use torture skills."

“Torture.” Shelby moves closer to the cabinets, carefully sidestepping the chair in the middle of the room with chains on it. “Like in the olden days. We learned about Henry VIII of England at school. He loved to torture people. He’d have them tied to a rack and stretched until their arms and legs were pulled out of the sockets.”

“I don’t have a rack, but some of my methods are old-fashioned. I’ve pulled out fingers nails. Cut off limbs. That sort of thing.” Shelby places her hand on her stomach. “That disgusts you?”

“I don’t think I’d be normal if it didn’t. You’re the man who calls me his, and I’m learning you like to chop people’s fingers off.”

“Fingers, ears, toes, tongues.” I step next to Shelby and point toward a large sword I purchased from an auction in London. It was used at the Battle of Bosworth, during the Wars of the Roses. Several years before Henry VIII was born. “Arms, legs...Heads when needed.”

Shelby turns quickly to face me. “You’ve killed people.”

“Yes.”

She rubs her stomach again. “I think maybe I should have gone with Diego.”

“He’s more modern with his choice of implements. He likes to shoot off limbs. Here in Vegas, there’s many a person unable to walk properly due to his torture methods.”

“What about the police? Don’t they stop you?”

I shrug. “We own them. Vegas is more secure with us in control. Tourists here have no idea.”

“Until they try to steal from you and you cut their head off.”

I wave my finger. “No, tourists are treated a little differently. We can’t go around killing them, but they are still punished for their crimes and never return to Vegas again.”

Shelby moves from the cabinet to the chair. “This is where they sit when you torture them.”

“Where we teach them a lesson for their crimes, Shelby.” I sit in the chair and place my hand on one of the arms. “Do you want to teach me?”

She shakes her head quickly to say no, and I’m slightly relieved, even though I would have let her. Not take a finger or anything but make a cut or two.

“Do Max and Lena do this as well?” Shelby questions, standing in front of me.

She looks out of place in this room, wearing her designer dress, heels, and diamond choker. Only the blood red of the dress would be something seen in here.

“Max is my second in command. He does whatever’s needed. Lena has only been in this room once and that was for something very personal to her.”

Shelby looks at me with suspicion, and then I can see from her expression when the truth dawns on her.

“She tortured her father in here?” Shelby questions, but she already knows the answer.

“Yes. The abuse she suffered was beyond anything I’m willing to describe to you. She needed to make him suffer and then kill him to get closure and move on.”

Shelby smiles. “I can understand that. I don’t blame her.” She looks back at the cabinet. “I hope she made it painful and bloody.”

“It was interesting. She’s got a strong stomach.”

Shelby rubs her hands over her head.

“Do you know how many people you’ve killed?”

“Less than fifty. My first kill was when I was fifteen. A rite of passage from my father.”

“I expected more than that, looking at this room.” Shelby gives a wry laugh.

“I’ve tortured more. I’ve lost count of that number.” I push myself out of the chair and approach Shelby. “Tell me what you’re thinking in there?” I tap her forehead.

“I don’t know if you want to hear my thoughts. You don’t seem to like it when I use swear words.”

“I think we’re past that. Swear away.”

Shelby leans in closer to me, and I wrap my arms around her waist.

“Fuck!!! I’ve never been under the illusion you were a saint. You turned up unannounced at my trailer and told me I was yours. You’ve got more money and power than I can ever imagine. You snap your fingers, and people come running. It takes a certain someone to have that much control over those around them. I see it in you, and I see something similar in your father. But there’s a big difference between the two of you. Your father does it for the power it gives him. You do it to make the world a better place for those around you—me, Max, Lena, the staff in your casino, even Vegas itself. I knew you weren’t a saint the first moment I met you. I’ve never been

under that illusion. But also I've always known you won't ever hurt me. It's why I agreed to come with you."

Shelby leans into me and kisses me. She instigates and deepens it, our tongues twisting together before she pulls away.

"No more secrets?" she asks.

"No, I'm an open book to you now."

"No more skeletons in the closet?"

"None that I know of." I step back from her and wave my hands down my body. "What you see is what you get from now on. I'm a bossy, demanding bastard who'll expect you to toe-the-line, but I will care for you forever, despite the fact I was brought up to hate the flesh you came from. Seeing you in this room makes me realize how innocent you are of your father's actions. This place is where the darkness lurks and this is where it needs to stay. We've suffered enough because of past mistakes. It's time we started looking to the future."

She steps forward and kisses me again. "When I first saw you watching me at the diner, I felt a connection. I think I knew even then that you'd be the one to care for me." Shelby motions for me to take her hand. "Did you say you had rooms here? I think I'd like to get out of this creepy-as-fuck torture room now."

SHELBY

I don't let go of Eaton's hand as we make our way back through the hotel to his rooms. Most people would have run, knowing the person they are with is a killer, but like I said to Eaton, I've known all along. I just didn't want to admit it.

To have your childhood blown apart changes a person. What my father did shaped Eaton and me. His mother's death left him without love and compassion. My mother's addiction guided me into the person I am. I've always thought myself weak and helpless, but I realize it's made me strong and prepared for whatever comes next.

Max is standing at the door when we reach Eaton's private rooms.

"Everything all right?" He looks at me, rather than addressing Eaton, which is a first and probably the only time he'll do that.

"It's an interesting collection," I reply as I'm guided into the lobby of the suites. "Holy shit, this is massive."

"Shelby, language," Eaton warns, his limit for the evening having been reached.

I ignore him and quickly run to the window where I can see the whole of the Vegas strip sprawled out in front of me.

The French hotel, the Italian one, and so much more. I need to learn all their names. I need to visit them all. This place isn't like anything I've seen before. I haven't had a chance to experience the sounds and smells yet, but together with the colorful lights I can see far below me, it must be an assault on all the senses. Hell, I bet the food tastes amazing as well.

Max chuckles behind me.

“Is there anything else you want me for, Eaton?”

“No, you can stand down.”

“Even with Diego around?”

“I suspect he's gone home to sulk,” Eaton responds.

Looking away from the window, I kick my heeled shoes off and pad on the plush carpet toward Eaton and Max.

“Wait a minute.” They both look at me when I speak. “I think the message you gave him needs to be reinforced.”

“What do you mean?” Eaton looks at me confused.

“The message to Diego, that I'm yours.” Pulling the hem of my dress up a little. I reach under my dress to the thong I'm wearing and slowly pull it down my legs, I can't help but notice Eaton's mouth dropping open.

“What are you doing, Shelby?” he asks.

“Sending a message.” I hand my underwear to Max, who does his job and takes them without question. “Tell Diego that this is as close as he will ever get to being near my pussy because it belongs to Eaton.”

Max, unsure what to do, looks at Eaton for confirmation.

“Urgh, we might as well, ” Eaton confirms as he shakes his head in shock at what I’ve just done.

A moment of indecision hits me, and I’m tempted to grab the thong back, but I don’t. Max disappears, and Eaton locks the door to the suite and the rest of the outside world.

“What just happened? I think I’m a little scared. You’re learning far too fast,” he says with a smirk.

I shrug my shoulders. “I have an excellent teacher. One who seems to like nipple clamps and handcuffs. I’ve heard about that sort of stuff before.” I pause, looking for the word I read about once. “It’s called BDSM. Is that correct?”

“It is. My sexual tastes are darker than most peoples, and we will explore that in time.”

Scanning the room, I see another glass cabinet.

“More weapons?”

“No, those are kept only in the cellar.”

I make my way over to the cabinet and notice lots of old-fashioned watches.

“You do like collecting things?” I peer inside to get a closer look.

“You should be grateful I don’t collect the body parts I take.”

“Gross. Did you have to say that?” I shiver. “That one looks really old.” I point to a gold pocket watch.

“It’s not as old as some.”

Eaton is behind me. Filling my space and leaving me breathless again. He wraps his hand around my neck and effortlessly turns me to face him.

“It was once owned by Al Capone.”

“The legendary mafia boss.”

“The one and only.”

“I won’t ask how you got it.”

“Best not to. It involved loss of limbs.”

As we speak, our mouths move closer and closer together until we’re kissing.

“I’m ready.” I pull away from Eaton and look up to him. “No more lies, I know all about you and what I’m getting into. I know about the money, and I know the monster my father was. I’m not stupid enough to believe this is going to be the greatest love story ever, but I know the truth and that’s enough. You said you would look after me, and I believe it. I want to be looked after for the first time in my life, and I know I won’t be a whore if I do.” My words are straight from the heart.

I know what Eaton and I have will never be conventional. It will never be the romance of fairy tales; I doubt it will ever be true love, but it’s honest and raw.

“I want to say no to you, but I can’t anymore. You’re mine, and I’m going to take you.”

Eaton sweeps me up into his arms and carries me down a hallway and into a bedroom. It’s masculine in style with dark grays and rich teal colors.

“I’ve never brought another woman into this room. It’s my sacred place,” Eaton informs me, and the admission shows me how special the moment between us will be.

“Thank you for letting me know that.”

Eaton reaches down to the hem of my dress and pulls it up and over my head. My hair tumbles free from the fancy hairstyle Cecilia gave me. I'm still wearing the diamond choker at my neck. Reaching behind me, I remove the strapless bra I've been wearing. My thong already gone, I stand naked in front of Eaton.

He inhales deeply, his eyes roaming hungrily over my body.

"It's my turn to swear, looking at you. Fuck, Shelby, you are so beautiful."

I flush with embarrassment, but my mouth broadens into a wide smile.

"I believe you. It's the first time someone has said that to me and I've agreed."

Eaton shrugs off his jacket and removes his tie. It's my turn to stare. Licking my lips, I watch as he undoes the buttons of his shirt and lowers it over his arms. His muscular chest is revealed as well as his taut abs.

I let out a long exhale. "I've never seen you workout. How did you get a body like that? Is it natural?"

Eaton steps up to me, and his groin rubs against mine. I can feel the hardness of his cock against my sex.

"I exercise. I have to work hard to look like this." He smiles and steps away from me again.

He reaches for his belt at his waist, and his eyes stare directly into mine as he removes it. His pants follow next; he lowers them down his legs before his shoes are kicked off and socks removed. He's almost naked, apart from the tented underwear that covers his erection.

I gulp. Nerves flutter in my stomach.

“Shelby, look at me.”

My eyes snap to meet his.

“No one will hurt you.”

“I know.”

Eaton lowers his underwear, and his hard cock springs free.

“Holy fucking shit. That ain’t gonna fit!” I exclaim loudly at the sight of his thick, long cock. I’ve seen a penis before. My mum’s clients often liked to walk around naked, but I’ve never seen one like Eaton’s.

“Thank you for the compliment, but it’s not needed.”

“I mean it, Eaton. It’s...” I gesture with my hands toward his cock, which is the size of a large zucchini and standing rigid between his thighs.

“No more talking. On the bed,” Eaton commands, and I follow his instructions.

He joins me on the bed, lying at my side. We kiss again, our tongues twisting together. Then pulling back, we look at each other before we start to kiss again. His hands slide over my body, feathering the tender flesh of my breasts as he circles and strokes my nipples. My head falls back, and I shut my eyes with the pleasure he’s bringing me.

Finally I dare to reach out and run my hands over his chest, feeling the hard lines of his body. I trace every muscle, running my fingernails over the taut skin of his abdomen and down toward his cock.

“Touch me, Shelby.” His voice is husky, lust filled. I tentatively move my hand to his cock and wrap my fingers around it.

“I-I...” I stammer, realizing I’m out of my depth.

Eaton wraps his hand around mine, and we move our hands as one over his length. Up and down, twisting and turning, alternating pressure.

“It feels so good.” Eaton removes my hand from his cock, then he flips us on the bed so I’m flat on my back and he’s towering above me. He runs a finger down the folds of my sex. “So wet.”

“Why do you think I gave Diego my underwear? They’ve been soaked all night,” I retort with a playful eyebrow.

“I’m not sure I want to share your taste and smell with anyone else...” He brings his finger to his lips and sucks on it. “But I think it will send the perfect message.”

He shifts so his cock is now positioned at the entrance to my sex.

“Are you sure, Shelby? One taste of you, and I became obsessed. Once I’ve been inside you, there’ll never be any escape from me.” He smirks.

“Not that there ever was,” I counter.

“Mine.” Eaton’s eyes darken and with one long, tantalizingly slow thrust, he pushes inside me. It consumes all my senses to be taken by him. It feels so good, apart from a few moments as he breaks through the barrier of my virginity.

“Ow!” I can’t help the squeal that leaves me.

Eaton covers me in a plethora of kisses.

“It will pass, Shelby.”

“So full.” I utter breathlessly. “So good. So different.”

“Shush.”

He kisses me over my face, my neck, my breasts, all the while filling me with his cock. He doesn't begin to thrust, though, not until I shift my hips and beg him to move. I plead with him to fuck me and claim every part of me.

He hasn't claimed your heart yet.

He never will because there will always be a part of him that hates your DNA.

I temper down the doubts and listen to my body.

Eaton starts to move, pulling his cock out of my body completely and then thrusting deep inside me again. I lose myself in his movements. Our eyes meet, and we stare at each other. His pupils, black as the night with arousal, capture me. I listen to him. I listen to my body. I allow myself to be claimed.

Eaton pushes himself deep inside me one last time and stills.

“Come,” he orders, and my body obeys his command.

Pleasure beyond anything I've ever felt before rages through me. I feel like a burning building being consumed by powerful flames. Eaton sounds his own release with a growl of power and dominance. I feel the inside of my sex being washed in his orgasm, marking me.

We still.

Both of us silent.

Staring.

No words are spoken.

We both take deep breaths as we try to get air into our lungs.

Eventually he shifts his weight and runs a finger down my face.

“Mine,” he repeats. “Mine.”

The word I will hear for the rest for my life, and for the first time since he said it to me. I don't mind.

“Yours.”

EATON

I claim Shelby one more time before we fall asleep, both of us sated, and for the first time in a long while, I sleep peacefully. I think the last time that happened was before my mother died.

“Shelby, Max, Lena. Here now,” I shout out, standing in the hallway of my mansion a week later. Looking down at my watch, I tap the timer to see who will appear first and how long it will take them. “I’m waiting.” I growl a little louder.

Max appears first after twenty-five seconds. “Eaton, what the fuck?” He takes one look at me and bursts into laughter. “You’ve got legs!”

He’s referring to the fact I’m dressed casually in shorts and a t-shirt. And not my usual business suit.

“And so will you in less than five minutes, or I’ll shoot you in the foot for laughing at me.” I raise a telling eyebrow at him.

Lena appears next. I can see the shock on her face at my choice of attire, but she’s more sensible than her husband and doesn’t say anything. She’s already casually dressed and not in a suit like Max.

She turns to Max. “Is he all right? Do I need to get a doctor?”

“He’s fine, just going a little bit soft in his old age.” Max chuckles.

I tap the gun secured in the waistband of my shorts. “Last warning.”

Max waves his hand in the air and disappears down the corridor a deep chuckle following him. “Think about it, Eaton. A couple of months ago you would have threatened to shoot me in the balls, not the foot.”

He’s right, a part of me is mellowing, but I’m still a dangerous asshole if needed.

Finally Shelby arrives. She’s wearing a light summer dress and has her long hair pulled back in a French plait. She stops, mouth open wide, staring at me.

“Are you going somewhere?” she questions.

“We all are.”

Shelby and Lena exchange side eye looks.

“The next one to question the way I look will be spending time in the cellar!” I retort, growing frustrated with the fact that my shorts and t-shirt are causing such amusement. I wear the same outfit when I go to the gym, albeit the designer Gucci clothes I have on today are not as sporty as the ones I wear for exercising.

“He’s still in there, then.” Shelby smirks.

“I look like a right idiot.” Max returns dressed similarly to me. “Where are we actually going?”

“It’s a surprise,” I offer as the sound of a helicopter landing in the garden fills the house.

Shelby grabs me tight. “What in the ‘Sam Hill’ is that noise?”

“This is going to be fun.” I laugh and lead them all out to the waiting aircraft.

“No, no chance, no way.” Shelby digs her heels into the ground. “I’m not getting on that thing.”

“You are because you’ll love where we’re going, and it’s the best way to get there,” I order and push her forward. “Lena, you go in the front, and Shelby, you go between Max and I, to even out the weight distribution.”

Lena has traveled on a helicopter with us a few times before, and she happily climbs on board and straps herself in. Max gets in the back first and moves across to his seat.

“Shelby?” I motion for her to get in.

“I’m scared, Eaton. I didn’t enjoy the plane journey here. This thing looks even scarier.”

“It’s safe. I wouldn’t travel on it if it wasn’t. Trust me.”

“Okay,” Shelby reluctantly agrees and climbs aboard.

I strap her in, and we all put on headphones.

“We wear these because it gets very loud in here,” I explain to Shelby. “The headphones allow us to talk while in flight.”

The pilot starts the rotors. And we lift into the air. The gentle see-sawing motion is comforting to me, but the fact Shelby grabs my hand tight and digs her nails into it tells me it’s not the same for her.

“Let me off. This isn’t natural. Let me off. Please, Eaton,” she begs.

“Relax, it’ll be fine.”

“It won’t be fucking fine, Eaton. That’s a bunch of fucking crap. This thing is fucking dangerous. Shit balls. Fucking asshole. I hate you. Put me back on the fucking ground now!” Shelby glares at me. Her nostrils flaring with anger, but her eyes are wide with fright “Shit, shit, shit,” she repeats as we bank left and head away from Vegas toward LA. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” she repeats, over and over again.

I can see the smirk on Max’s face. He’s enjoying the show as Shelby tries to clamber onto my lap. I must admit it’s pretty funny. I can’t stop the smirk that crosses my face.

“You asshole! You’re laughing at me.” Shelby slaps me across the chest.

I grab her hand when she goes to do it again.

“Turn the mikes on for just Shelby and me please,” I instruct the pilot. “And off for everyone else.”

He flicks the communication switch just as we get up to top speed in the helicopter and zoom out over the desert. The weather for the journey today is good, and I’ve been told it will only take an hour and half to get to our destination.

“Shelby, listen to me.” I pull her face so her eyes are looking into mine. “As much as your swearing is growing on me, there is nothing to be afraid of. I travel this way often. Relax and look out the window. When do you ever get a view like this? You can see all around you. Look below us. That’s the Indian reserve of the Mojave people. Keep watching, and you’ll see as the barrenness of the desert gives way to the

richness of the Angeles National Forest. You can't get these views anywhere else."

Stretching over me, Shelby looks out of the window.

"It looks like a giant sandpit. There's nothing around. We're in the middle of nowhere."

"We really are."

"You can see patterns in the sand—shapes of different things."

Shelby gradually calms down as she starts to point out what she sees in the landscape, and apart from a small period of turbulence, her language is less that of a well seasoned sailor and more suited to the beautiful, young woman she is. I hold her in my arms and enjoy capturing more of her firsts.

As we approach our destination, the helicopter begins to descend, and Shelby looks eagerly out of the window.

"Are you going to tell us where we're going?" she questions.

"Keep looking."

The helicopter glides lower, and our destination comes into view.

"Eaton." Shelby stares at me with a look of excitement on her face. "Is that where we're going?"

I nod. "Los Angeles zoo."

Tears start to form in Shelby's eyes. They tumble down her cheeks as the helicopter lands, and the rotors are switched off. I remove her headphones so we can talk normally.

"Why the tears?"

“Because I can’t believe you’ve brought me here. I’ve never been to a zoo before. I could never afford to go.” She wipes at her tears, but they continue to fall. I’m just glad they are happy ones.

“Then we’re going to have a really good day because I’ve never been here before either.”

SHELBY

“*H*is name is CJ. He’s a Sumatran tiger, one of the most endangered subspecies of tiger in the world.” Shelby reads from the sign explaining about the tiger in front of us. “He’s ten years old and is the smallest of the tigers. I had a friend growing up called CJ. Her real name was Cara Jane. She was always making up stories and writing them down. We lost touch. I hope wherever she is she’s still telling her stories about wild animals that turn into humans.”

“He’s very powerful,” Max says, putting his arm around Lena’s shoulders as we all stand and stare at the tiger.

“He’s not as powerful as Eaton in his designer shorts.” Lena laughs.

“I’m never going to live this outfit down, am I?” Eaton scoffs.

“I think you look good in it.” I take his hand and squeeze it. “Oh! Fun fact, did you know that tigers have antiseptic saliva. So next time you get a cut you should go looking for a tiger.”

“I think I’d rather not.” Eaton chuckles.

“Spoilsport,” I counter with my own laugh.

I've never been to a place like this before. I can't believe I'm here. I'm trying to take in as many details about the animals as I can. Eaton has even given me a camera so I can take pictures of them. I'm already planning to make a notebook from the pictures and hope to research as much as I can about the animals. The big cats are my favorite. They are so majestic. My mind goes to Betty. I hope she's finding food somewhere. Maybe Eaton would allow me to get my own cat one day.

"We need to go." Eaton looks at his watch and takes my hand.

"Leave already?" I'm sure we've only been here an hour. It can't be time to go yet.

"No, don't worry. We're not leaving. I've got another surprise for you."

We all follow Eaton through the zoo to what I can see is the medical center.

"They don't normally allow people in here, but they've made an exception for us. Max, Lena, you can go explore for a bit if you want. I'm afraid it's just for us two."

"Don't worry." Max nods. "Call me when you need us to come back."

The couple I've now come to think of as friends walk off together. I think it must be nice for them to spend the day together. With Max being at Eaton's side most of the time, the couple are often apart.

"I can't believe we're going to do this." I'm almost jumping up and down with excitement as we enter the large medical building.

“I hope you’re going to enjoy this. I’ve been told they have some very sick animals here. I don’t want you to get upset.”

“I won’t. I’ll be concerned and want to help them.”

A man stands in the lobby. He’s dressed in scrubs.

“Hi, my name is Ian. I’m the director of medicine here at the zoo. It’s lovely to meet you both. Please come this way, and we’ll have a look at some of our patients.”

We follow him through the building to the medical wards. We’re led to a cage holding a meerkat. He looks very young. Ian takes him out and carries him into an examination room while we follow on behind. The meerkat is lethargic and looks thin.

“We had this little one brought in this morning. It’s particularly worrying because he is so young, and some of the other meerkats are showing similar symptoms,” Ian explains.

Eaton stands back behind us, watching intently while Ian guides me in checking over the meerkat. It doesn’t even try to struggle against our touch. It’s horrible to see. He should be running around. I try to think back in the books I’ve read as to what could be wrong with him.

“He’s got a fever,” I announce as his temperature is taken. “Oh God.” It suddenly hits me what this could be. “Is it toxoplasmosis?” It’s a parasitic infection that can be fatal.

“It is. We’ve already put him on antibiotics and started the other meerkats on them as well. It’s a big problem in zoos because of the different types of animals. You’ll need to make sure you wash your hands with antibacterial soap when you leave as it can be passed on to humans,” the vet explains.

“I didn’t know that.” Eaton steps forward, concern for me on his face.

“It’s all right, Eaton. It’s not likely to happen,” I reassure him. “We just need to make sure we wash our hands before eating. Poor thing. Will he be all right?” I stroke the meerkat.

My knowledge of his illness and the fact he’s so lethargic concerns me.

“We’ve caught it early. He was the runt of the litter, so I think that’s why he’s been hit so hard.”

“You must let me know how he progresses, please.” I turn to Eaton. “Is that all right?”

Eaton nods.

“Well done on spotting what was wrong. You know your stuff?”

I shrug. “I’m all right on the theory. It’s the practical side I’m not sure about.”

I feel proud of myself for recognizing the symptoms. But also, it makes me feel a little sad. My life could have been so different.

The rest of the day passes in a blur of observing and treating different animals with Ian as my teacher. The big cats remain my favorites, and my excitement reaches fever pitch when I’m allowed to feed CJ. I’m not allowed directly in the cage, but I throw some pieces of food into his enclosure for him.

The helicopter ride back to Vegas isn’t as scary as the outgoing journey. I’m too exhausted and happy to care about the bumps or the strange sensation of floating. I think I must fall asleep for a little while, holding the stuffed tiger toy Eaton bought for me, because the journey doesn’t seem as long as on the way there.

“Thank you for taking me.” I cuddle up to Eaton on the sofa in his lounge after Max and Lena have retired to their rooms. “It was the most amazing place in the world. Seeing those wild cats in real life was incredible. Even though they’re much larger, I don’t think they’re very different from the little cat I looked after in Pharr.’

“Speaking of which.” Eaton gently pushes me away and gets to his feet.

“What?” Confused, I look up at him as he holds his hand out to me.

“Come with me. I want to show you something.”

“More surprises? You’ve given me enough today,” I tell him as I get to my feet and take his hand.

He turns me, so I’m facing him. His expression is serious.

“What’s wrong, Eaton?” I ask.

“Shelby, I know this situation isn’t conventional, and you will never have the freedom that a woman your age should have, but I do want you to be happy here and not hate being with me. Do you know what I mean.”

“I do. You’re grumpy, a control freak, and you have a bipolar personality, so it’s sometimes a little hard to know which Eaton I’m going to get, but I am happy.”

“That wasn’t exactly what I meant, but I appreciate your honesty.”

Eaton leads me through the house and out into the backyard. The heat, even this late in the evening, hits me. It’s not oppressive, though, because there’s a gentle breeze rippling over the desert. Eaton flips a switch on the wall and a

light turns on to reveal a new caged area. In the middle of it sits Betty.

“Betty.” I run toward her. “How?” I turn back to Eaton.

“Apparently, she kept coming back to the trailer, calling for you. I had her brought here and the cage installed today. I don’t know much about looking after her, or whether this cage is all right because she’s feral, but she’ll need some special care because she’s going to have kittens.”

“Kittens? She’s pregnant. Betty, you naughty girl.” I laugh as I enter the cage, and bringing her into my arms, I stroke her ears. She purrs loudly and settles.

“She can come into the house. I don’t mind. I just wouldn’t want her roaming around outside without the cage. There’s a lot of wildlife that could attack her,” Eaton continues to explain.

“I’ll have to read up about what we need to do.” I put Betty back down and make my way out of the cage to where Eaton is standing. “Thank you. I was thinking about her today while I was with all the big cats. I’m glad she’s here. She was my one friend in Pharr.”

“I know.” Eaton strokes down my face. “There’s one more present I have for you tonight.”

“More? Eaton, I don’t need all this.”

“I’m not buying you things to get anything from you in exchange, Shelby. Please don’t think that. I’m a different person from the one who came to collect you. I want to marry you, and I want to have children with you because of who *you* are, not because of whose daughter you are. The hate I had for you has gone. I feel only...” Eaton places his hand over my

heart. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to say the word, but I think you know what I mean.”

A part of me is saddened that the growing feeling I have for this man in front of me will probably never be spoken out loud, but I know what his hand resting on my heart means, and that’s all I need. He removes his hand and reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone. He swipes to bring up a picture and turns the phone to show me.

“Everything is at the casino at the moment, but I’ll have it brought here tomorrow.”

I look closely at the picture. It’s a laptop with books surrounding it. The books are different modules of veterinary science.

“I don’t understand.” I’m confused as to what it means.

“I’ve arranged for you to study to become a vet. It’s an online course with tutors who will help. I’m not letting you out of my sight to go to university. I don’t trust the boys who’ll be there, but you can study whatever you want and tailor later modules to the areas you want to specialize in. Ian has also said that he’s happy to assist you in gaining practical experience. He was impressed with you diagnosing the meerkat’s problem.”

My head starts spinning. I can’t believe what I’m hearing. This has been my dream all my life, to study animal medicine.

“Is this real?” My voice breaks.

“Yes. You’ll need to work hard. It’s not going to be easy, but I know you’ll succeed. Who knows, when you qualify, I might even buy the Las Vegas Zoo for you.”

“Okay, that’s going too far! I’ll settle for delivering Betty’s kittens and looking after them for now.

I take a step closer to Eaton, and raising my hand, I cover his heart with my palm.

“Thank you. I’m glad my father was a monster because it led me to you. I just wish,” I look down and away, “that your mother hadn’t been the price you had to pay.”

Eaton falls silent. His fingers turning the ring on his left hand. A ring I know was once his mother’s. He pulls it off, and taking my left hand in his, he slips it onto my finger. It’s a little big for me, but I understand the significance of this gesture.

“Marry me?” It’s not a question, it’s a demand. It will always be a demand when Eaton wants something, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“You know I can’t say no.” I lean forward and kiss him. “Let’s go to bed and celebrate.”

EATON

“*W*hat do you think she wants, Eaton?” Max’s face is full of concern as we stride purposely through the secure unit.

“I don’t know, but why now, just when Shelby and I have finally sorted everything out.”

My hands are gripped into tight fists—they have been since I got the phone call this morning that Shelby’s mother, Juana, wanted to see me. I should have told her to go fuck herself. She’s nothing but a drug addict and a whore, but her message indicated that she has important information about the past, leaving me in little doubt I needed to hear what she has to say.

“You want me to come in with you?” Max questions.

I shake my head. “No, I can deal with this myself.”

I remember Juana from my youth. She was quiet, but I suspect Shelby gets her swearing ability from her mother’s Mexican ancestry. Juana could be fiery when flustered.

We reach the door of Juana’s room. Max assumes a guarding position by the door, and I knock before entering the room. Shelby’s mother is sitting on a chair by the window, reading a book.

She looks completely different from the last time I saw her when she was fucking a client in the trailer to get a drug fix. Gone is the greasy hair and the dark circles under her eyes. She's no longer gaunt and spaced out. Her hair is cut shorter and pulled back in a ponytail, and she's wearing glasses to read.

"Mrs. Jones," I acknowledge her politely. My view on Shelby has changed since our first meeting. I don't blame her for what her father did, and I can't blame Juana either. "You wanted to see me."

She shuts the book, places it down on the table next to her and motions for me to sit on the chair opposite her. I make my way over and sit down.

"Thank you for coming. I wasn't sure if you would." Juana speaks clearly. There's no hint of the drug addict she once was.

"You didn't leave me any choice. You said it was important information about the past and relates to Shelby. She's under my protection now, and I will make sure she's not hurt in anyway. She had enough of that growing up." My words are clipped and to the point. I just want to know why I'm here and then get back to Vegas and my fiancée.

"She did, and you as well. It should have been so different." Juana looks out of the window, lost in a fleeting memory. "I've been on drugs for so long now, and it's been hard to distinguish between reality and fiction as I came off them. But these have helped me to remember..."

She gets to her feet, and going over to a wooden chest, she pulls out a small pile of papers from one of the drawers and brings them back to where I'm sitting. She places them down on the table in front of me and retakes her seat.

“Please, Eaton,” she pleads. “I know I have no right to ask. I’ve never been a real mother to Shelby, but I want to make sure she’s safe. I want you to know the truth about what happened between your family and mine. The lies have been told for so long. It’s time the truths came out.”

“Just because you’ve finally regained some clarity doesn’t mean I’m willing to hear what you have to say. It’s probably bullshit if it has anything to do with your husband.”

I don’t need to be here, listening to her lies. I get to my feet and turn to face the door.

“Eaton, you’ve got your father’s stubborn nature, but you need to hear this. I loved my husband. He loved me, but there was a third person in our marriage.” I’ve had enough, this was a mistake. I don’t need to hear what a good man David Jones was. I know the truth. My hand reaches out to open the door and leave. “Eaton, that person was your mother, Eliza.”

“What?” I spin around. “I don’t understand, what are you saying? Keep my mother’s name out of this.”

“I loved her. David loved her. The three of us were in a relationship together.” She places her hand over the papers on the table. “These are letters confirming the truth. I hid them after she died because I didn’t want to believe what we had was real anymore. It was too painful to deal with. We both loved her, Eaton, and we were planning on selling the casino, leaving Vegas, and taking you and Shelby with us.”

I shut my eyes, trying to block out what I’m hearing.

It can’t be true.

David Jones killed my mother.

Storming forward, I pick up one of the letters and start to read the declarations of love between the Jones’ and my

mother and their plans to run away. Anger gets the better of me, and I tear the first letter into little pieces.

“If he was so in love with my mother, why did he kill her?” I shout, slamming my fist into the table.

“I don’t have proof, but I know David didn’t murder Eliza. He couldn’t. He loved her. It was someone else. Someone you’ve known all your life. The person who molded you into the man you are right now.”

I shut my eyes and think back to the night my mother died. The muffled words between my mother and Shelby’s father. The sound of the gun going off. I begin to recall that night with greater clarity.

“David, I’m scared.” My mother’s whispered voice floods my head.

“I know. We need to leave tonight. Now.” David grabs my mother’s hand. “We’ll be all right.”

“But he knows about us. He’s not going to let me go. I’m his possession. I always will be.”

“We’ll go before he realizes what’s happened, and I’ll hide us. The casino is in my name. He can’t touch any of the money from that. I’ll sell it to provide for us. Come...” David leans forward and presses a kiss to my mother’s lips. “Let’s go. We’ll get Eaton together, and I’ll message Juana to bring Shelby.

Bang.

The explosion of a gun goes off, and my mother falls to the ground. The hole in her forehead leaves me with no doubt she’s gone.

“No!” David shouts and bends down over her.

Another shot, and David falls next to her. His body twitches for a few seconds before it goes still. He too is dead.

My recollections of that night have finally come into focus. I'm at the window of my childhood bedroom again, watching everything. Hearing everything. Smelling the scent of gun residue and death, but it's who I see next that finally uncovers the buried memories I've been suppressing.

My father, gun in hand, walks out into the open. The look on his face is pure evil. I've never seen that expression on him before. It's like the devil has risen up and is walking this earth.

"My father killed them. He knew about the three of you, and he shot them." I slump down into the chair, rubbing at my temples as I try to dispel the horrendous memories that have just hit me. "It's not true. It can't be."

"I never realized you saw what happened," Juana says as she reaches out and grabs my hand. Part of me wants to shrug off her comforting touch, but the part of me that just lost my mother all over again appreciates her compassion. "Eaton, I'm so sorry. If only I'd known. At least they were together at the end." Her voice breaks, and I entwine our fingers in a gesture of support for both of us. "I didn't know what happened. My husband was delivered back to our house a week later, his body decapitated, quartered, and castrated. It broke me. Your father told me it was David's punishment for killing your mother. I knew it wasn't true. It couldn't be, and your father knew I wouldn't rest until I proved it. He held a gun to my head, and I knew I was next. I was going to die, but then Shelby cried. She'd woken from a nightmare. She saved my life with that cry. A needle was shoved into my neck, and I was injected with heroin. Your father did it. We were stolen away that night, and the next few years became a blur. I

remember trying to get off the drugs but every time I tried, your father was there, sticking the needle back in my neck.” She gasps. “Oh God, he’s going to come for me again.” Pulling away from me, she gets up and starts pacing the room. “We couldn’t save you. You’ve become him. You’re going to drug me and put me back in that trailer. You’re going to do it, aren’t you? Oh God, Shelby, I’m so sorry.”

“No, no, not at all,” I try to reassure her.

Juana is terrified of me. She’s shaking and as pale as the crisp, white sheets that cover my bed at home. I try to reach out to her, but she curls herself into a ball in the corner of the room.

“Max.” I call, and he rushes in at the sound of my anguished voice.

“Eaton,” he responds.

I stand there staring at him for a minute. My head is racing with everything I’ve just heard and recalled. The truths I’ve believed all my life are lies. My father was behind everything. He killed my mother, Shelby’s father, and put Shelby and her mother in a place where he could keep them down until Shelby was old enough to be useful.

“Eaton, are you all right?” Max questions, his face awash with concern, and I realize I’m shaking.

Forming a fist, I send it flying into the nearest wall. Juana screams, and Max, not knowing what to do, tries to get near her to help her.

“My father killed her.” I finally manage to get some words out.

“Killed who?” Max scoops Shelby’s mother into his arms and lays her down on the bed. Then pressing an alarm on the

wall, he alerts the medical staff in the center.

“My mother. He was the one who killed her, not Shelby’s father. I remember. I saw it all.” I turn to face Max, and he stares at me, his mouth open in shock.

“Why, Eaton?”

Several members of the medical team run into the room before I can answer Max’s question.

We step back, and I stand in stunned silence as they calm Juana down.

“No drugs,” I shout at them. “Natural remedies only.”

They don’t argue.

“Are you all right?” Max places his hand on my shoulder.

“It was my father all along. He’s been controlling everything.”

“Eaton.” Juana’s voice comes from the bed. She’s shaking and still pale, but it seems she’s no longer scared I’m there to hurt her. “Does he know you’re here?”

“Are you asking about my father?” My brain is foggy with everything I’m trying to process. I look down to where I have a tracker chip in my hand. “Yes, he does.”

She lets out a scream. “Shelby, where is she?”

“At my mansion.”

Juana shakes her head.

“Go, go now. Get to her, Eaton. Your father needs Shelby for the child she can give him. He knows that’s the only way he can get his hands on the money, but he doesn’t need you to make that happen. The will never stated that you and Shelby had to wed. David would never have done that to his daughter.

He would never have prescribed who she should marry. He believed in soulmates. David made the biggest mistake of his life when he wrote that will. It states that the first person to marry her and have a child with her gets control of the money. He never realized the danger it would put Shelby in. It doesn't have to be you that marries Shelby, and your father knows it. You've got to save her, Eaton. Save her from the man who's caused so much heartache already."

I don't need to hear another word. I'm running through the hospital back to the car. My phone is in hand, and I'm dialing the house.

No answer.

Max is at my side as we jump into the car. I drive while Max calls Lena.

No answer.

Please, don't let us be too late.

SHELBY

“*H*ow is the study going?” Lena stands at the door to Eaton’s office where I’m sitting at his desk, working through the first module of my course.

“It’s going well. I’m having to research some things, but it’s mainly related to anatomy, and I’ve learned some of it before. Did you know that when a frog is eating, his eyeballs move to the inside of his mouth when he swallows, so the food is pushed down by them.” I look up from my book just in time to see the look of disgust on Lena’s face.

“I’m not sure I needed to know that...” She hangs on her words looking at me.

“What is it?” I question.

“The whole zoo thing with Eaton. The day out.” She takes a step forward so she’s standing more central in the doorway.

“Yeah?” I put my pencil down and rest my head on my hand.

“That’s not normal for Eaton. You know that, right? Eaton doesn’t do things like that. He likes routine, and he’s always working. He really doesn’t take days off to go to the zoo, wearing shorts and a t-shirt. He’s changed. He’s growing, and it’s because of you.”

“I know. I see it as well. I think we’re both growing because of each other. It’s hard to explain. The situation we’re in, it’s intense. There’s a lot riding on our relationship, and I think we’ve both been fighting it since the moment I first arrived here. We’ve only just started to realize we don’t hate each other and there’s something more between us.” I look down at the ring that was once his mother’s. It’s been resized to fit me.

“You’ve fallen in love with him?” Lena questions.

I nod. “Yes, I have. I don’t think he’ll ever say it to me in return. There will always be something holding him back because of what happened to his mother. I wish Eaton could allow himself to love freely, but we both know he’s stubborn. He won’t let go of the past.”

“Can you ever truly commit to him, knowing he will never tell you he loves you?”

“It’s a word I will always long to hear from him, but he shows me how he feels in other ways. I couldn’t walk away from him now, even if I wanted to. He told me that once he’d tasted me, I consumed him. It’s true the other way around as well. He’s inside me, physically and mentally. And I’m beginning to suspect there’s a part of him inside me in another way as well. Lena, there’s something I need to tell you.”

She lifts the mug of coffee in her hand to her mouth, but before it reaches her lips, it falls from her hands to the floor.

“Lena!”

I’m up on my feet but freeze to the spot when I notice the blood seeping through the front of the t-shirt she’s wearing. She grabs her stomach, trying to speak. Her mouth gulps like a goldfish out of water as she falls to the floor.

Behind her stands Eaton's father, gun in hand.

"I can't think of a better woman to shoot. Moaning about her father raping her since she was a child. She should have just accepted it. Her life could have been so much worse. If I'd had my way, I would have sold her to the highest bidder, one of those with the weird sexual fetishes. She'd have known real degradation then. He steps over her to enter the room. Several other men are behind him. One of them grabs hold of Lena's legs and drags her out of my sight.

"Hello, Shelby." Eaton's father looks down at the book I've been studying. Derision crosses his face as he picks it up and throws it against the wall. "Eaton was always soft. He has too much of his whore of a mother in him. She was my biggest mistake. I should have married someone who could give me strong, loyal children and more than one. She was a weak woman in body and in mind. At least she died young, so I didn't have to put up with her for too long. She made the mistake of having an affair with your father and mother, so I had to put a bullet in her head. She should have known better than to fuck with me."

My hand comes to my mouth at his confession. It wasn't my father who killed Eliza Armstrong, it was Eaton's. Her husband.

I start walking backward, trying to get away from him, but my body hits into a wall.

"I gave Eaton a chance. You must admit that. I hoped he would prove me wrong, but of course he didn't. I presented him with a woman, you, on a plate. All he needed to do was marry you, fuck you, and impregnate you, but no, he couldn't even do that. It doesn't surprise me, really. His mother made him soft. What happens now is all her fault. I'm going to enjoy

raising my child to be the monster I am. I'll make sure there's no weak-willed mother to install a soft heart into my son and heir this time. *Our* child will be everything I need him to be. He will rule this city and destroy anyone who gets in our way.

"O-Our child?" I stutter as Eaton's father closes in on me. He wraps his hand around my neck and squeezes.

"Your father and mother betrayed me. Eaton's beloved mother betrayed me. The three of them planned to run away with you and Eaton, but I got to them first and have been looking forward to this moment ever since. I don't need my son to get my revenge. I will marry you. I will abuse you, and I will cut my child from your womb as soon as I can. Your last memory will be seeing me triumphant, holding our baby, before I shoot you directly in the center of your pretty little forehead."

He lets out a loud laugh, and it almost has me vomiting in fear because it sounds so dark and evil. My survival instincts kick in, and I try to knee him in the groin but miss. Despite his age, he's stronger than me, and I'm slapped hard across the face, not once but twice. Loud sounds ring in my head, and pain explodes from my left eye as my legs go weak.

"Stupid bitch." He forms a fist and sends it flying directly into my face.

The pain is unbearable. The metallic taste of blood fills my mouth. My eyes roll back, and I feel my consciousness drifting away from me. I fight it. I fight to stay alert.

"I'm going to enjoy this so much," he says with a smirk. "I'm going to rip your pussy apart. I'm going to make the last few months of your life even more hellish than the first eighteen years, and there's nothing you can do about it, because you're mine."

The last word out of his mouth is my undoing. It's Eaton's word for me, not his.

The corners of my world close in, and darkness claims me.

EATON

I've never driven so fast in my life, and as we race up the driveway to my house, I see my father's car already parked in the driveway.

"Shit, Max, he's already here." During the journey, Max called in reinforcements, but they aren't here yet. I pull my gun out of its holster, silence it, and cock it. "He doesn't leave with Shelby."

"Eaton, don't let what you've discovered about him cloud your judgment."

"He killed my mother," I spit out. "I won't let him take Shelby."

Max nods. "I agree, but keep your mind focused. You're at your most lethal when you do."

"Don't worry. I've never been more focused." It's a lie. My mind is all over the place, but I won't let my father have Shelby.

With stealth, we make our way into the house. Everything seems quiet until we near the bedrooms. One of my father's men stands over Lena, his gun pointing at her head. Before I have a chance to react, he looks up at us and Max shoots him

dead. A bullet to the forehead. Max goes straight to Lena. Blood covers the white t-shirt she's wearing.

"Lena." Max checks for a pulse when he gets to her side. "She's alive." He looks under her t-shirt at the wound. "It looks more superficial than life threatening, an inch either side, though, and it would've been a different story."

Relief floods through me. I know how much she means to him.

"Get her out of here. She needs help."

"Eaton," he turns his head to look at me, "you can't do this alone."

"You love her. Make sure she's safe."

Max opens his mouth to protest, but I understand the feelings flooding through him right now. Lena's safety is his priority.

"Thank you. I'll be back as soon as I can." Max scoops Lena into his arms and makes his way back toward the front entrance.

I head deeper into the house, knowing Shelby was planning to work on her studies in my office today. As I approach the office, my father steps out. There's a man at his side carrying an unconscious Shelby. Her left eye is swollen, and there's blood on her lips.

I point my gun at my father.

"Put her down."

My father laughs.

"Finally grown a pair of balls, son. What did it take for that to happen?"

“The truth. I witnessed everything that happened that night. It just took me a while to remember,” I spit out. My father doesn’t seem shocked by this revelation. “You killed my mother.”

“I killed a whore!” he shouts back at me, his face red with anger. “And now I’ll finally get back what’s mine.”

The floorboards creak as four of my father’s men appear from behind me, guns cocked. Two more men exit the office.

“Get out of my way,” my father orders.

I stand defiantly.

“Move!” he shouts again before pulling his own gun from his pocket and putting it against Shelby’s forehead. “I remember the hole I put in your mother’s head. I could always do the same to Shelby.”

“You need her alive to get the money. You’re bluffing.”

I know he won’t shoot her. She’s worth more to him alive than dead.

“Are you willing to test that theory, Eaton. You’ve seen what a cold-blooded killer I can be. Your mother was an inconvenience I had to endure. She was weak and feeble. She couldn’t even give birth without messing it up. I’m done with people fucking me around. I’m the power in Vegas. I always have been, and nothing can change that now. Move out of my way, Eaton. You’ve had your chance.”

He pushes the gun harder into Shelby’s forehead, and her eyelids flutter open. As she regains consciousness, she starts to look around, and her eyes widen when she sees what’s happening. She screams, and my father pushes the barrel of the gun into her mouth to silence her.

I've run out of options.

I can't do this alone.

Max was right.

I drop my gun to the floor.

I just have to hope that outside my house there's an army ready and waiting to save Shelby.

The first punch lands on my back before I have a chance to register it's coming. More blows follow from the men behind me, and then the two bodyguards in front of me join in. I try my hardest to fight back, but it's impossible with six onto one.

Before I know it, I'm on the floor, and pain explodes throughout my body. I can see Shelby trying to free herself from the arms of the man holding her, but he's too strong. Her eyes are filled with tears.

My father removes the gun from her mouth, and having stepped over me, he walks away, dragging Shelby behind him. I try to get up and chase after them, but I'm met by a barrage of kicks and punches to my body and legs, and I hear the crack of ribs breaking.

Get up.

Get up.

I try to will myself to stand, but my body is failing me.

My father's leaving with the woman I love.

Love!

I love Shelby Jones.

“Goodbye, Eaton.” My father turns back to look at me. “Thank you for being the biggest disappointment of my life. I'm going to enjoy breaking Shelby.”

Reaching my hand out toward Shelby, I try to get up, but I can't as more kicks incapacitate me. Shelby disappears from view, and I know I've failed to keep her safe like I promised.

“Kill him,” my father orders. “Send his head to my rivals. No one will ever dare mess with me again.”

SHELBY

I can't get Mr. Armstrong's last words to his men out of my head—kill him and decapitate him.

I shut down completely. Without Eaton, there is no life.

I'm carried out of the house, thrown into the back of a car, and Eaton's father gets in beside me. Orders are barked out, and we speed down the drive and out into the desert. I don't know where I'm being taken. My face is swelling by the minute, and the ringing still sounds out in my head. Everything feels blurred, like I'm in a dream that's playing out in slow motion. No, not a dream, a nightmare, the most frightening one of my life.

Eventually the car slams to a halt, and I'm dragged out of the car. My feet rake across the sandy ground as two men, one on either side of me, carry me under my arms. Richard Armstrong walks like a king at the head of our procession. I'm like a lamb to the slaughter.

We enter the building in front of us. It's a square box with no distinct features except for the cross on the door. A chapel. He means for us to marry straight away.

He wasn't joking when he said I was to be his.

His meaning of the word mine is very different from Eaton's, though.

I'll only ever belong to Eaton.

But he's dead.

A priest is standing at the front of the chapel when we enter. Eaton's father throws some paperwork at him and says, "I think you'll find everything's in order."

One of the guards appears at the side of the priest and points a gun at him.

"Marry us now," Mr. Armstrong orders.

I'm held up in front of the priest as he recites the marriage vows. I shake my head the entire time to show I don't consent to this marriage. I don't repeat the vows, but it doesn't matter, he continues with the ceremony regardless. Once the vows are completed, a certificate is put in front of me to sign. I refuse and am punished with another punch to the face. A wound opens on my face, and blood trickles down my cheek and neck. It stains the white t-shirt I'm wearing.

The pain is nothing, though.

I'm numb.

Eaton is dead.

I'll be joining him soon.

But first, I need to save the baby I'm carrying.

My name is signed with an 'x'.

"She probably can't write anyway." Eaton's father drops the pen he's just used to sign for me.

Part of me sparks into life when the priest announces we're husband and wife. I struggle, trying to get away, but I'm held

firm.

Mr. Armstrong appears in front of me.

“I’m going to enjoy fucking you, ripping apart your tight little pussy. You better get pregnant quickly, otherwise I’m going to have to spend every day with my dick buried deep inside you until you do.”

“That’s if you can still get it up,” I spit into his face.

I’m done being polite and scared of this man. He may take my body, but he won’t own my mind. He wants to dominate me and frighten me into submission, but I won’t let that happen. I owe that much to Eaton.

I’m pulled flush against Mr. Armstrong’s body. His erection juts into my thigh.

“Oh, I can still get it up, Shelby. Don’t worry about that.” My top is ripped open, exposing my bra to him. “Such pretty breasts, perfectly curved.” He gropes one over my bra. “But this is what I really want.” He cups my sex over the shorts I’m wearing.

“Strip her,” Mr. Armstrong orders his men as he starts to undress himself. “I want lots of witnesses to the consummation of our marriage.”

“You can’t do this in here, Mr. Armstrong. It’s a house of God,” the priest protests, but it falls on deaf ears.

“And as a man of God, you can’t lie about what you’re going to see. Me, fucking my new wife. Get on your knees and pray I have another son.”

A gun is pushed against the priest’s forehead.

“Please, Mr. Armstrong. You can’t do this here. I’m begging you.”

The gun goes off, and I start screaming until a hand is slapped over my mouth to silence me.

The priest has been shot in the foot, and he collapses to the ground, groaning in pain.

“You should have thought about the consequences before you accepted my generous donation to your church. You knew exactly what sort of man I am,” Mr. Armstrong growls at the priest as he removes his shirt and tie.

I want this nightmare to end.

Shoot me.

Please.

I want to go back to Pharr, to my little trailer. To a time where I thought the world was hell because I had nothing. I have everything I want now, and it's all being ripped away from me, piece by piece. Pharr is like heaven compared to this.

Who will look after Betty?

Lena's dead.

Eaton's dead.

Oh God, poor Max.

My friends.

My family.

The only people I've ever truly had.

Since the day my father died, my life has been controlled by the man who's currently removing his pants in front of me.

He's about to rape me.

He's going to destroy the last part of me, and there is nothing I can do to stop him.

EATON

“*P*ull him up onto his knees,” one of the men holding me orders.

I’m trying to focus on the words and ignore the intense pain radiating through my body. My breaths are shallow because every time I inhale, sharp shooting tendrils of agony invade me from my broken ribs. I’m positioned like a rag doll onto my knees.

“I’ve grabbed an axe from the car.” Another man speaks this time. “We can hack his head off with it. Make it even more painful for him.”

I need to save Shelby.

Damn body. Stop failing me.

With all the strength I have left, I push up onto my feet and smash the back of my head into the face of the man holding me. He groans as I hear his nose crack. And letting go of me, he stumbles back. My own legs give way again, and I fall back down to the floor. The man with the axe takes a swing at me, but I manage to angle my body so it passes just above me.

“Stop delaying the inevitable,” he tells me while readying himself to swing the axe again.

He doesn't get a chance, though, as gun shots ring out around me, and all the men lining up to attack me fall to the ground, dead.

"I think the inevitable's been delayed forever, you fucker," Max announces as he shoots the man holding the axe in the center of his forehead.

I shift my position on the floor until I'm leaning against the wall, and I try to catch my breath.

"Where's Lena?" I question Max.

"I'm here. Stubborn as you are. I'm not dying yet. A scratch isn't going to keep me down." She appears from around the corner, and leaning down, she checks the bodies around me. "All dead."

Max helps me up from the floor. "Let's get you to the hospital."

"No," I protest, even though my body is praying for attention. "We need to get to Shelby. My father's going to marry her and then rape her. I can't allow that to happen. I love her. Locate her tracker."

Max releases me, and leaning heavily against the wall again, I push down the pain. Fighting my instincts as the urgency to find Shelby takes priority. Adrenaline subdues the pain, and I push off the wall to stand without any support.

"She's at the chapel down the road."

"Let's go," I order.

Max passes me my gun and removes the silencer as we make our way through the house and out into the heat and sunshine of the desert.

I stop dead when I get outside.

“What the fuck?”

I can't believe what I'm seeing. There are groups of men and women everywhere—associates as well as rival casino owners and gang members. From out of the crowd, Diego steps forward.

“I think this is sending you the message you need, Eaton.” He waves his hands at all the assembled people. “We've had enough of your father and his dictatorship. David Jones was a good man. He's been vilified for long enough. We're her to support you and his daughter, but only if you are ready to end your father's reign for good.”

I throw my head back in a bellowing laugh. Everyone gives me a look as if I've gone insane. Maybe I have. The pain is pretty unbearable.

“My father has taken Shelby to the local chapel, and he plans to force her to marry him. I'm going there now to stop him. I'm going to end my father for good, and I'm going to make sure everyone knows I'm in charge now. His reign is over.”

Diego nods his agreement.

We all make our way to the cars that have been assembled, ready and waiting, and travel in silence to the chapel. I gather my thoughts on the journey. My anger overwhelmed me when I realized my father had killed my mother, but now he's taken the woman I love. This time I'm focused, cold, and calculating. I'm the man my father made me with years of training, violence, and neglect. He made a mistake telling me that Shelby was mine. Because I always protect what is mine!

When we arrive at the chapel, I bark out my orders. “Diego, you and your men deal with my father's guards. Max,

Lena, you're with me. Lena, once we're inside, you go for Shelby and protect her. We don't know what state she'll be in. My father had been using her as a punching bag when I last saw her. I alone will deliver the death blow to my father."

Diego and his men advance on the front of the chapel while Max, Lena, and I head to the side entrance. A few of my most loyal men follow behind us. Taking a couple of guards out, we make it easily into the chapel, and Max disappears into the shadows. I don't need to tell him how this will play out. He and I have worked together for a long now. We've been trained as lethal weapons. We've killed a lot of men, but this time, the motivation is the strongest it's ever been.

Shelby is standing next to my father with his gun pointed at her head. She's half naked, bruised, battered, and terrified.

"Eaton," she screams when she sees me. The relief in her voice is palpable. She thought I was dead. I can't imagine what that felt like for her.

I push forward. Lena flanking me on my left, still wearing her t-shirt covered in blood. My own shirt is splattered as well.

"This will only end one way. The entire underworld of Vegas is outside. They've turned against you. We're all done with your lies. Let Shelby go and surrender."

"A few idiots don't make an army, Eaton. When this is all over, I'll remind them of their place in society. I'm still in control here. As long I possess the queen on this chessboard, I will be victorious," my father taunts back.

His face is inches from Shelby's, and he licks the length of her cheek. She shuts her eyes to block him out.

A few more gunshots sound out in the church, and two of my father's men fall to the floor. The priest screams and starts

to recite the Lord's Prayer. He's sitting on the floor by a pew, blood seeping from a wound to his foot.

"Make sure the priest is all right as soon as you can," I instruct one of my men who is standing to my right. I turn my attention to the guards protecting my father. "If any of you want to save your lives, then lay down your weapons and walk away now. You can leave by the door over there." I point to where I came in. "Don't try to be heroes. You all know as well as I do that you won't see Max before he shoots you dead."

Several of the men look at each other, fear etched on their faces. They are family men. They don't want to die. Laying down their arms, they make their way to the exit. Max uses the distraction to take out a couple more of my father's men who refuse to surrender, leaving only two guards protecting him.

"Last chance," I offer.

"Shoot him. Take a shot," my father orders, but the men aren't stupid. They know they are horribly outnumbered. They place their guns down and join the others leaving the chapel.

My father is alone at the front of the church with Shelby as his only bargaining chip now. I don't know where Max is, but he's somewhere in the chapel. Lena peels off to my left, her gun trained on my father. The man on my right does the same until he reaches the priest. He checks him over, all the while watching my father retreat farther and farther away until he reaches the altar itself. The cross standing on it falls to the ground with a thunderous crash.

"An omen." I smirk as a gunshot sounds.

Max hits my father in the shoulder, on the side he's holding the gun. He can no longer grip the weapon, which means it's my turn to pounce. I'm on him in an instant.

My punches rain down on his face, and I hear his nose crack. I allow years of repressed anger to flow from my body in revenge. This isn't how he's going to die, though. No. Not yet. Standing up, I turn to check on Shelby as Max continues to point his gun at my father, making sure he doesn't try to move.

"You all right, Shelby?" I question as Lena holds her in her arms.

"I thought you were dead," Shelby cries. "He told me I was his."

"You were never his. You've always been mine." I bring Shelby into my arms. "Lena, he shot you. You get to fire the first bullet."

"Second," she counters. "I think Max has already got his bullet in as revenge for shooting me."

"Shame I couldn't get it in his groin," Max growls. He's furious with my father for hurting the woman he loves.

Lena steps toward my father. "You've always treated me as a punching bag, an inferior woman. You're no different from the man I was unfortunate enough to call my father. And now you're about to end up in the same place as him. Rotting with the worms."

My father pleads for his life, but it falls on deaf ears. Lena shoots him in the leg, and he screams in pain. Then she stands to the left of my father, mirroring Max's position on the right.

I nod to the guy attending to the priest. "You should probably take him outside for this one." I step forward.

"Wait." Shelby taps me on the shoulder. "It's my turn. I need to do something for my father and mother. Avenge what he did to them."

“Are you sure?” I check. “Shooting someone isn’t easy.”

She nods vehemently.

“I have to. I need to be able to move on from the childhood I suffered because of his actions.”

I hand Shelby my gun, quickly showing her how it works as my father tries to pull himself away from us.

“If I shoot him in the heart, will he die?”

I shake my head. “Not instantly. A head shot is the only way to do that. Mind you, if you do aim for his chest, it won’t do a lot of damage, given he doesn’t have a heart.”

“Not like you.” Shelby places her free hand over my heart.

I lean forward and kiss her before she turns and aims the gun at my father. Standing back, I give her this moment. She needs the closure.

“I hope you burn in hell,” she spits out as she fires the gun, and the bullet rips through my father’s chest.

I know he doesn’t have long left now, so I take the gun from her, and she stands at my side as I point it at my father’s head.

“I feel sorry for you. Power corrupted you, and you lost everything that was good about you—my mother, your friends, and now you’ve lost me. Go to hell, Father.” I pull the trigger and the bullet lodges in my father’s brain. It kills him instantly.

No last words, nothing. Just his death. Finally it’s all over.

Diego and his men storm in, but he lowers his weapon when he sees my father’s corpse.

“Take it,” I order, pointing at the body. “Show everyone my father’s reign is at an end. Shelby and I are in charge now.”

He nods in agreement, and we all watch as my father is unceremoniously dragged from the church. I know his body will be desecrated, stripped naked, and urinated on—every degrading act under the sun will be exacted on his corpse, but I don't care. He deserves it. I never want to see him again. I won't bury him. He can rot in the desert for the vultures to pick over.

The fight over, I go to put my gun back in its holster. Shelby grabs it, though, and points it straight at the priest.

“Woah, what are you doing?” I protest, holding my hands out in front of me and not making any fast movements.

“Marry us.” She waves the gun at the priest. “I was never married to his father. I didn't consent.” She looks at me for reassurance.

“Do it,” I order.

Max grabs the priest, and pulling him up onto his feet, he tells him, “Unless you want to be shot in the other foot, I suggest you do as they ask.”

“I don't have the paperwork,” the priest protests.

“I'll sort that out later,” I inform him. “Shelby wants me as her husband now. And you are going to give her that.”

The priest no longer protests. Shelby and I stand, side by side, at the front of the chapel as our vows are read. When it comes to signing the marriage records, the page registering her forced marriage to my father is destroyed, and in place of a cross, she signs her name with a flourish. Her father's name is written proudly in the space provided, but the place where my father's name should be contains my mother's. This isn't a traditional wedding, and I know we'll probably have to re-do it later. This is more symbolic than anything else right now.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the priest announces, and everyone gathered in the chapel cheers. I lean forward and kiss Shelby.

“I love you, Mrs. Armstrong-Jones. You’re mine forever.”

“Yours.” She kisses me back. “Mr. Armstrong-Jones.”

“We’re joined together forever,” I tell her. “This is a new beginning for both of us.” A spasm of pain shoots through me. “Sadly I think we’re going to have to wait to consummate this marriage. I think I might need to listen to Max for once and get some medical treatment. I’m sure I’ve got at least one broken rib.”

Shelby chuckles. “That’s all right. I’ll let you off this once. Besides, it’s not as though you need to get me pregnant in a hurry.”

I look at her confused.

“I’m late.” She moves her hand to her abdomen. “I think I’m already carrying our child.”

SHELBY

A YEAR LATER.

“*I* can’t believe we created them, Eaton. Out of so much evil has come so much good.” I’m standing beside the crib of our daughter, Eliza.

Eaton sits on a chair giving David, her twin brother and our first born, a bottle. The babies are three months old now and named after my father and Eaton’s mother. They’re everything to us, and we both spend as much time with them as possible.

Growing up, their lives will be very different from the ones we experienced. They’ll be encouraged to stay on the right side of the law as much as possible. They won’t suffer poverty or hunger, and they won’t need to search for their next meal like I did. They’ll be loved and adored. It’s just a shame they only have the one grandparent.

“Here’s Eliza’s milk.” My mother hands me a warmed bottle, but I give it back to her. “It’s all right, Mom, you feed her.”

“You sure?” she questions.

I nod.

She’s been clean for over a year now and has her own annex in Eaton’s and my home where she lives. It was hard for her to come back to Vegas at first, but I know when the graves of my father and Eaton’s mother were moved together, she spent a long time there, chatting to them.

She’s apologized for not being there for me when I was growing up. I finally feel like I have a mother. And I’m happy

that through the twins we'll get to experience together the things I missed out on as a child.

I move to sit beside Eaton as our son finishes his bottle and falls asleep in my husband's arms.

"I love you," I tell him.

"I love you as well."

These are words I never thought I would hear, but they're ones he says to me often. They'll never grow old. Even though he can still be a controlling, grumpy bastard, I wouldn't want him any other way.

Lena pops her head around the door. "Can I come in?" she asks.

"Have you showered? I don't want any of those parasite things near the babies," Eaton questions, his brows furrowed.

"Of course, I have." She rolls her eyes at him before taking David out of his arms and cradling him.

I can just see the first signs of a bump as the baby she's growing for her and Max reaches it's fourth month. I know it won't be long until both men stop her working with the animals at the veterinary center that Eaton bought me in Vegas. I was made to stop at five months, but since the children have been born, I've been back there a few times.

As soon as the twins are old enough, I'll get them involved with the center, and once I've finished my degree, I'll be able to take on a more active role. I will always be there for my family, but I'm also achieving my dream. All of which started with Betty.

My best friend from Pharr is happily settled inside the house with her own family. She didn't last long in the caged

area in the garden. You would never know she was once a feral cat, and she's been spayed now, so if she ever wanders again, she won't come back with any more surprises.

"How is Kenny?" I ask Lena.

He's a dog that was brought into the center last week with a nasty snake bite. It was touch and go whether he would survive for a while.

"He got sent home today. His owners were so happy. They were crying. It was lovely to see." Lena smiles, taking a seat on the rocking chair with David still in her arms.

I watch as my mom sits Eliza up to burp her. With no children to cuddle, I lean back into Eaton's arms, and he pulls me close.

"How was the casino today?" I ask.

"Good. We did have to send a little message. I found someone stealing chips. They won't be doing it again." He presses a kiss to my forehead.

"I know you'll always have to do that. I'm just glad you finally shut down the sex trafficking and the drugs side of the business and are trying to help Diego legitimize his interests."

I know that Eaton and Max have spent a long time disbanding the more illegal and disreputable side of the Armstrong empire. It doesn't mean their rivals haven't tried to take over, but with the help of Diego and some of the other powerful names in Vegas, none of them have been successful. We both know it won't stay that way forever, but until it becomes unmanageable, we intend to enjoy our lives.

"Hey." Max enters the room and dumps his travel bag on the floor.

He makes his way over to Lena, who's still in the rocking chair with David asleep in her arms, and bending down, he kisses her on the lips and gently pats her stomach.

Max has been in Europe for a few weeks and has only just flown back.

“We got her,” he tells Eaton, and I know he's talking about one of the women my husband's father trafficked. “She's getting the help she needs.”

With some of the inheritance I got from my father, we set up a home to help women who had been trafficked by Eaton's father. We've spent millions trying to locate them and help them. There are still more to find, and we're determined to do all we can to help as many as we can.

I know my father would be proud of us for using the money for such a good cause. He was going to help Eaton's mother escape her own persecution, but sadly he never got the chance. Eaton and I have succeeded where my father, due to his cruel and untimely death, failed.

We will always fight for those less fortunate than us. It's who we are, and who we will always be.

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Anna Edwards is a *USA Today* Bestselling British author from the depths of the rural countryside near London. When she has some spare time, she can also be found writing poetry, baking cakes (and eating them), or behind a camera snapping like a mad paparazzo. She's an avid reader who turned to writing to combat her depression and anxiety. She has a love of traveling and likes to bring this to her stories to give them the air of reality. She likes her heroes hot and hunky with a dirty mouth, her heroines demure but with spunk, and her books full of dramatic suspense.

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CHAPTER ONE - VICTORIA

I swear I must have read the same page in this high society gossip magazine at least five times. You know the sort: who's marrying who, which couples are divorcing, and who's running around Chelsea in nothing but their bra and knickers. It's boring!

But then again, it's more interesting than the life I have. The highlight of my day would be if the cook changed the strictly ordered meal plan that I've eaten every week, without fail, since I turned sixteen. Five years of the same food is enough to send anyone crazy. But I shouldn't complain. My father, Arthur Cortland Hamilton,

Viscount Mayfield, is a wealthy man, and I lead a life of privilege. I've never wanted for anything: clothes, makeup, books, they've all been produced within hours of asking. My days are often spent lounging around by the indoor pool after swimming a hundred lengths, as I am now, but I want something more. I didn't go to regular school like normal people — I was educated at home by a governess. My brother, Theodore, Theo for short, went to a local private school. He would always come home with tales of the friends he'd made and the games that he'd played. My games would consist of reciting my times tables, so I didn't fall asleep from the monotony of the day. I once asked my mother why I wasn't allowed to go to school,

and all she would say was 'to protect your reputation'. I have no doubt my gravestone will read, 'Here lies, the honorable Victoria Hamilton. She died from boredom, but at least, her reputation was intact.'

I give up on the magazine and place it down on the ornately carved sixteenth-century table. I take off the towel, which I'd wrapped around me after my swim. I'm dressed in only a small black bikini. It's the one I always try to choose because of the inlaid embroidery of a rose on it. It's my favorite flower.

"Miss Hamilton?" I turn my head toward the middle-aged butler when he addresses me. He bows.

"Yes."

"Miss Bennett is on the telephone for you." He hands me the phone, and I wave him away before squealing into the receiver.

"Tammy, how are you?"

She's excited about something. I can tell from the hyperventilating breaths coming from the other end of the phone.

"I did it. I've taken my last exam, and it feels so good. I'm sure I passed it. I answered nearly every question."

"I'm so happy for you. That's amazing news."

Tamara Bennett is my only friend. She's the same age as me. We grew up together. She made life tolerable in this mansion of no fun. Her mother, Elsie, is lady's maid

to my mother and me. She doesn't know who her father is. Her mother tells her it isn't important. We used to make up stories that he was a hero off fighting for his country, and one day, he would come back for her and Elsie. He never did though, and the truth, about him being a father who abandoned a pregnant woman, seems a lot less exciting. Still, I'm glad she came to live with me because it means I can live vicariously through her. She's been at Oxford University for the last three years, studying law. I've missed her so much.

"All I need to do is pack up all my stuff and I'll be coming back to London."

"When?" I try to temper down my excitement a little bit, but her giggle tells me she knows I'm practically climbing the walls without her here.

"I've got a few end-of-term parties first, so a couple of weeks."

"A couple of weeks," I say sadly.

"I know. It'll go quickly. You'll see."

"I wonder if Daddy would let me come up to see you at the parties? Theo could accompany me. That way, I wouldn't get into any of the trouble he thinks would befall me if I happened to leave the house."

"Victoria." Her answer is ominous. Not because she doesn't want me to come, but she knows my father would say 'no' immediately.

"I just wish for once he would trust me."

"He does trust you."

"He doesn't," I interrupt. "He thinks that if I see a man, who isn't a relative, all my morals will go down the drain, and I'll hump him like a wild dog."

"He's doesn't think that!"

"Then, why didn't he allow me to go to University to study the History of Art? I obtained a place at Oxford. You don't get higher than that. I also had a place at Goldsmiths, which is just down the road, so I'd still be able to live at home. Every time I asked, the answer was 'no'. If he'd trusted me, he'd have let me go."

"He just doesn't want to see any harm come to you. Some parties can get a little bit rowdy." Tammy's voice went quiet on the other end of the phone.

"You've been to them?" I ask.

"A few times."

"What happens, tell me?" My living by proxy is all done through my friend, and I'm not going to let her keep details from me.

"Ria." My nickname since we were toddlers. She struggled to say Victoria when she was younger, so it was just shortened to Ria, and it stuck.

"Please," I beg.

“Ok, there was this one party when I was in my second year. It was after the end of the final year exams. Some of my mates brought in some kegs of beer. They were paid for by one of the final years, he was a billionaire’s son. He had more money than sense. We spent most of the day drinking and ordering in pizza when we got hungry. By the evening, we were all pretty merry.”

“Drunk?” I interrupt, not knowing what that feels like. I’m allowed a glass of wine with my dinner and champagne at the functions Daddy throws. I’ve never been drunk.

“I was on my way to drunk. I wasn’t drunk. My inhibitions were lowered. There was this guy. We’d been working together on our final project for the term.”

“Did you have sex with him?” I know Tammy isn’t a virgin. She lost her cherry, when she was at school, to a guy she’d been dating for a year. She came home and told me all the details.

“Eventually. But first, we played Twister with another couple. Every time someone fell over, they had to remove an item of clothing. You know how clumsy I am. I was naked with my backside in the air in no time. One of the moves put him behind me. He got hard, so we stopped playing and fucked right there on the lounge floor. Most of the party were watching us, but we weren’t the only ones naked. Lots of couples were having sex around us.”

“Wow.” It’s all I can say. I mean I’ve read books about sex and looked at videos on the internet, when I’ve wanted to get myself off, but to be involved in a real-life orgy sounds amazing. Jesus, Tammy had such a good life. “What happened next?”

“Yeah. Next wasn’t good.” She goes quiet. “I found him having sex with some other girl later that evening.”

“The bastard.”

“It was an evening of free love. I went and found another partner.”

“I wish I could do it for once.”

“No, you don’t. Your saving yourself for your husband.”

“What husband!” I exclaim indignantly. “Don’t I actually have to be allowed to leave the house to find one?”

“Have you spoken to your father again about getting a job?”

“What’s the point?”

“You told me about the volunteering position at the art gallery. Maybe since you won’t be getting paid, he’ll let you?” she asks, hopefully.

“Oh that, I left the information on his desk. I went in the next day and found it in the bin. He wouldn’t even entertain it, money or not.” I stand up and walk around the pool to the French doors that open over our manicured gardens. We’re on the

outskirts of London so have a large plot compared to some, and I welcome it because it means I can escape and walk. I open them and take a breath of air.

“I’m sure he’ll allow something soon. Maybe when I move back, we can persuade him to allow you to come out with me more.”

“It won’t happen, there’s no point in asking. I’m stuck in this place. Probably until he chooses a husband for me, and then, I’ll be stuck doing what another man wants me to do.” I’m so down with my life at the moment, I just want to have a purpose.

“We’ll think of something,” Tammy offers. She knows how sad I get. “What about asking him if you can help him with his business affairs again? He was more than happy for you to help him arrange the functions when your mother was ill. Maybe you could take some of the running of the estates away from her. Talk to her.”

“That’s a good idea. She’s been busy with Theodore and his new business venture recently, and she still looks weak after the flu.” Her mother had caught flu the previous winter and had been bedridden for weeks. She had problems with her lungs anyway, from an iron deficiency at birth. It really hit her hard. She spent time in the hospital and took months to recover. “I’ll ask him when I next see him. Mother can concentrate on Theo, and I’ll run the estates. At least I’ll get to talk to people.”

“Great idea.” I can hear voices, in the background, on the other end of the phone. They’re calling my friend. “I’m going to have to go, Ria.”

“Going on another drinking fest?” I laugh, but she goes silent. “Have fun and be careful.”

“I’ll be home soon, and we’ll work on you being allowed out more. I promise. Go talk to your father about the estate.”

She hangs up, and I go back to staring out of the window. Our gardens are formal in style. A rose border dominates the vista from the pool. It’s June, and the beautiful pink and red petals of the climber’s contrast stunningly with the crisp white of the fragrant tea roses. The gardener appears from behind a hedge, and he sees me standing there. I go to ask him to cut a rose for me, but he puts his head down and hurries away back into the depths of the woodland area. Oops, I remember that I’m in a bikini. Awkward.

“Victoria,” my father calls me. I stroll back to the lounge and pick up my dressing gown. I’ve just finished wrapping it around me and tying the cord when he enters the room.

“Father.” I smile.

“I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

“You know I *always* swim at this time,” I offer with a hint of sarcasm, alluding to the fact that I don’t have anything else to do.

“We don’t have much time.” He seems flustered.

“Time for what?” I come over to his side and place my arm through the crook of his. For all my father’s overprotective faults, I do love him. I remember once, as a child, him building Theo and me this tent in his office and having afternoon tea with us in it. Theo, of course, being a lively boy wanted to use the shelter as a place to hide from the enemies who were chasing him. He didn’t really want to have a girly tea party, but my father insisted that it was my turn to choose the game, we sat with our pinkies out and pretended to drink tea.

“You have to get changed. We’re going out.”

“Out? Where?” I enquire with a great deal of excitement in my voice.

“It’s time,” he says and brushes me off, striding away through the house. I follow him as he heads toward my bedroom. Elsie’s waiting in the room for us when we walk in. She looks sad. There’s a definite air of tension in the room. Elsie steps aside and on the bed is a pure white linen dress. It’s plain in design except for a small crest on the breast. I don’t recognize it. Are those oak leaves? I try to think to whom it might belong but come up blank.

“Father, will you please tell me what’s going on? I’m worried.” I take his hand and squeeze it. He looks down at the floor.

“It’s time for you to enter society. Put the dress on. No make-up. No undergarments. Just the dress. Elsie knows how your hair should be. We leave within the hour.” I stand there in shock. Society? The door slams before I even realize he’s left. I get to go and meet people. This is it — I finally get the freedom I crave. Alright, it’ll be in probably the most unflattering dress I’ve ever seen, but at least it’s going out. I squeal inwardly with barely contained excitement. My wish is going to come true.

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CHAPTER ONE - AMY

Amy emerged from the water to the sight of the full moon glistening over the endless volcanic sand. The bright illumination shone on her honey-blonde hair, and she brushed her fingers through it to separate the wet strands. The day of travelling had left her tired, and the warm water eased her aching muscles that had been cramped by the budget flight. This was her first holiday in many years because aspiring writers didn't tend to have the money to travel. Nor dancers in a gentlemen's club, forced to work just to make ends meet. But it wasn't as bad a job as it sounded because she was well protected. Her uncle ran it and made sure she was sheltered from the seedier side of the profession. She enjoyed the dancing side, it was her second passion after writing. Her uncle, Stephen, paid for this holiday to Lanzarote as a twenty-first birthday present. Ever since her parents died in a car crash two years ago, he'd looked out for her. He was the only family she had left, and she respected him and trusted him implicitly.

She took a towel and wrapped it around her body, the aroma of the freshly caught fish being cooked in town was everywhere and made her mouth water in anticipation. She decided on a small tavern which was filled with more locals than tourists. She wasn't big on the mass-market tourism of the island and preferred places of culture and history, but as the holiday was a gift, she couldn't refuse it. She ordered the grilled catch of the day with salad and a glass of the local *La Geria* wine. As she watched the sun slowly set over the shimmering waves, the tension in her shoulders began to dissipate.

When she had finished her delicious meal, Amy ordered another glass of wine and pulled out a little notebook from her bag to begin writing down some of the details of the island so far. She liked to bring her personal experiences into her writing. She wanted to get everything noted down, in case she should need it for future stories.

She'd just finished a passage on the chaotic wait for her luggage at the airport when an uneasy tingling warmed her skin, as though she were being watched. Looking up, she met the alluring sky blue eyes of a man sitting across the room. Had he just arrived? Or how had she not noticed him previously? He too was sitting alone with a glass of wine for company. Upon making eye-contact, she couldn't help but blush. He was exquisitely handsome. He'd a rugged, yet, smart look; a defined jawline; and short dark hair, which he ran his fingers through as he watched her. The top few buttons of his blue linen shirt were undone and revealed a muscular upper body, which oozed a primal masculinity. His stare was intense, and she felt herself being drawn into it even more. When his lip twitched at her blatantly checking him out, she pushed the other chair at her table out with her gladiator-sandalled foot and looked up. She smiled at him with a cheeky grin, masking her excitement. For a moment, she thought he wasn't going to move, but then, he got to his feet. Even the

way he walked was sexy. She was glad she was sitting down as her legs felt like jelly at his presence. He took a seat and held his hand up to the waiter, who promptly took his order for a more expensive bottle of wine. Neither of them spoke at first. They continued to take each other in.

“James.” His voice was deep and inviting, and she was pleased to note he was speaking English.

“Amy.” Her voice was smooth and possibly a little bit too sexy when she spoke.

Silence.

“Well, if this isn’t awkward.” He ruffled his hands through his hair again. The bottle of wine arrived, and the waiter poured them each a glass.

“Shall we start again? I’m Amy. I’m twenty-one. I come from London, and this is my first holiday in a while. I’ve come away to finish writing my first novel.”

“I’m James. I’m twenty-eight. I also come from London, well Kent initially. I haven’t had a holiday myself for a while. I tend to be a workaholic.”

“What do you do?”

“I work in property. It’s all very boring, I’m sure you don’t want to hear about it. So, a novel? Is it all hush-hush, or can you tell me something about it?” He sat back in the chair, his left leg resting over his right, the wine glass tantalisingly resting at his full lips. Lips that she couldn’t tear her eyes away from. She wondered what they’d taste of, if she kissed him? He seemed happier to be asking questions than answering them, so she decided to respond to him to continue that line of conversation.

She chuckled and took a mouthful of her wine. “It’s a classic boy meets girl, boy loses the girl, boy wins the girl back forever.”

“Interesting. So this boy? What’s he like?”

“Tall, dark, and handsome.”

James nodded with genuine interest.

“And the girl?”

“Pretty, slim.”

“Blonde?”

“Blonde.”

“I like this story already.”

“Told you it was a classic.”

“Certainly is.” He raised his eyebrow as he spoke. “So, is the man proficient in the bedroom?”

“That’s a little presumptuous isn’t it?”

“Why?” He chuckled, as he refilled the glasses that they both seemed to have drunk rather quickly.

“They’ve only just met.”

He shrugged, “Why should they waste time, if there’s an attraction between them?”

James reached forward and took her hand. Their eyes met in an intense stare, as sparks of electricity flowed through them both. She wasn’t drunk, so it wasn’t that.

“Are you staying nearby?”

The question hung thickly in the air between them.

She’d had only one previous partner, and that was a boyfriend of four years. Strange as it seemed, she felt that she already knew James, even though they’d only set eyes on each other not fifteen minutes before. “Yes, the Rivera apartments.”

“Do you want me to walk you home?”

She didn’t doubt from the look on his face that this would turn to sex if he did. But something about him, something about the mystery of his tone prevented her from saying no. He had a presence about him that drew her under his spell.

“Yes.”

James pulled out his wallet and put forty euros on the table. The walk back was short, and they talked a little more. Just general facts, where they grew up, favourite foods, drinks, and a particularly funny story about an encounter that he’d had with a flock of seagulls in Brighton. She didn’t tell him she worked in a Gentleman’s Club.

When they entered her apartment, she was suddenly nervous. James took a seat on the cream sofa, and she went to look in the kitchen for a drink. She found two glasses and a semi-chilled bottle of wine and returned to the lounge. His big body was so commanding in the small lounge.

“Sorry, it isn’t more. I only arrived today.”

“It’s fine. I still haven’t bought any wine for my apartment, so you’re a step ahead of me.”

“How long have you been here?”

“A week now. I’ve just a few days left. How long are you here?”

“Only a week.”

“Not long to finish that novel then.”

“No. Not really. I’ll have to forgo sunbathing and do lots of writing.”

She put the bottle down on the table, because she needed a corkscrew to open it. “I won’t be a minute. Just have to figure out which drawer the corkscrew is in.” She turned back to walk into the kitchen but stopped as James called out ‘wait’. It was the way he said it—it sent shivers of anticipation down her spine. Slowly, she

turned and looked at him, her eyes wide. He'd risen from the sofa and was walking towards her.

"Take your dress off."

"I..."

"Take your dress off."

She had no answer. Her mind was telling her this was crazy, but her body was doing as he asked, completely disobeying the part that was telling her to tell him to fuck off. She reached down to the hem of her dress and pulled it over her head. She wasn't big breasted, so underneath the summer dress, she hadn't worn a bra. She stood in front of him in a pair of white lace panties. He walked around her, studying her, taking in every inch of her prickling flesh. She could feel the heat of his gaze marking her. She was never *naked* in front of the clients at the club, although she did wear revealing clothing, but that could not prepare her for what she was feeling right now. He leaned over her and took a deep breath, he was smelling her.

"You're beautiful." His tone was calm but had a stern undercurrent to it.

"I was supposed to be getting you wine."

He laughed. "I'm going to kiss you now. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I don't think I'd be standing in front of you in my panties if I didn't. Now, are you going to remove some of your clothing?"

"Eager. I like it. But we will do this my way." James pulled his shirt over his head, and she noted that she was indeed correct about his superbly toned chest. She couldn't see his back, but she saw on his left arm he had a tattoo. It looked like the tips of wings.

"What's your tattoo?"

His face went momentarily blank. He didn't answer but pressed his body closer to hers. He leaned in and kissed her. Tender at first, and then with intense passion. She could feel her knees weakening as she was pushed back against the wall. "Place your hands above your head and don't move them." Again with that authoritative tone.

"Why?"

"Will you do as I asked? Or should I leave now? I told you, we will do this my way. You'll enjoy it. Don't worry." A hot kiss was again pressed to her lips and without thinking anymore, she moved her hands above her head. "Good girl. You'll be rewarded for that later."

Rewarded? James moved his mouth from her lips down to the peaking tips of her nipples. His tongue swirled around the sensitive buds, and she let out a yearning moan. He looked up at her, a mischievous look in his eyes, and began to lower his body to trail his tongue down the flat line of her stomach until he knelt on the floor in front of her. He placed his hands on either side of her panties, and in one fluid

motion, ripped them from her body. She was breathing fast now. This whole experience was so damn intense it almost seemed like a dream. Her body was on fire, and she longed for him to touch her.

James put his hands between her legs and parted them to reveal her neatly trimmed sex. He groaned. "I haven't even touched you, yet, and you're ready for me. Have you been like this all night? I can even smell your arousal."

She sure as hell wasn't going to let him know that he was turning her on more than she ever had been before. "You know how to kiss a lady and get her excited. It's a good start but it all depends on what skills you have now."

He gave her a little tap on the top of her thigh which brought a scream from her, and then ran a finger over her displayed folds before moving it slowly into her inner channel.

"If you doubt my skills again, I'll put you over my knee." Her body writhed against his hand, and she found herself being excited about having her bottom spanked.

Holy hell. Where had that come from?

His thumb found the hidden bundle of nerves between her thighs and teased it. She could feel the heat within her starting to build. "If you don't stop doing that, I'm going to come all over your hand." James abruptly withdrew his finger and got to his feet with a tutting sound.

"No. Not yet. You'll come when I tell you that you can." He looked her in the eyes, and it was almost like he was controlling her body with his words.

"You're not in charge of me, you know that right?"

He didn't answer, only sniggered. He reached into the pocket of his trousers, brought out his wallet, and retrieved a condom from it. The wallet was then tossed aside. She watched him lower his trousers and pants to reveal a substantially thick cock which he then covered with the condom. It was jutting up towards his stomach and was a work of art. It should have been framed and hung in an art gallery. It was that perfect. She was panting now. Although she was terrified that the length and girth of his manhood was going to hurt, at the same time, she needed him buried deeply inside her. *Now!* She wanted to know what he felt like. She pulled her hands down and reached out to touch the muscular sinews of James's shoulders.

"No. You don't touch me, unless I give you permission." He slammed her hands back against the wall and held them there with one hand. With the other, he lifted her leg from the floor and in one slow thrust pushed inside her.

"Oh God," she groaned. This was nothing like she'd felt before. Her ex-boyfriend wasn't small, but sex between them had always been something that they seemed to do just because they were boyfriend and girlfriend. This was different. It was raw, and it was dangerous. James began to move slowly. Their eyes locked together as with each long movement he stroked against the sweet spot deep within her.

Their lips joined in a tango of passion. His hand still held her in place, and she was glad for it, because she was barely able to support her weight. She felt the build-up of her climax again. She tried to suppress the feeling. James had told her that she couldn't come until he gave her permission, and she wanted to please him.

Jesus, what was this man doing to her? This was her body. Why was it responding to his control like this?

He seemed to know she was close and trying to control herself; she could tell by the little curl of his lip. She wanted to hit him. She wished he'd let her release. He finally let her out of her misery when he leaned forward and collected her lip between his teeth. He nodded consent, and she exploded around him. Wave after wave of earth-shattering pleasure rolled over her shaking body. She called out, and he joined her over the precipice as he released himself into her.

They were both covered in sweat. They were breathing rapidly, and their legs were quivering. James lowered her leg to the floor and withdrew from her, checking the filled condom as he did so.

"Are you alright? I didn't hurt you, did I?" She shook her head. She couldn't find her voice just yet. "Good." He pressed another kiss to her now-bruised lips and looked into her eyes. At that moment, something within him changed. She saw it. Gone was the dominantly splendid lover he'd been; he withdrew into himself. He pulled up his trousers, quickly found his shirt and put it on. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that." And with that, he left her: confused, standing naked, covered with the scent of the best sex she'd ever had, and her hands still above her head.