

**ONLY
THE
WICKED**

a contemporary dark romance

drawn from Rapunzel

C.J. VERGE

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Punk Rawk Books

Author's Note

IF YOU'RE EASILY triggered, this is perhaps not the book for you. The entire premise is essentially non-con by virtue of ignorance. How can a person consent when she doesn't know what she's consenting to?

That said, this book portrays enthusiastically pleasurable activities for all parties, verges into my-body-is-betraying-me kink, and features spanking, gagging, forced pregnancy, and orgasm permission.

There's another element of this book that you might uncomfortable, and it's that this book refuses to wave away the morally questionable content of the hero of the book. This book doesn't take place in a universe where morals are subjugated in pursuit of voyeuristic pleasure. Consequences will be had, regardless of how arousing it was to read about the hero's bad behavior.

But I don't intend to punish the reader for enjoying it, either. I thought it was arousing, too, ladies. Everyone did.

I want to find a way to have both—dark fantasies and a moral center.

Come to the verge with me and we'll see if we can't find that way together.

EASTON

ONE

LAST YEAR, I found out my father isn't really my father.

It explains a lot, so I think the first thing I feel when I hear about it is relief. That's why he hates me. That's why he never looks at me. That's why nothing I do is ever good enough for him.

But later, I start to have questions, of course.

If he's not the guy, who is?

No one to ask that question of, though, because my mother is dead. She died when I was thirteen years old in a plane crash. Private plane. Flying over the mountains, because my mother was always going somewhere far away from my father. When I was younger, she would take me with her, but as I got older, she didn't want to disrupt the stability of my life, so she wouldn't.

I used to wish she would.

Felt like abandonment, I guess.

Maybe she was gone long before she died, gone from my life, anyway, gone as my protector. I think she started to resent me, and when I found out that I wasn't my father's son by blood, I understood why. Here I was, the thing that had estranged them. Here I was, the badge of her failure and weakness. Here I was, the problem.

So.

Yeah, cry me a river. Poor little rich boy whose parents never loved him. As if that isn't some kind of cliché. I'm fine, thanks for asking. I have a lot of compensations, you know?

So, I found out about my father not being my father when he was diagnosed with leukemia and the doctors started hinting around about bone marrow transplants, and everyone looked at me, like I needed to get tested. My father didn't tell me not to get tested, either, that's the thing. He didn't say a damned word.

But Uncle Marcus—not my uncle, not really, not even if I was my father's son, just the family lawyer who's as close to my dad as a brother, his partner-in-crime in nearly all respects, my father's enabler and enforcer and best friend—took me aside and said that I should look at the way my father's will was worded.

That's all he said.

Just that.

I asked for a copy.

Uncle Marcus emailed it right over.

Assets divided amongst the children of my loins.

That's seriously what it says. Of my *loins*. Who even writes that phrase anymore? What does it even mean in the grand scheme of things? Would it hold up in court if anyone ever finds out?

I tried to email Uncle Marcus about this, to text him, but he was too paranoid about texts. Didn't want anything that could be found later, nothing that was a digital record. He talked to me on a walk on the pier, down by the water, close enough to the river that even if someone had managed to record us, the ripple of the water would have made it hard to capture our voices.

“She was too far along for it to have made any sense,” Uncle Marcus said. “So Baum knew, and he confronted her. I don't know why he didn't throw her out. I've never understood whatever it is that was between them.” Uncle Marcus made a face when he said this. He's a confirmed bachelor, never settled down, says women are nothing but trouble if you start asking him questions about it. Ties are weaknesses, he says, and he's not going to allow himself to be

vulnerable. “She was supposed to give him his own child, his real child, but something changed her mind, and she wouldn’t let him touch her after that. I think he saw reason at that point, knew he’d be better off without her. But, of course, it’s one thing to throw a woman out when you know she’s been unfaithful, but it’s another thing entirely to admit that she’s gotten one over on you for years and that there’s a toddler boy child you’ve already acknowledged as your own. He wasn’t going to do that to himself. He has his pride.”

I don’t remember what I said to that. I don’t remember anything except the way that I felt in that moment—that odd feeling of relief, as though something that had been tying me down my whole life had been cut loose, and now I was floating away like a freed balloon, heading up into the atmosphere.

Thing about freed balloons, of course, is that once they get high enough, the air pressure changes and the air inside expands and expands and...

Anyway, I haven’t been the same since that day.

“Look,” said Uncle Marcus, tugging me along the riverside, over the wooden slabs of the pier, “I like you, Easton. It’s not your fault your mother was a lying whore, you know? He used to know this, but lately, with the diagnosis, he’s gotten different. He’s bitter. He wants to burn everything down, take it all down in his wake, as if he’s just now realizing the world will continue on after he’s gone. As if he can’t bear that. Don’t let him destroy you, kid.” He cuffed me on the shoulder, something I think that passed for affection for him.

So, I dodged the test.

I never got my marrow tested, and I never stepped up to help my father beat his cancer, and when people asked me why, I’d say all different kinds of things to them.

Sometimes, I’d tell them stories.

“When I was seven years old,” I’d say, “I had a little cat figurine. I used to want a cat, you see, a real cat, one with stripes, maybe, or one with spots. When I was a kid, I thought

cats were perfect and sleek and so, so pretty. I was that kind of kid. I liked pretty things.” If it was a woman I was telling this story too, I’d wink at her and say, “Still do.” She’d either blush or glare at me, depending on the woman. “Anyway, I was a lonely kid. I didn’t have a lot of friends. I went through nannies pretty quick, because my father kept fucking them, and my mother would find out, throw a fit, and demand they be fired. So, anyway, I was a little bit attached to this cat figurine. It was made of metal, and it was about two inches long. The cat was all curled up in a little ball. I named it Patches, this cat figurine, and I used to talk to it all the time, tell it little stories and pretend it was a real cat and that it needed food and water and to chase little cat toys, all that kind of stuff. My father, this one time, we’re outside and I’m playing with the cat, talking to it, and he keeps yelling at me to shut up. But I don’t. So, he comes over, takes the cat from me, and hurls it off into the bushes. He says if I want it so bad, to go and find it myself. I go and search those bushes for hours, crying my little boy eyes out. Eventually, he makes me stop, tells me I can’t look for it anymore, to get over it. He says I need to man up and take care of myself, not get so upset about some stupid toy. ‘Learn to take care of yourself, Easton. Learn to be strong all on your own.’”

People would furrow their brow, looking concerned, looking disturbed, not sure what to say to me at this juncture.

I’d just shrug. “He can take care of himself, I guess. He can be strong on his own.”

People would sputter, say that my dad shouldn’t have thrown that cat, that he was mean, sure, but that this was his life on the line, and that I’d feel guilty if I let him die.

“Will I, though?” I would say.

I had other stories, too. I usually told this one to men who asked.

“When I was fifteen years old, I had a girlfriend,” I said. “She was the daughter of the housekeeper at our house, so not an appropriate girlfriend, obviously, and she may or may not have been into me just because I was rich and powerful. I

don't even know. My father told me to stop dating her, said it was embarrassing, said that I could fuck around with girls like that all I wanted but that I didn't form relationships with them, you know, that sort of thing. I refused, of course. I paraded her around all the more. I took her out on the town, let the paparazzi get pictures of us together—because that was right around the time I was getting noticed, mostly because I was hanging out with the celebutantes like Nikki Cross and Jillian Knoxen and they were starting that reality show around then. Anyway, point being, my father paid her off. He paid her to come with him to a fucking strip club, to sit on his lap in her panties, to humiliate herself, and he got evidence. Her pictures with him were all over the gossip sites right after that. 'Can't depend on anyone, Easton,' he said. 'Everyone has a price. You want something from them, you pay it.'"

The men I told this story to would be horrified, but they'd also say that any woman who was worth anything would have been loyal and that maybe my father had a point.

"Nah, it's not about that cunt," I'd say. "It's about my price. He wants something from me, he can pay it."

"You want your father to pay you to give him bone marrow?"

"He knows what I want from him," I'd say. "It's not money." Even though it didn't matter, of course, because I was probably not a match for the man.

The women I would tell the story to would usually ask how the hell my father had not gotten in legal trouble for that.

"She was underage, right? I mean, the websites published pictures of a sexualized *child*?" they would say.

"This was eight years ago," I would say. "It was pre-Metoo. And my dad has money." Plus, my dad has Uncle Marcus, who has gotten him out of any legal trouble he ever should have gotten into.

Anyway, the telling of all these stories stopped two weeks ago, when my father died of leukemia, and I inherited everything, as the only child of his loins—because even

though the will was wide open for any illegitimate child conceived on the wrong side of the sheets, my father didn't have any takers on that front.

Not sure how he managed that, to be honest. It's not as if he didn't have a lot of women.

He spoke to me one day, in the hospital, which he didn't do that often, as much because he was weak and attached to a bunch of beeping equipment as because he hated me and I hated him. I mean, it's not as if I visited him all that often.

And I don't even know why I told those stories about him, anyway. The one about my girlfriend, that wasn't exactly a revelation. People had seen that. That had been a juicy story precisely because of the fact it was a father stealing a son's girl. And the thing with the cat, well, it showed what a dick he was, sure, but it made me look pathetic.

Both of the stories made me look pathetic, in fact.

I'm not really in the habit of making myself look bad.

Yeah...

I'm happy he's dead, is the thing, because he always unsettled me, always took me off at the knees. I'm better off now that he's gone.

Anyway, five weeks ago, when I was at the hospital, standing at the foot of his bed, sneering down at him while he slept, he spoke to me.

He woke up first, obviously.

He was sleeping, then he opened his eyes, and looked up at me, standing over him like that. He looked weak and small and sad then, not like the man who'd hated and tormented me my whole life, and this was incongruous to me in this way where I knew he was dying, but I almost didn't want him to, because I don't honestly know how I'm going to function without him to hate in my life. It's going to be very, very strange.

Anyway, so he woke up, and he looked up at me, and he said this, only this: "Briarfeld. The tower."

I didn't know what the fuck he was talking about.

But now, two weeks after his death, I'm here, at Briarfeld, which it turns out is the name of an estate he owns—that *I* own now—out in the middle of nowhere in Virginia. It's off in the woods here, acres and acres of woods and fields. It used to be a vineyard, but it's overrun, all the grape vines overtaking the stakes they used to grow on, the forest encroaching on the fields.

Why did he tell me about this place?

I could not say.

I especially don't know what he means by a tower.

I don't see a tower when we pull up to the place. Well, right when we get there, we come to a gate, but there's a call box, so I buzz up to ask for entry.

No one answers when I buzz, though. I guess no one's here. My father does own a lot of houses that are uninhabited. It would make sense. I did bring keys, but none of them look like they're made to fit the padlock that is holding the gates closed.

Francesca is in the front seat, feet propped up on the dash, her toes painted blue and sparkly. Francesca is not my girlfriend, and she is not a sex worker.

She is a woman I pay to fuck me, though, essentially. I figure this is what all relationships with women boil down to in the end, anyway.

Not for everyone, okay?

I'm not that jaded and sad and bitter.

I'm sure if you happen to be a normal man with a normal amount of money, there's a chance you could meet a woman who would be, you know, your equal. A woman you felt as if you could respect. A woman you felt as if you could earn.

But when you're me, this is impossible.

I can get married, and she's essentially just a sex worker, except eventually she stops having sex with me and I have to

pay someone else, and then—when we get divorced—it’s a big mess of lawyers and legal fees and other annoyances.

I can delude myself into thinking that there’s some woman out there who wants me for some reason other than my money. She’ll probably delude herself, too, after all. No one likes to think of herself as a shallow slut who’s essentially a rich man’s whore. So, she’ll tell herself a bunch of nice stories too about how she loves me for me, and we’ll both believe them for a while...

But, in the end, I know the score.

Why go through that roller coaster of hellish emotions?

I’ve been sad and pathetic for too long in my life.

Being rich is great in a lot of ways—really great. But you sacrifice true connections with human beings when you get too much money. You trade that in for status and power. It’s one thing if you’re first generation, right? You make that choice. But for me, born into it, I just never got a chance for love.

It’s fine; I don’t know what I’m missing.

Anyway, so Francesca and I are at the gate of Briarfeld, and no one’s answering the call box. I get out of the car.

She rolls down the window. “What are you doing?”

I inspect the padlock that’s holding the gates together. When I was in high school, I went to a boarding school in Europe for a while and I made friends with some guys who taught me things, like picking locks, but this one doesn’t look too easy to pick.

I come back to the car, open the trunk and debate trying the keys.

Yeah, worth it, I decide.

“You’re ignoring me,” Francesca pouts.

“You know talking is my least favorite of the things you do with your mouth,” I say to her, going through my suitcase and getting out the keys I found in my father’s house, the ones marked Briarfeld.

“You’re so mean sometimes,” she says, hunching down in the seat.

I feel bad about that, but I don’t say anything. I’m not always mean to her, but she is my employee, so I feel like there’s a point in which I don’t have to care about her feelings, right? Isn’t that the point of being rich? To break the rules of the social contract that other people have to follow? Aren’t you just allowed to be a dick whenever you want?

I take the keys up, but I also bring the bolt cutters.

Handy that I carry bolt cutters in the trunk of my Bentley, isn’t it? Truthfully, I put them in the car years back, when I was in the phase of my life where I was scoping out old abandoned buildings to use for exclusive parties. There’s nothing that gives rich kids a rise more than pretending like they have to do things like poor people. Vandalism is a real rush, especially when you know that if you get caught, you can just pay for the damages. Anyway, you would be surprised the amount of times in the course of your normal, everyday life that bolt cutters come in handy. I keep them all the time now.

So, I try the keys; none of them work; I end up cutting the chain off the gate.

Francesca and I pull up to Briarfeld, then.

We get out of the car and go to the front door, and I do have a key for that, so we don’t have to break in.

Except the door opens.

This place, turns out, not uninhabited.

TWO

THE WOMAN AT the door is old but still striking, in the way of older women sometimes. She's got long jet-black hair, accented here and there with streaks of sparkling gray. She's tall. She's wearing a tasseled black sweater over a pair of jeans and boots. She looks me over.

I give her a smile. I'm an attractive man, owing mostly to my mother's genes. She was fucking drop-dead gorgeous, which has to be one of the reasons my father married her. I don't know what my real father looked like. Maybe he was pretty, too. Maybe that's why my mother cheated on good old dad. After all, he was, you know, nothing to look at. Rich men rarely are. Anyway, I can be charming if I want. It's easy to be charming when you're not ugly. Easier, that is. They've done actual scientific studies on this shit, so I know it's true. People respond to attractive people in a way that they don't respond to unattractive people. So, a little goes a long way when you've got a pleasing face. "Hi there. Sorry, we didn't know anyone was occupying this place. I'm Easton Wicker."

"I know who you are," says the woman.

"Well, that puts me at a distinct disadvantage, then, because I don't know who you are."

"Madison Nevely," she says. "Your father gave me this place."

"Uh, I'm sorry, but there was nothing in his will about giving you anything. I've never heard of you. I own this place," I say. "Look, if you've been living here—"

“I can’t believe he didn’t leave any provisions about me,” she says. Then shoulders sagging, she says, “No, maybe I can believe it. Come in.”

So, I step inside.

Francesca trails behind me, chewing on her thumbnail, which is an unattractive thing she does that makes me kind of like her more, actually. I don’t know what it is about her nervous habit that draws me to her, but I like it more than her flat stomach or her perky tits or the curve of her ass.

So, of course, I say to her, “Stop that. You know I think that’s disgusting when you do that.”

She looks up at me, wounded. “Sorry.”

I don’t know why Francesca is still so easily hurt, not after the way I constantly treat her, and not after everything she’s been through with men. I get why she stays in this situation—I think she liked to call herself a sugar baby before I got my hands on her and told her she would never refer to herself as that in my presence again. It’s a good gig for a chick like her. She makes very good money and she gets to basically pretend to be my wife. Sometimes, if I’m really drunk, I’m even super nice to her.

Like, have I told her I loved her while I was inside her pussy?

I’m weak. More than five times. I’ve counted. I always feel like shit the next day. Not just because it made me look pathetic, but because it’s a lie. I do not love Francesca, not even a little bit. Sometimes, I feel pity for her, and I like fucking her, and she’s a good fit for me, as far as all that goes. It seems really needlessly cruel of me to toy with her like that.

I tell her that.

I sit her down and say that I didn’t mean it, that I was in the moment, that she shouldn’t attach any significance to it, that she’s here to be a fantasy for me, and that she shouldn’t let herself get caught up in it.

And she nods and laughs and says she knows the score.

But then, she seems more hurt the next time I'm not very nice to her, so I don't know if it's possible to put a person in a role and treat her like she belongs there and for her not to somehow feel as if that role is real, even if it happens to be pretend.

I bet being an actor for a living is a mindfuck.

No wonder they're always marrying the people they co-star with. I bet it feels real if you pretend for too long.

"If you want me to leave," says Madison, "you should know about the tower."

I round on her, narrowing my eyes. "Funny you should mention that."

"SHE'S MENTALLY ILL," says Madison. "She's very fragile, and she has to be isolated due to the nature of her mental illness. She's not to be disturbed. Anyone who goes up there could unbalance her to a very dangerous degree."

We're upstairs in Briarfeld, looking out over the ruined vineyard and there's the tower, rising up in the distance.

"Why would your father put some mentally ill girl in a tower out here?" says Francesca.

"She's his daughter," I say, because it's the only thing that makes sense.

"You have a sister?" says Francesca, because she does not know that I'm not really the biological son of my father, and I'm never going to tell her the truth.

"He never confirmed that," said Madison with a sigh. "But I think so, yes. It was sort of his consolation prize for me, I think. Your father..." She presses her lips together in a long line, looking pretty annoyed.

I'm putting the pieces together. "You were one of his mistresses. He wouldn't knock you up and you wished he would. So, instead, he gave you some other woman's child to raise."

"She was brought here already very disturbed. I think whoever her mother really was, she couldn't handle the child

and begged him for help. Rather than pay for the girl to be in an institution, he thought she'd be happier here. It was always his intention for her to leave the tower, or so he said, but every time I met with the doctors, they'd tell me it was better for her to be isolated."

"And you're her mother, then," I say.

"Not really," says Madison. "But I have felt responsible for her, I suppose. How do you leave a child all alone in a tower when you're the only person who loves her? Of course, she's not exactly a child anymore. She's nineteen."

"I want to meet her," I say.

"No," says Madison. "I'm telling you, she's very fragile."

"But if that's Easton's sister," says Francesca, "it's, like, his only living family."

"I want to meet her," I repeat.

"No one sees her," says Madison. "Only me. The doctors don't even go to meet with her. There's an observation room in the tower, and there are cameras there. They review that footage, and they have me ask her questions, if necessary. They are quite adamant that introducing new elements to her environment could be quite dangerous for her."

"Dangerous how?" I say.

"She has only a tentative grip on reality," says Madison. "And this, you see, has been fostered primarily through my interaction with her. If we push her too hard, she may have a psychotic break, and we may never reach her ever again. I beg you, do not disrupt this girl's life."

I look into Madison Nevely's eyes and I don't see the lies there, but there are lies somewhere. This doesn't add up, this doesn't add up at all.

Oh, it makes sense for my father to tell me about this girl, this real daughter of his loins, this person who can take my entire fortune from me. It's exactly the kind of mindfuckery the old man would have enjoyed. I bet he got a real kick out of imagining me figuring all this out.

What will I do about the girl? Leave her here, locked in this tower, to be discovered at any point in time and destroy me?

Will I have her institutionalized, which should clearly have been done already, even though I run the risk of it all coming out if I do that?

Will I divide my fortune with her, since she deserves it, being my father's actual daughter and all? I bet she needs very expensive care. I bet Madison Nevely is not the least bit qualified to give this poor, disturbed girl the care she actually needs.

But.

That's why I'm wary.

Maybe my father would have hidden away his daughter because he was ashamed that she was so very mentally disturbed. As Uncle Marcus pointed out, my father had his pride, and that pride kept him from disclosing I was the evidence that he was a cuckold, so he might not want anyone to know the only child he did actually sire is mentally damaged.

Maybe that makes sense.

But he hated me so very much, I can't understand why he wouldn't have paraded this girl out into the world just to hurt me.

Thing about my father? He liked hurting people. I think hurting people may have been the only thing that brought him true joy.

So, no, I don't understand this. There's more to this than meets the eye. More to uncover, more to know. He's forcing Madison Nevely to be here, undoubtedly, keeping her prisoner in some way. This is some kind of twisted game for him, and I imagine she's being punished for his amusement.

"How *do* you leave a girl all alone in a tower?" I say softly.

Madison Nevely points at me. “I want your word that you won’t push this, that you won’t demand to see her.”

“Don’t you want a little time off? A little vacation?” I say.

Madison hesitates, looking me over. “When I heard he was dead, I...” She doesn’t finish the sentence.

“Are you the only person living in this house?”

“I have someone who comes in to clean every few weeks,” she says. “And there’s a cook, but she cooks elsewhere. She brings all the meals and leaves them in the freezer for me. So, basically, yes, it’s just me.”

“So, you’re bringing my sister her meals,” I said, trying out the word in my head. Sister. Hmm. Such a strange idea.

“The cook makes enough for both of us,” says Madison. “I heat them and take them over to her.”

“We could do that,” I say, gesturing to Francesca. “How long has it been since you left here?” What did he threaten you with if you left?

Madison hesitates again. “No, no, it would never work.”

“We won’t interact with her,” I said. This is probably a lie, though. I’m curious. I can’t help but poke things. I want to understand all of this.

“It doesn’t matter,” she says. “She has a strange, specific delusion, and she wouldn’t be able to understand the idea of me going away on a vacation.” She furrows her brow. “But maybe...”

Madison *does* want to leave.

“Only for a few days,” says Madison. “If I could think of a way to explain it to her, and you would promise not to speak to her, only to leave the food.”

“Of course,” I say.

FRANCESCA IS MAKING the bed in the guest room where we’re staying. This house is huge, but most of it has been shut down and closed off for years. Madison gave us this guest

area, which connects to a large bathroom and living area, all of which looks as if it hasn't been touched in a decade.

"You could help me," says Francesca as she tucks in the sheet.

"I mean, I could," I say, tilting my head to one side. "Kind of nicer to watch you bending over, though."

She flips me off. "You think there's more going on here."

Francesca is not actually dumb, that's the thing. Also, she hates my father about as much as I do. This is probably because I brought her around at family gatherings and my father knew she was just a paid escort—well, I don't know what to call Francesca—a full-time girlfriend-for-hire?

Whatever. He thought it was gauche.

I liked pissing him off.

He was mean to Francesca, though. This was probably because he propositioned her and she turned him down.

See, at the very beginning of the job—relationship—whatever-you-want-to-call-it, I made a video of Francesca naked, playing with herself and talking about how much she wants to suck her own father's cock.

She doesn't want to do that, obviously.

It's just insurance.

I told her that I'd release that video if she does anything with *my* father.

So, anyway, when my father propositioned her, which I knew he would do, she said no. He propositioned her a lot. He offered her obscene amounts of cash. He tried three or four times, and she kept saying no.

This made my father really angry and he took to saying cruel and humiliating things about her very loudly at every single family dinner. He also never called her by her name, just Easton's Fucktoy, something I found so delightful that I had a shirt made with that written on it—tiny words, right

across her tits—and I made her wear it when we went to see my father.

Could I have left Francesca at home and spared her his ire?

I mean, I *could* have done that.

Didn't though.

"I think she's the girl's really real mom," says Francesca.

"What?" I say, shaking my head. "No way. I don't get that vibe from her at all. She'd be more protective."

"Well, that's why she's here, because she's a shitty mom," says Francesca. "Your dad hates that she wanted to abandon her own daughter and stuck her here for all time."

"I mean, that makes sense," I say.

"You're going to see your sister after Madison leaves," says Francesca.

"Obviously."

"You're going to want to go alone, but you should let me go with you, because you're kind of horrible at talking to people, especially new people," she says. She shakes the top sheet out over the bed.

"Fuck you very much," I say idly, not really angry, because she's right, but wondering if I should punish her for talking to me like that.

"I'm serious, Easton, you have no one." Francesca straightens up. "Eventually, I'm going to get my hands on those blackmail videos you have of me and delete them, and then I'm leaving your ass."

I sit up straight. "Wait, you don't like this job? You want out?" I get my phone out of my pocket and go through the dropbox account and find the video of her saying the shit about wanting to blow her dad. "He's dead. I'm deleting this, okay?"

She snorts.

“I don’t want to be him,” I mutter, slumping in my chair. “I’m not trying to make you feel trapped with me. You want to quit—”

“I didn’t say I wanted to quit.” She rolls her eyes.

I look her over. “Well... good. I’d miss you.”

She goes back to the bed. “Someday, I will want to quit. No point in having all this money you’ve paid me if I can’t spend it on myself before I’m really fucking old, right?”

I nod. “Sure, sure, makes sense.” She does get paid a fucking lot of money, and she has literally no expenses, either. She lives with me. I feed her. I buy her fucking clothes.

“Anyway, all I’m saying is that you don’t want to fuck this up with the girl. You have a sister. Maybe she’s crazy—”

“Yeah, or maybe that’s all bullshit,” I say.

She smooths out the top sheet. “I thought that sounded weird too. I don’t know a lot about mental illnesses—”

“Me either, but I’ve never heard of any kind of mental illness that’s better treated in a tower, cut off from everyone in the world except one person.”

“Exactly.” She tucks in the bottom of the sheet. “Is there any reason to think this is not his daughter, but instead, someone he wants to hurt?”

I have to admit that makes sense. “No, definitely his daughter,” I say. “Why else tell me about this place if not to torture me? But maybe he does want to hurt her. Maybe he hates her, too, for some reason.”

“Some reason not her fault, just like the way he hated you.” She says it in past tense, and it makes me realize I keep talking about him as if he’s still alive.

Fuck my father. Even though he’s dead, he’s not really dead, because all the fucked-up things he set up, like this tower, like this run-down vineyard, they’re all still up and running and affecting people. He dies, but all his vendettas are still alive.

“If so,” I say, “the right thing to do would be to get her out of here.”

She turns away from the bed, folding her arms over her chest. “You won’t though, will you? You don’t want to share your inheritance.”

I sigh heavily. *It’s so much more complicated than that, Francesca*, I want to say, but I don’t, because she’s just indicated that she’s very much looking forward to leaving my ass, and I’m reminded that I can’t really trust her.

“You’re a piece of shit, Easton,” she tells me.

“You don’t get to say that to me.” I glare at her. I’m annoyed.

“No one else has the balls to say that to you,” she counters. She tosses the pillows onto the bed. “That girl deserves her money.”

“Deserves it, why? Because she was spawned from his sperm?”

“Well, that’s the only reason you’ve got it.”

My nostrils flare. “Get over here.”

She gestures. “I’m making the bed.”

I get up and cross the room to her. I grab her face, digging my fingers into her cheeks.

She mewls. I’m hurting her.

“You obey me when I give you an order, you got that?”

Anger flashes in her eyes.

I let go of her.

She huffs, tossing down the pillow. “You’re a piece of shit, Easton,” she says, and gets down on her knees. She unzips me. “This is what you wanted?”

“Please,” I say softly. “Sorry.”

She puts her lips to my soft penis.

“Get me hard,” I tell her, shutting my eyes.

“Yes, sir,” she says.

She’s very good at what she does.

THREE

THE MEALS THAT Madison heats up for us are very good. Francesca and I eat them in our living area in the guest rooms we have. I stare out the window, looking to see if Madison is out there near the tower, but it's too far away to see the bottom of the tower. All I can see is the expanse of unruly grape vines, a dark, murky tangle of nature taking itself back over once humans stop trying to prune it all back.

Then, I see something in the top window, too far away to see clearly. But a light comes on and there are two figures moving in front of the window. Madison must already be out there.

I wonder if she's come up with some way to explain to the girl about her vacation.

I wonder if the girl is really mentally ill.

If not, that probably means Madison's in on it in some way. What does my father have on Madison? How is he keeping her here? How is he forcing her into this?

Later that night, after Francesca is asleep, I get up out of bed and go out to the tower.

I know, Francesca said I shouldn't go alone to meet this girl, and I know that it makes better sense to simply wait until Madison is gone, but I can't help myself.

There's a path through the vineyard to the tower, but it's overgrown and I nearly trip over vines in the darkness three times. I have to use my cell phone's flashlight to see where I'm going.

When I get out to the tower, the light is on in that room up at the top, just like it was before, when I was looking.

But there's no *door*.

I walk all the way around the thing.

There's a tiny windowy-thing, with a wooden latch that closes, held in place with a hook. I open that up, and inside is a small wooden box. Further inspection, using my cell phone flashlight, indicates it's attached to pulleys. I remember reading about this sort of thing in some old book as a kid. It's called a dumbwaiter. I guess the idea is that instead of a smart, human waiter who'd bring your food up the stairs, having something like this meant that food could just be hauled up from the kitchens to the upstairs in a big house, like a tiny elevator. (Maybe it just means it can't talk, like "deaf and dumb." I don't know.)

Near as I can see, it's the only way up into the tower.

This doesn't make sense, because I know Madison was up there.

What?

Did she climb a ladder or something?

I back away, looking up at that lighted window at the top.

It's open.

There she is, peering down at me.

The girl.

The woman, really, she's...

Fuck.

She has long, long hair, down to her waist, it looks like. It's the same sandy-brown color my father's used to be when he was young, but she doesn't look like him otherwise, thank God. She's afraid of me. I see that as she looks down at me, horrified.

Suddenly, the light up there goes out. I can't see her anymore.

Which is a pity, really, because she's pretty.

I spend another good twenty minutes roaming around that tower, trying to figure out how anyone gets up into it.

Doesn't make sense.

I even go looking around for a nearby shed where a ladder might be stored, but there's nothing.

Eventually, I trudge back to the house and climb into bed with Francesca.

I lie on my back and think of the pretty girl in the tower with her long hair. I think about having her naked and arranging her hair to cover her breasts, moving it out of the way to play peek-a-boo with her nipples.

I get an erection, and it's been, like, a while since that happened spontaneously, without some kind of effort on my part. Either I need to concentrate on something sexy or I need actual stimulus. No morning wood either, not in months. I actually asked my doctor about it, but he said it was fine, probably stress, probably—

I wonder if I'm just bored of Francesca.

I could wake her up and make her take care of this. It's literally her job to see to my erections.

I roll over, put my back to her, take my cock in my own hand, and picture the girl in the tower again.

Your sister.

Not my sister, not really, but the whole thing makes me fucking harder, so I don't even care.

I pretend she's shy but eager, giggling as I uncover her nipples, sighing as I tweak them to make them stand up in tight little points. I pretend she's never seen a cock before—well, how long has she been in that tower, so...?

What's that for? she says in my fantasy.

Let me show you, I tell her.

THE NEXT DAY, Madison gives us a bunch of instructions about how we need to bring the food out wearing full-on pandemic gear, like it's 2020 or something. Gloves, N95 masks, the whole nine.

She says that the girl in the tower has a delusion about germs and sickness and she's convinced that anyone outside the tower can infect her.

"That's why we never go in," says Madison.

"*You* go in," I say.

"No, I just send the food up from the bottom of the tower," says Madison.

"You said you went in," I say. "You said even the doctors never went in there, but that you did. Only me, you said."

"I didn't mean I go in," says Madison. "As you can see, there's no door."

"Right," I say. "So, what? You're telling me they built this tower around her? There's a way in."

"For emergencies, yes," says Madison. "But if there's an emergency, you call me. You do not go in there."

I'm annoyed by this.

"You have to promise not to disturb her," says Madison. "I told you how dangerous it could be for her."

Right, and I guess if I believed Madison, I wouldn't be planning on going back on my word. But I don't believe her.

"He's dead," I say to her. "Whatever he had over you, my father, you don't have to worry about it anymore. Tell me what's really going on here."

Madison raises her eyebrows. "You think I'm lying to you?"

"Are you?" I say.

"Being around that man made you paranoid," she says. "Now, you're making me paranoid. Can I trust you not to

bother that poor girl up there? If anything happened to her, I'd be beside myself."

"You can trust me," I say.

She looks me over, wary.

"Look, I can't get into the tower, anyway, can I?" I say.

"No," she says. "I suppose you can't."

So, Madison leaves. She takes two suitcases and a car comes to pick her up. She says she'll be back in two weeks. She climbs into the car and drives away.

Then it's just me and Francesca and the girl in the tower.

Since I rubbed one out thinking about her, every time my thoughts return to her, my dick twitches, and I don't know what that's about.

She's supposedly mentally ill in some way, so it's disgusting, really, thinking of her in that way.

But, yeah, being disgusting is not really a deterrent to me sexually, actually. Not much is, to be frank. On some level, depending on the way it disgusts me, sometimes disgust actually makes me *more* turned on.

Recently, though, I haven't been thinking about sex much. If Francesca wasn't around, her presence there to remind me that I've hired her to have sex with me, I think I would have probably turned completely off in that way.

Something about this girl, though, she's waking me up, and it's like being a teenager again with my housekeeper's-daughter girlfriend. Except different than that, actually. More intense than that, actually.

I need to find a way into that tower.

We take the meals down, Francesca and me, masked and gloved up, and someone hauls them up to the top of the tower, but the girl never appears in the window, and I don't see her again.

This makes it worse, somehow.

Francesca tries to talk to me. She tries to get me to help pick out a movie to watch. The house doesn't have cable, so it's just internet subscriptions on one of those streaming sticks. I tell her to watch whatever she wants. She abandons the movie idea and tries to get me to play cards with a deck she finds in a drawer of an end table somewhere. I turn that down too.

Later, in bed, she puts her hand on my stomach and tells me that if I'm wanting her to initiate things, I need to tell her, because she can't read my mind.

"It's fine," I say. "I'm not really in the mood."

"You're sure?" she says.

I take her hand off my stomach. She gives me a look, a worried look, and I see it go through her, the understanding that this ride can end for her as soon as I'm done with her. She furrows her brow, but she rolls over and pulls the covers up and goes right to sleep.

I lie awake long after her breathing has grown steady, thinking about what Madison's emergency way into the tunnel is.

And finally, it comes to me.

Obviously.

It's tunnels. It's got to be tunnels. There's no other way besides a ladder, and I know Madison isn't hauling a ladder back and forth, especially not one so tall to get up in that tower.

I get out of bed, get dressed, and go looking around in the house. Tunnels are underground, so the first thing to do is to get to the basement of the house.

That's easy enough.

The basement is a finished basement, but no one's been down here a very long time. Everything's covered in sheets, and all of the decor is dated and a little too ostentatious. There's a big entertainment room with a truly large and intimidating couch, swathed in a number of white sheets to

protect it from dust. There's a game room with a covered pool table and a ping pong table.

Finally, I find a door that's facing the direction of the tower that is locked.

I brought all my keys with me, the ones I found at my father's house when I decided to come to Briarfeld. I start trying key after key after key.

There.

The door opens.

It opens onto a *tunnel*.

I knew it.

The tunnel has a rounded ceiling made of carefully placed bricks. There's a musty, underground smell, vaguely like earthworms. There are no lights. But as I shine the flashlight on my cell around everywhere, the way looks clear and mostly clean. A few cobwebs here and there, sure, but it's not bad.

Leaving the door open, I set off down the tunnel.

I walk.

From time to time, I turn back, just to make sure the door's still open, just to see that there's a way back, because it feels intimidating, walking into this seemingly endless darkness.

Then, eventually, the tunnel turns, and when I turn back, all I can see is that bend.

Finally, I come to another door. It's locked, too, but from the outside. It locks the girl in the tower *in*.

I undo the deadbolt and the doorknob, feeling a bad taste rise in the back of my throat.

What has my father been doing out here to this girl?

I open the door.

Immediately, there's a rush of movement, coming straight at me.

I don't think, I block it.

I realize the thing coming at my face is a wooden toy hobby horse—the kind with a long wooden stick to pretend to ride. I seize the stick portion and wrench it away, tossing it aside.

The girl who was holding the hobby horse shrieks and retreats, scrambling away.

“Wait, I’m not here to hurt you,” I call after her.

She scrambles up a set of spiral stairs which are in the middle of the circular room, and all I really see is her long hair streaming behind her.

“Wait,” I say again.

Should I go after her? Should I go up the stairs? Or would that just spook her more?

I walk across the room to the foot of the stairs. I call up, “Hello?”

No response.

“My name’s Easton,” I say. “What’s your name?”

No response to that either.

“Can I come up the stairs? I’ll stay down here if you tell me to. It’s up to you. You call the shots. If you want me to stay here, you have to answer, though. If you say nothing, how do I know not to come up?”

Silence.

“Can I come up the stairs?” I say again.

“You’re infected,” comes back her voice, tinny and far away.

Infected. Okay, so whatever Madison said about a delusion, maybe it’s true. I lick my lips. “I don’t know about the infection. Can you tell me about it?”

“Everyone knows about the infection, because the whole world is infected. It’s the *apocalypse*.”

Wait a minute, this isn’t a delusion, this is a *lie*. “Who told you that?” I call up to her. “Did Madison tell you that?”

Let's assume, for instance, that this girl isn't mentally ill at all, and that she would have no desire to stay inside a tower. But let's assume you—for some reason—want to keep her there. How would you convince her to stay? Maybe by telling her the outside world is dangerous? Maybe by telling her it's *The Stand* out there? How ironic the Covid epidemic must have been after setting this up whenever this girl got here? How long has she been here anyway?

Fuck.

"I'm coming up the stairs," I say to her.

"No, please," she says.

I climb the stairs. "What if I told you that you could leave the tower—"

"I'm not *leaving* the tower!" she squeals. "You're going to get me sick."

All right, arguing with her, telling her the truth, it's not going to work. Maybe I should play along with her, instead. "Why don't you tell me about the infection? What kind of sickness is it?"

"Well, it's bad," she says.

I emerge at the top of the spiral staircase, into a circular room that contains a bed and a chair. On the chair sits a guitar. I don't see the girl anywhere. She's hiding.

"Bad how?" I say.

"You *know*," she says, frustrated.

I think she's under the bed. Should I get down there and look? Is that a good thing to do to her, or will it freak her out? I settle for simply sitting cross-legged on the floor at the top of the stairs. "I don't know, actually," I say to her.

"How could you not know?"

Because it's not real, and it's a lie. Except, if I say that, she'll simply fight me. "I know you're under the bed," I say instead. "Just... come out, okay?"

“No,” she says, but her voice is trembling. “You’re going to get me sick, and then I’m going to die.”

“What kind of sickness is it?” I say. “Is it something respiratory? Gastrointestinal? Blood borne?”

Nothing from her.

“No one told you that?”

“Madison doesn’t like to talk about it, because she says it makes her think about all the people who she watched die.”

I sigh. “And yet Madison isn’t dead.”

“Madison is one of the very, very few who are immune,” she says. “So far, anyway. It keeps mutating, you see, and people who were immune keep getting it. But I don’t have any immunity at all, so if I get it, I’m going to die, and you’re here ___”

“So, let me get this straight,” I say. “It’s a virus?”

“I guess so? It killed my parents.”

“How long ago was that?”

“When I was a baby.”

“So, this virus has been raging through the population for nineteen years—”

“Twenty years. Why are you acting as if you don’t know about this?”

“What did Madison tell you about me? Didn’t Madison tell you that I was going to be feeding you?”

“She said you and your girlfriend knew not to infect me!”

“Francesca’s not my girlfriend,” I say, which is a weird thing to say to that, really. And not even really true, either. “We’re not together like that.”

The girl’s head pokes out from beneath the bed. I can only see her forehead and her eyes. She looks at me, taking me in.

“Maybe I’m immune,” I say. “Hey, maybe you’re immune. You ever think of that?”

“Are you immune?” she says. “Like Madison?”

I think about this for a minute. It’s pointless to fight with her about something she thinks is true. We can just keep talking about this virus that’s clearly made up forever and ever, and she’s not going to listen if I tell her the entire foundation of her worldview is a lie. She’s going to resist that, no matter what.

Or, I can play along. Not forever, just long enough to gain her trust. After she and I have talked a while, I can start explaining it all to her, after she thinks I’m safe. The easiest way for her to think I’m safe is not to fight this lie right now. “Yeah, I’m immune,” I say. “I can’t believe Madison didn’t tell you that.”

“She said you would just bring food, and that it would be in sealed containers and you’d wear gloves.”

“Yeah, maybe she just thought it would be easier for you that way.”

She slithers out from beneath the bed. “So, you’re immune. You swear you’re immune?”

“Would I be alive otherwise?”

She stands up. Her hair is long, all the way to her waist, and it’s a little bit wavy. She’s wearing a long white nightgown with white lace at the sleeves, at the collar, and at the bottom. She looks like innocence personified. She’s—

Fuck, why am I hard as all hell?

“You might just *think* you’re immune,” she says. “A new mutation of the virus might get you at any point in time.”

“That could happen to Madison, too, I guess?”

“True.”

“Where did Madison say she was going?” I say. I’m guessing she didn’t tell her she was going on a vacation.

“She said she had news about her family. She thought her family was dead, but that she got a note saying it’s from her sister, and she thinks it’s probably not true, but she has to go

and see for herself,” she says. “I told her I understood. Didn’t Madison tell you where she was going? I thought you brought word about her sister.”

“Right,” I say. “Well, I didn’t know what was in the note. I didn’t look, and Madison didn’t tell me.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “You weren’t supposed to come into the tower.”

“I know, but—”

“*And* you’re a man.”

My cock tingles. “Uh, yeah, last I checked.”

“Madison says that if men ever wander onto the vineyard—which they shouldn’t, she says, because there’s a gate and a wall—but that there are ways in from the woods out that way.” The girl points. “She says if I ever see them not to let them see me. Because she says men are desperate and feral now, that they’ve all become uncivilized, and all they want to do is rape girls like me.”

I swallow really hard.

“I don’t even really know what that means, though,” she says. “Madison said it was bad and it hurt and they’d tear all my clothes off. Are you here to do that?”

“Definitely not,” I say, and my dick is throbbing.

“I asked her a bunch of questions about it once,” says the girl, folding her arms over her chest. “She finally said she wouldn’t talk about it with me anymore, because it didn’t matter. But she also said something about how men—even if they aren’t forcing you—they’re tricking you. Is that what you’re doing? Trying to trick me?”

“No,” I say. “No, I swear to you. I’m, uh...” I let out a breath. “I’m here to rescue you. You’re being kept prisoner in this tower, and I know a way out. Let me take you away from all this.”

She blinks at me, solemn, confused.

I'm sitting on the floor and she's standing up over me, looking down at me. I'd stand up, too, except then I'm afraid it might be obvious that I'm having an erection of epic proportions, and I don't want to freak her out. On the other hand, she doesn't know what rape is; she doesn't know what an erection is; if I *wanted* to rape her...

I stand up. "You know what, I'm going to go. I think I'm freaking you out, and I don't want to do that."

"You should go," she says. "Because if you're not actually immune, you're going to get me sick. Heck, you might even be a carrier. It might not affect you, but it'll affect me."

"No, I swear. I haven't been around any sick people. Can I come back tomorrow?"

She shrugs.

"Do you want me to come back tomorrow?"

"No," she says.

I consider this. "All right, well, I'm coming anyway."

She glares at me.

"Maybe I could bring you something," I say. "Maybe there's something you want. Is there something Madison brings you from the outside world?"

"Books," she says immediately. "I always need more books. Or a USB stick with more movies to watch on my tablet?"

"What kind of movies do you like?"

"Hmm, I don't know. I don't usually get to choose. Madison just brings me whatever. You want to see what I already have?"

"Okay," I say.

She points across the room. "I'm going to go and get that."

There's a tablet sitting on a desk in the corner. It looks pretty old. It's kind of clunky and thick. It's plugged in, and she climbs over the bed to get to it and then climbs back. She

shows me the screen, and I see that she has a collection of kids movies on there.

Disney shit.

Dumbo, Up, Cinderella, The Great Mouse Detective, Toy Story.

Non-Disney shit, too, like *Shrek* and *Anastasia*.

But it's basically all animated.

"I'll find you some other kind of movie," I say. "These are kids movies. You're not a kid."

She lifts her chin. "Exactly what I said to Madison."

"I'll find you some other sort of books, too. Does she bring you all kids books, too?"

"Old stuff, mostly, like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Oliver Twist*."

"I'll bring you something recent," I say.

"I would like that," she says.

"Good," I say. I turn to start down the stairs.

"Wait," she says. "Can I ask you something?"

I stop and turn to her. "Sure. Definitely. Whatever you want."

"It's..." She shifts on her feet. "Sometimes, on movies, men get kicked there and it hurts them, but... I've never seen..."

I look down at my crotch.

Her voice is soft. "Why are you sticking out there?"

And then we're both just staring at my erection.

Right now, right here, this is a moment in which I see two paths. There's the path a good person would take, and then, well, there's the path *I* take. The problem is, I don't even really think about taking the path a good person would take. I don't even consider it.

I see it, but I do this instead.

“Because you’re pretty,” I say.

This surprises her. She seizes a lock of her hair and twists it around one of her fingers and looks at me with big, wide eyes. “What do you mean?”

“When men are attracted to women, they have reactions,” I say. “You’re very attractive. I can’t help it.”

“Why do you react that way, though?” she says.

“That part of me, it wants to be touched,” I say. “You want to see?”

Her eyes get even wider. There’s a long, long moment, and then she nods, wordless.

I move closer to her.

She stays where she is, and I can hear her taking in these sharp breaths, one after the other.

I undo my button. I undo my zipper. I push my pants and my boxers just out of the way, not off, but down, so that I can expose my hard cock to her. It’s hugely hard and pointing straight at her. Well, I’m a little curved, so it’s pointing kind of above her head a little bit. Anyway, I’m standing here, with this sheltered girl who knows nothing about anything, showing her my cock.

Because I’m not a good guy, not at all.

FOUR

SHE SITS DOWN on the bed so that she's eye-level with my dick and just stares at it.

I like it. My cock jerks a couple of times, and it pulses tingling arousal feelings all through me. I'm crazy turned on right now. This is a shit thing to do, and the deviance of it makes me hot.

"Why is it moving?" She's whispering.

"Uh, it likes you looking at it." My voice is soft, too.

She looks up at me, a little smile on her face. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Because... I like looking at it." And she goes back to looking at it.

My balls tighten up. My breath gets shallow.

"I don't know why." She hunches up her shoulders. "It makes me feel this... this feeling, and I've sort of felt it other times."

"Yeah? When?"

"Um... sometimes in kissing scenes in books and movies, but sometimes, just... in the dark, at night, when I'm supposed to be sleeping, and then I..." She shakes her head.

What the fuck? I'm realizing how mindfucked this poor girl has been, kept in this tower, denied knowledge about anything and everything—sheltered and alone. My voice comes out hoarse. "And then what? You can tell me."

She flushes, embarrassed, shaking her head.

“Do you touch yourself?” I urge her. I wrap my hand around my cock. “Between *your* legs?” *Please tell me you at least have figured out masturbating.* Because being locked away is bad enough without having access to orgasms.

Her gaze jerks up to mine. “How did you know that?”

“People do that,” I say, stroking myself. “I mean, *I* do that.”

She turns her attention back to what I’m doing, to the way I’m jacking off in front of her. “Me too,” she says. “But, I mean, I don’t have...”

“A cock,” I say. “It’s a cock.” I stop stroking and kind of shake it at her face. I’m such a jerk.

She likes it, though. “Cock,” she whispers. “But if I don’t have a cock, then—”

“Pussy,” I supply. “You have a pussy.”

“You want to see mine?” she says.

Should say no, should definitely say no. “Yeah,” I say.

She starts to lift her nightgown. She reveals her ankles to me, and then she lets it drop, shaking her head. “I don’t think so, actually.”

I grin at her. Well, then, she’s got a little fire to her, huh?

“Because, you’ve seen other people’s before, right?”

I laugh.

“You have, right?”

“I mean... yeah.”

“So, why do you need to see mine?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I don’t need to, I guess. I just want to.”

She bites her lip, gazing up at me, letting that settle into her. For a minute, I think she’s going to change her mind, that maybe she’ll lie back on the bed and lift her nightgown for me, show me everything. But instead, she looks away, back at my cock. “Why are they named after animals?”

“It’s slang,” I say. “There are other words. Proper, clinical words, like penis and vagina.” Wait, Francesca would get annoyed with me for saying that. “Vulva,” I correct. “The hole is a vagina, the whole thing is a vulva.”

“The hole,” she repeats. She stands up. “Put it away.”

I do. I struggle a little, because nothing about this entire exchange has done a single thing to make me less aroused, and my cock is huge and hard and doesn’t want to be tucked away.

She hugs herself. “I get this weird feeling like... like Madison wouldn’t like it if she knew you did that.”

“You’re not wrong,” I say. “I should apologize, really, it was a fucked up thing to do. I, um... *sorry*.”

“No, don’t be sorry,” she says. “I liked it. If you come back tomorrow, can I see it again?”

Fuck. I nod. “You can see it anytime you want.”

She sucks in a breath.

I take a step toward her, which means we’re practically brushing into each other now. The tip of my covered cock is less than an inch from her nightgown. “You going to touch yourself after I leave?”

She nods slowly.

“Me too,” I say. “You going to think about my cock while you do it?”

“Probably,” she whispers. “It’s better than what I usually think about. I don’t know what to think about when I do it. I don’t... understand it.”

“I can help you understand,” I say. God, I’m an asshole. God, it’s turning me on. “I’m going to think about you when I touch myself.”

“But you didn’t even see me.”

“Well, we’ll work up to that,” I say.

She gives me a small, shy smile.

I reach up and touch her face, sliding my fingers over her cheek. “What’s your name?” Because I didn’t think to ask her this until just now, after I’ve already begun corrupting her sweet innocence with my filth. What does her fucking name matter, right, if she’ll let me show her my dick?

“Rhiannon,” she says.

“Rhiannon,” I repeat. “Pretty name for a pretty girl.”

She lets out a noisy breath.

I let go of her. “I’m coming back,” I tell her. “Tomorrow. With movies and books.”

“Okay,” she says, still smiling that shy, sweet smile. “You promise she’s not your girlfriend?”

“Swear to God,” I say.

I RUB MYSELF off in the bathroom. I don’t want to do it next to Francesca.

Not because I feel guilty or anything, but because I don’t want Francesca tainting this. I don’t want the image or the smell or the feel or anything about Francesca to stain Rhiannon.

Rhiannon is this perfect, tiny, untouched fantasy of a woman.

Nineteen years old, Madison said.

I’m twenty-four, so if she weren’t completely sheltered and hidden away in a tower without any instruction about life or men or sex or whatever, she wouldn’t even be too young for me, I don’t think. I mean, I don’t have a leg to stand on in terms of whether it’s remotely cool to be manipulating her the way I’m manipulating her, of course. I should not have shown her my cock. I should not have said half of the things I said to her.

She’s too ignorant about anything to be anything other than curious.

I’m using her curiosity to take advantage of her.

It’s wrong.

I know it, and the wrongness of it is making me really hot.

I jack off twice.

The first time, I come pretty much immediately, just like a loaded shotgun exploding into my own palm.

But I'm still hard after that, which—man, that *never* happens, so what is this girl *doing* to me—so I slow it down and think about her, imagining her doing what I wanted her to do, lying back and slowly lifting up her nightgown for me, showing me her pretty, tiny, wet slit.

I pretend that I ask her to show me how she likes to touch herself.

I pretend I watch her finger fuck her tight little hole while she moans.

I pretend that she says that she wishes she had something just a little bigger and thicker in there.

I pretend she notices my cock and says that she wants that, please, please, and then I give it to her.

When I come that time, it's even better than the first explosion, so sweet and so good and so intense.

I get in bed then, exhausted, spent, fucking happier than I've felt in a long time.

Francesca stirs. "Where have you been?" she says sleepily.

"Nowhere," I say. "Go to sleep."

"YOU'RE FIRING ME." Francesca is standing in the doorway to the guest room where we're staying, hands on her hips.

"It's more like I'm just saying I don't need your services for the next few weeks," I say.

"Why not?" she says. "Why the fuck not? What is going on with you?"

I thought about this a whole lot this morning, especially while we were down at the tower putting breakfast in the

dumbwaiter to go up for Rhiannon. We did not see Rhiannon during all of this, but she was there.

I thought that Rhiannon probably was watching us, and all it would take to get her all upset is to see me do one careless thing with Francesca—or vice versa. Anything that makes it look a little bit like we're a couple, or betrays the fact I am fucking Francesca, and I'll lose Rhiannon.

I mean, yeah, I could probably tell Rhiannon fucking anything, right? I could tell her that in the apocalypse, there's now only one man to every four women, and women are all sharing, and it's no big deal, and maybe she'll even believe that shit.

But it would ruin it, not because I'm lying to her—I'm already lying to her and manipulating her.

It would ruin it for *me*.

I don't want to touch Francesca right now, that's the thing.

I only want Rhiannon.

I want to pretend that it's just me and her. I want to pretend that I could be the kind of man who could have a woman and it would be, you know, real.

Rhiannon doesn't know anything about me. She doesn't know that I'm rich. She doesn't know how many houses I own. To her, I'm just a man. She's just interested in me because I have a fucking penis and she's never seen one.

It's pure, and I want it.

Francesca has to go.

“Look, it's what you said the other night,” I say. “You know, about how eventually you're going to leave my ass. It, uh, I need a little break. You've noticed we've been slow anyway, right?”

Francesca shakes her head. “We have been slow, and your dick has been only half-hard a lot of times when I'm trying to suck it, but that is not why you're doing this, Easton.” She leaves the room.

I run a hand over my face. I guess I need to go after her.

Nope, she's back. She points at me. "You went to the tower without me."

"No," I say.

"You're fucking her."

"No!" I get up out of the chair where I'm sitting, as if I'm offended at the suggestion. "She's my sister, for fuck's sake."

"Oh, like that would stop you." She shakes her head at me, horrified. "Is that what it takes for you these days, Easton? It's got to be perverse in some way? And this—me—paying a woman to do degrading things to you—that's not perverse enough? It's got to be incest?"

"I'm not fucking her."

"Not yet, maybe," says Francesca. She looks down at the floor, tapping her foot, thinking. She raises her head. "How'd you even get in there? There's no *door*."

Francesca is too smart. She'll figure that out easily.

I decide to distract and deny. "I do not find incest arousing." This is kind of a lie? I don't have any desire to do incestuous things myself, but the idea of other people doing it...? I mean, I don't know.

She snorts.

"I *don't*."

"You'd do it, no question," she says. "I think you don't want me here because you know I'll give you shit about this. You don't plan on ever telling that girl that she gets half of your inheritance."

I spread my hands. "I mean, he's dead, and the will has already been read, and I think it's a done deal. She can't come take money from me, anyway." I don't know if this is true or not, but it seems reasonable. I don't know if I have a leg to stand on, however, if it comes out that I'm not actually a child of my father's loins.

“You’re a jackass, you know that? You have to give her the money.” She shakes her head at me again, disgusted. “Is she crazy?”

“No,” I say.

“You’d tell yourself that regardless since you’re planning on fucking her.”

I roll my eyes.

“You’re going to fuck your mentally unstable half-sister, because you’re bored.”

“That is not—”

“Isn’t that why you do everything, anyway? Nothing actually stimulates you anymore. You push and you push for something else, anything else, and it’s always empty, Easton, and this will be too, once you get over the initial excitement. Don’t do it.” She taps her bottom lip with her forefinger. “Or, if you have to do it, let me stay here and try to keep you from going over the edge.”

I’m really tired of this conversation now. “Look, I want you to go, and if you don’t like the bonus I offered you to get the fuck out, let’s negotiate until you’re happy. That’s all I want to discuss at this point with you.”

Her lips part and she just gazes at me for a few moments. I can’t read the expression on her face. Suddenly, she walks over to me and takes both of my hands in hers. She tugs on me. “Easton.”

“For fuck’s sake, Francesca.”

But she keeps tugging on me, so I let her lead me over to a couch and she sits down and pats the place next to her, so I sit down.

I glare at her.

She takes a deep breath. “I know you’re in denial about things, Easton.”

“Like what things?” No, I am not.

“And I don’t try to point those things out. I know if I do, you’ll just deny it further, and that it will be even harder for you to admit it. And I know you think I’m just in this thing for money with you, but... I don’t know... you’re not like the men I’ve been with like this before. You’re different, even though I see it in you, I see the way you could break. I can see how you could turn into them, but you’re not like them yet.”

“What the fuck are you even talking about?”

“You...” She sighs. “You love me.”

I throw up my hands. “I do *not*. I told you not to latch onto me saying shit when we’re fucking, and you *said* you were listening—”

“Okay, you care about me,” she said. “I’m not saying you think of me like an equal or that you respect me as a human being or that you... it’s not *that* kind of love.”

I furrow my brow. “Hey, Francesca, I don’t mean to disrespect you. I know I ask you to do things with me sometimes that might be a little bit, well, degrading, but—”

“Easton, just listen to me,” she says.

“But I don’t love you,” I say, and I’m gentle about it, because I really do feel like shit about having said it to her in the first place. More than once. It makes sense for her to think some part of me meant it, but I didn’t.

“This—sex—it’s not supposed to be what you make it into. It’s not supposed to be a transaction, and it’s not supposed to be something where the power dynamic is so badly skewed in one direction.”

“What do you mean *supposed*?” Because in my opinion, there’s no one making cosmic rules. We’re all just on our own here.

“Well, maybe that’s the wrong word,” she says. “I’m just saying, there’s a better way. And when men resort to this way, it’s because they’re desperate.”

“I’m not desperate. I can get laid anytime I want.”

“Right, but you always second-guess it, because you don’t think anyone is ever going to love you. I can see why you think that. No one ever has.”

“Fuck you,” I say, and I get off the couch.

“I just mean, your mom, your dad, your string of childhood caregivers, your whole life, Easton, it’s no wonder you’re fucked up.”

“I think this conversation is over.”

“I love you,” she says, touching her chest.

“No, you don’t,” I mutter. “You hate me, but you put up with me because of what I give you.”

“No,” she says, “no. I wish you didn’t have money. Then, maybe, this...” She gestures back and forth between us. She laughs softly. “On the other hand, no. If you wanted me like that, you wouldn’t keep putting distance between us. You can’t see me. You can’t see how rare it is to find someone like me, someone who *can* love you despite all your shit.”

“Francesca, you’re a fucking prostitute.”

She flinches at the word, but she keeps going. “I get you, Easton. I make allowances for you that other women—women who aren’t sex workers—won’t know how to make. I can accept things about you that they’ll never be able to accept. And we’re good together. I’m good for you, and you’re nicer to me than... than...” She sighs. “But fine. I mean, fine, throw me away, then. You’re a fucking idiot.”

It’s quiet.

Finally, I say, “I’m not saying I want this to be over, you know. You just... go back home. You can stay in my apartment in the city. You... I’ll come back eventually.”

“I can’t do that, though.” She’s quiet. She looks down at her knees.

“Why not?”

“This isn’t good for me, either. Sex isn’t supposed to be a transaction. It’s warping me. I mean, I came into it warped and

it's continuing to warp me further, and if I stay in, I'll be even more damaged. I don't need the money anymore, so I need to stop. I've known that for a while. It's just..." She lifts her gaze to mine. "You."

I feel horrible. "I didn't mean to make you think—"

"You didn't mean to develop actual feelings for me, you mean?"

"I didn't. I haven't."

"I didn't mean to either." She rubs her forehead. "I'm such a fucking idiot."

I don't want to say it out loud, but... I mean... she is. I don't feel anything for Francesca. Nothing at all. Well. Pity, I guess. Sympathy. Even... I don't know, whenever she's upset, I feel acutely uncomfortable in a way that I'm not used to feeling. I like making her happy and giving her things that make her smile. And if anyone ever says mean or cruel things to her—I mean, anyone besides my father—I always have words with them about it. Like, I want to protect her.

She's been with me a long time now, since I was maybe twenty.

But I feel nothing for her.

She gets up from the couch. She levels me with a look. "It's not going to be what you think with her. Sure, now she's innocent and sweet and she doesn't know anything about you, and you can fool her into thinking that you're some good guy, and you might get a brief period of time where she adores you, but... she'll figure it out, you know. She'll figure out that you're just using her. And—what we have, it's at least honest, right? You're ditching what we have for a lie."

"I'm not... that's not what I'm..." Fuck Francesca.

FIVE

I DON'T KNOW how to put movies on a USB stick, I'm realizing.

Who even uses a USB stick these days? There's cloud storage for anything you'd need.

But I'm guessing that Rhiannon doesn't have internet on her tablet, because otherwise, that would burst her bubble real quick about what's going on in the real world and how there's no apocalypse or whatever.

I don't need to pirate movies. I have money. I can buy anything I want to watch and I have a ton of subscriptions to streaming services, lots of which I only used once and just forgot to ever cancel.

But, like, the only way I can seem to figure out how to get movies on a USB stick—after a ton of googling—is to pirate them.

This turns out to be much harder than you would think it would be. It involves downloading a whole bunch of different programs. A torrent client. A robust pop-up blocker so that I can go searching on the sites that list the torrents. It's... I don't even understand, frankly, why you wouldn't just *pay* for the movie by the time I'm done with doing it. It's insane how difficult it is. Not worth it.

Now, sure, I could have just gone out into town and bought Rhiannon a different tablet. A newer tablet, with internet capabilities. Then, she could have explored the internet at her leisure, and she could have figured out that there was no apocalypse on her own and also used all of my

streaming services to watch whatever the fuck she wanted to watch.

That, see, would have been the right thing to do.

But by this point, I'm not even making excuses to myself that lying to her is for her own good or anything. I'm committed to preserving the lie that she has to stay in the tower, and that's part of the reason I'm sending Francesca away.

Madison will be gone for two weeks. It'll be long enough that I can seduce Rhiannon, corrupt her very thoroughly, stick my dick into her multiple times, and then... well, fuck it, who knows? Maybe I just leave her there afterwards.

Taking her out of this tower, it really fucks up my life. Best case, she takes half my inheritance. Worst case, she takes it all.

The right thing to do is to rescue her. That's what a good person would do.

I just happen to be, as Francesca pointed out, a jackass.

Whatever.

I do go into town and find a bookstore. I buy a bunch of bodice ripper romance books, because I'm corrupting her, after all, and besides, women like that shit.

I get the historical ones, because, uh, well, she's used to reading old books, classics, so this will be easier for her.

But also... I'm preserving the ruse. The movies I put on that USB stick? None of them are set in a time period later than the year 2000. She said the apocalypse happened twenty years ago, after all. I'm not trying to burst her bubble.

I get several phone calls from an unknown number but I chalk them up to spam and ignore them. Then a text from the number comes through. It says, *Please call me back. It's Mitchell Thorn, and I want to speak to you.*

Mitchell Thorn? He's my dad's big competition. He heads up the rival company that was always threatening to outperform my father's company.

Now, I personally have no role in my father's company. I never wanted a role, and no one tried to groom me for one. I don't have, like, a job, per se. I have an inheritance, and I have stocks in my dad's company—not enough to have a majority on the board or anything, not enough for anything at all, really.

I don't care about that shit, and I never have.

No reason for me to talk to Mitchell Thorn. I text him that. *Don't think we have anything to talk about.*

I need to talk to you. This can't be done via text message. We really need to meet in person.

What the fuck?

It's about your past. It's about your father.

I'm out of town, I text back. When I get back, I'll be in touch.

Really should be sooner rather than later, but I'll wait. For now.

That's super strange. I am curious, but I'm also distracted by the business with Rhiannon. I can't leave her to go meet with Mitchell Thorn, anyway. Someone has to be here to feed Rhiannon.

When I get back with my books, Francesca has already gone. All of her clothes are packed up, and the huge estate seems especially empty.

I have a little pang, something I didn't expect to have, but I shove that aside.

Instead, I get the food ready and take it and the books through the tunnel.

Soon enough, I'm opening the door on the other side, peering into the room at the bottom of the tunnel, calling Rhiannon's name.

"YOU CAME BACK," she says. She's smiling at me.

"I said I would," I say, holding out the containers with the food. It's a curry dish with rice and chicken. "I brought my

dinner, too. I thought we could eat together. Is there a table or something?"

"Over here," she says, showing me around the spiral staircase. There's actually a full kitchen set up down here, with a sink and refrigerator and a stove. They look really dated. The whole kitchen has this kind of early 90s look that reminds me of *Home Alone* or something—lots of jade green and mulberry.

I set the food on the table and go to turn on the sink. Water comes out. "Does this all work?" I turn on the stove. It buzzes at me.

"Yeah," she says.

"So, I could cook for you?"

"I cook sometimes!" she says. "Or, Madison will bring things and we'll cook together. We used to make brownies together when I was younger a lot."

I hold up a finger. "I've got one thing to take care of first."

She raises her eyebrows. "What?"

"Did Madison ever mention an observation room to you?"

"No." She shakes her head, confused.

I don't know if Madison was telling the truth about doctors watching Rhiannon on camera. It seems unlikely that any doctor would diagnose her as mentally ill, but then I don't really know anything about mental illness either.

If there are cameras in this tower, though, I want them gone. Last thing I need is video evidence of me and Rhiannon, especially considering I already whipped my dick out and shook it at her face last night.

"Did she ever talk to you about doctors watching you?" I say. "About there being cameras in here?"

"Oh, you mean that one." She points.

It's right above the doorway, an obvious camera, mounted there, pointing right at the spiral staircase and the area beyond,

which is a sort of living room area with couches and chairs and a big, big rug.

I go over to the camera and turn it off.

I take the data card out of it.

I pocket it.

That easy?

I hope so.

I look around for other cameras, but I don't see anything.

Rhiannon's talking during all of this. "But Madison didn't say doctors were watching the videos. She said that she would watch them because she felt lonely. She'd tell me to come down here and do activities where the camera could pick it up."

Hmm. Another weird thing that I don't entirely understand.

"There's no sound, but sometimes, I would make little signs and hold them up to the camera, just to say hi to her," says Rhiannon. "It gets lonely for me, too. But if we both stayed in the tower, we wouldn't have been able to eat or survive. Madison had to go out to scavenge for us."

I gesture to the food on the table. "That's scavenged, huh?"

"She said she found a supply of it in a big freezer. She goes to get more every few weeks, brings back as much as she can carry."

Uh huh. And how has Madison explained the electricity and the air conditioning and heat ducts that I see running throughout the tower?

Whatever. I'm not here to tear down the fantasy.

I'm here to indulge in my own fantasy, and it works better if Rhiannon is kept in the dark.

"So," says Rhiannon, "are you really positive that you're immune?"

“Yeah, definitely,” I say.

“I guess we’ll find out,” she says, sitting down at the table in the kitchen and opening up the frozen meal. They come in take-out containers with lids, and I heated them up before bringing them over, but they might be cold now. “If I get sick, we’ll know.”

“You’re not going to get sick,” I say.

She sighs. “Well, I’ve been thinking for a while now that it’s really just a matter of time. What kind of life is this, living in a tower, cut off from everyone else, anyway? Sometimes, I think I’d rather leave and die than live out my life up here all alone.”

This makes me feel like utter shit. Okay, okay, once I’m done with her, I swear to tell her the truth. I won’t leave her here. I can’t do that to her.

“What do you think?” she asks me pointedly.

“About...?”

“Whether or not I should risk it and leave the tower?”

“Well, uh...” I shrug, sitting down at the table with her. “I’m the first new person you’ve met. Let’s just see how this goes first before we start changing everything about your entire existence.”

“True,” she says with a little nod. “Leaving the tower sounds crazy scary, anyway. I should just stay here.” A pause. “Madison told you there are doctors? More than one doctor? Because I didn’t think there would be anything like that, not anymore.”

“Uh, I don’t know what she said, really.” I wave this away. “You know, she said a lot of things, and I—”

“I didn’t ask Madison why you and your, um, friend, I guess? Why you guys would stay and babysit me,” says Rhiannon. “Did she offer you something?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t even know.” Rhiannon shakes her head, putting her fork into the food. She doesn’t look at me. “She didn’t say that you could, like, do things to me.”

“*No*,” I say, very quickly.

“I’ve figured things out.” Rhiannon is pushing food around in her container with her fork. “Little things, here and there, from books, from movies, and from things Madison says, and men want things from women, and if she’s not your girlfriend, then maybe you’re looking for a girl to—”

“It’s shelter, okay?” I gesture. “That big house behind a gate? It’s, uh, enticing to a person, especially now that the world is just, you know, all destroyed and hellscapish. Because even the immune, you know, we...” I’m making this up, pulling from every single post-apocalyptic movie I’ve ever seen. “There’s no law, and people just steal from each other and things. It’s rough out there.”

Rhiannon looks at me, nodding.

“Look, here.” I upend the bag of romance novel books that I’ve bought for her. “You should just, you know, read these.”

She picks one up and turns it over. “You did bring books! Where’d you find so many? Madison said it was hard to find them.”

“Uh, I brought them,” I say. “Francesca, she likes these. But she’s gone now. She had to move on. So, it’s just you and me.”

Rhiannon looks up from the book.

I eat a forkful of rice. “It’s shitty how you’ve been so sheltered, that’s all. But I guess I get it. I can see why Madison wouldn’t want to talk about it with you.”

“Talk about what?”

“Sex,” I say.

Rhiannon looks at me blankly.

I’m guessing that’s not the term they’d use for it in a Dickens novel. Man, how did people in the Victorian period

even understand this? I get hard, though, hard because she's confused or because she's so wide-eyed and innocent or just because I said 'sex'? Who knows?

"You don't know what that means," I say.

"It's something to do with your, um, your cock," she says.

I like it when she says the word. It makes the appendage in question jerk a little. I feel wrong and right at the same time. "It does," I agree. "I can explain it to you, or you can just read the books."

She looks at the book, astonished. "It's in books?"

I nod, eating more rice.

"I just sort of got the impression it was something you weren't supposed to talk about," she said, leaning across the table. "And then you show up, and you seem so different. You just tell me things, show me things. I like that, but I feel... I don't know if I should trust you."

"You should totally trust me," I say.

"Well," she says, "if you don't get me sick..."

"You won't get sick."

A long pause.

She eats more of her food. Finally, without looking at me, she says in a tiny voice. "Explain it to me."

"What?" I say, even though I know what she means. I just want to make her say it out loud.

"Sex," she says, and she blushes, and she's pretty when she blushes, and my cock likes it when she blushes.

I grin at her.

She raises her eyebrows. "You said you'd explain it."

"It's a thing people do together," I say. "It feels good. My cock fits into your pussy."

She swallows. "It's not just a thing people do together. You don't just meet someone and then let him do that to you."

I shrug. “Depends, I guess.”

“On what?”

“The context? The guy?”

“But this is the thing that Madison says that men try to trick you into doing,” she says.

“I’m not trying to trick you into anything. I’m being very upfront and honest with you,” I say. Which is just so untrue on so many levels.

“Why do men have to trick women into it?” she says.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’ve never really understood that either. And, by the way, I don’t do that. I don’t trick women. I’m very honest about my intentions when I’m, you know, interested in a woman.”

“Are you . . . interested in me?” She’s uncertain.

“Definitely.”

She smiles, liking this. “So, what are your intentions? You want to, um, to sex me?”

“Have sex with you,” I say. “That’s how you say it.”

She blushes again. “Right, okay, well—”

“No, there’s no way you’d know that,” I say. “Don’t be embarrassed. And, yes, obviously, *look* at you.”

She does, looking down at herself.

“I told you before, you’re very pretty.”

She’s self-conscious but pleased. She gathers up her long, long hair and drapes it over her shoulder. She bites down on her lower lip.

“But we don’t need to get ahead of ourselves,” I say. “You’re a virgin, and we can work our way up to things. Take our time.” Because I want to toy with her. Because I’m a very bad man. Because I have two weeks, and I want to savor this.

“A virgin?”

“That means you’ve never had sex,” I say.

“And you have,” she says.

I nod. “Which is a good thing, because I know what I’m doing. Otherwise, we’d be fumbling around trying to figure it out.” I pause. “I mean, assuming you even want to with me. You don’t have to. Sorry, if I made you feel pressured.” But, fuck, of *course* I am pressuring her.

“No, no, I do.” She’s breathy. “When will I get another chance, right? You’ll leave, and I’ll be stuck here with Madison, and this could be it for me. *Yes*, I want to.”

Well, this is bullshit. She’s consenting under duress. She thinks this is her only chance, and it’s not.

Am I doing it anyway?

Fuck yes, I am.

So I just smile at her and say, “Good, I’m glad.”

She blushes again. She goes back to her food. “I’m glad you took down the camera.”

Wow, so I’m that obvious.

“You...” She eyes me. “There’s something you’re not telling me, though.”

I shake my head. I mean, she’s right, I guess. There are things I’m not telling her about sex. I didn’t say much at all, really. “What do you want to know?”

“You *are* trying to trick me,” she says. “Or... it’s why you’re here, anyway. It’s what you want from me.”

My lips part.

“What if I just give it to you, then?” She shrugs, and eats a bite of food. She chews and swallows. “Then, if that’s all you want, you don’t have to work so hard to convince me.” She picks up the book. “You promise you didn’t put yourself in a lot of danger to get this? To get *all* of these? Madison never brought more than three books at a time.”

She’s smart. She kinda sees right through me, doesn’t she? How does she see that, especially when she’s never been

around people her whole life? Maybe I'm just really obvious and pathetic.

"I don't think it's all I want," I say, and I realize this is true, and it kind of terrifies me. "And I..." I swallow. "Okay, real talk, it sometimes hurts girls their first time. I don't want... I want you to like it."

"Hurts," she says, nodding. "Yeah, I was thinking, last night, you said that thing about, um, a hole, and I was thinking there's just no way that you fit in me like that."

"Oh, it'll definitely fit," I say.

She's blushing again. "But it'll hurt."

"No, it's not supposed to hurt," I say. "It just does sometimes."

"Why?"

"I don't know," I say, and I realize this is something I've given very little thought to. "Maybe it needs... stretching."

She considers. "That would make sense, I guess." As if it's an academic proposition. "So, maybe fingers or something instead to start."

"I mean, you... when you touch yourself..."

"Oh." She nodded. "Sure, I could try that."

Of course she doesn't put her fingers inside herself when she masturbates. Obviously, she touches her clit, my little fantasy the night before notwithstanding. It's my turn to blush. I feel incredibly stupid and idiotic.

How am I supposed to do this?

I've never had sex with a virgin.

Fuck, I don't know if I've ever had sex with a woman and really gave much of a shit if she was enjoying herself.

I always figured she'd just fake it because I was paying her. Because even when I wasn't paying her, I sort of was. I was getting her into clubs she couldn't get into, taking her places she couldn't go herself, that kind of thing.

Even if I was dating a girl who was of the same social standing as me, it was the same. She expected to be pampered in a certain way. She'd been given things by her parents and she thought she should get that from a boyfriend too. So, a wealthy girl, she also only wanted my money. But she was less grateful about what I gave to her, since she felt entitled to it.

I lift a finger. "This is why we're working up to it. Not yet. Let's just ease into all of it. No rushing things." Which will give me a chance to go and do a lot of research on the internet. I pull out the USB flash drive I loaded up with movies and slide that over to her. "Let's, uh, let's watch a movie and... and try to relax together." I want it more organic than this, I think, moving closer on the couch, putting my arm around her. Maybe I kiss her, maybe I don't, but nothing more than that.

Sure, I've fucked this up already, because I showed her my dick, but I want it like this now. I like her, and I don't want to hate myself for doing this to her. I don't want her to hate me either.

"Oh," she says, grinning. "Really? You'll stay and watch with me? Madison hasn't done that since I was a little girl."

Probably because Madison is still showing her kids movies when she's a grown woman. I don't even understand any of this.

I wasn't sure what kinds of movies to put on this thing, honestly. I was limited in that I couldn't put anything recent on there, since that would give away that there's no apocalypse, and I tried to pick movies I thought she would like, not movies I liked.

She gets up and scampers up the stairs. "I'll bring down my tablet. I can prop it up on the coffee table in the living room." She's so excited.

I feel guilty again. Damn it, this isn't going to be any fun if I keep feeling like shit the entire time. Maybe I should come clean entirely, tell her that there's no virus, no apocalypse, nothing like that.

Maybe after the movie, though?

She sets up her tablet, propping it up on pillows on the coffee table, and we both sit on the couch while she looks at the movies I've brought for her to watch. She looks at me. "How is dancing dirty?"

I laugh. "Uh, well, we could watch that movie and find out, I guess." I don't even think I've ever seen *Dirty Dancing*, but I seem to remember it's a movie that chicks like. I don't know.

She shrugs. "Okay." She puts it on and sits back on the couch, grinning widely, hugging another pillow really tightly. She keeps glancing at me. She's excited.

I can't help but feel a little caught up in it, too. It's nice to make her this excited over something so little. It's a good feeling.

When she sees the first shot of the movie, she lets out a gasp. "It's... real." She turns to look at me. "Like a video, like the camera takes here." She points at where the camera used to be.

"You've never seen a movie that wasn't animated, have you?" I say softly.

She shakes her head and turns back to the small screen, mesmerized.

It ends up that I don't touch her the whole time. I can't bring myself to distract her from the movie, because she's glued to the screen, caught up in every second of it. She's swept up in the drama of it. She cries three times. She loves the music.

When it's over, she flings herself back on the couch and gazes up at the ceiling. She's speechless.

"So, you liked it," I say. I kind of liked it, too, actually. It's a decent movie. A little boring now and then, I guess, but mostly pretty interesting. That scene where the dancer guy, what's-his-name... Johnny? Where he says that the women were using him, I get what he's saying there. It's a good movie.

She sits up and scoots close to me. “Thank you,” she says and she kisses me.

It’s quick, just a peck on my lips, but it’s like a brush of sweet rose water. I reach for her, even as she’s trying to pull away, stop her, put my arms around her.

“People do that,” she breathes, practically out of breath. “I know people give kisses to say thank you.”

“Yes,” I say, and I kiss her again, but I put my tongue in her mouth.

She gasps when I do it, and then goes limp in my arms, surrendering. She’s tentative, not sure at first, but quickly learning to move her tongue against mine, sighing against me, and she’s this tiny, perfect, little thing in my arms.

When we break apart, she gazes at me with half-lidded eyes and swollen lips. “Oh,” she whispers. “Oh, wow, I didn’t know it was like that.”

My cock pulses, but it’s while I’m feeling this other sort of feeling for her, a feeling I’ve never felt at the same time as my cock was hard—it’s a feeling of sweetness and reverence. I want her. I want to fuck her. I want to spread her little thighs and nail her right here on this couch. But I don’t know. I want to be sweet with her too. I want to be gentle. I don’t want to hurt her. I want to take care of her.

I don’t know if I’ve ever felt all these things at the same time for a woman.

It’s different.

It’s good.

It’s kind of terrifying.

What is she *doing* to me?

“Me either.” I kiss her again, not as hard, slow and sweet.

“You either what?” She’s pulling away.

“Didn’t know it could be like that,” I say softly. “God, you’re perfect, Rhiannon.” I run my fingers over her long, long hair.

She writhes against me, sighing. “You’ve kissed before.”

“Not like this,” I say.

She lets out a little noise, like a whimper. “I want it.”

“What?”

“The, um, the sex,” she says. “Your cock. I want that.”

I groan. I kiss her again, a thorough, claiming kiss. I push her down into the couch and press into her.

She gasps and naturally settles into a perfectly provocative pose, her thighs parted, her hips cradling me.

I rut into her and her pelvis rises to meet mine.

She lets out a moan. She puts her hands between us and starts to work at the buttons of my pants.

I reach down and I actually stop her. “Wait,” I manage, my voice scratchy. “Hold on, Rhiannon. We shouldn’t do this too fast.”

“It’s like the movie,” she says. “Baby and Johnny, they—”

“I want to be sure I know what I’m doing,” I say, pushing her hands away.

“You said you did. You said you’d done it before.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know how to... I don’t want to hurt you. It would kill me to hurt you.”

“It did not look like it hurt her, on the movie,” she says. “I think it’s fine. I’m all... tingly and throbbing between my legs. My, um...” She drops her voice to a whisper, but she’s smiling at me. “My pussy. It feels good. Please.”

I kiss her again. “Just, um, just...” I move off of her, scooting back on the couch. “Show me how you touch yourself there. Can you make yourself come?”

“Come?”

“Climax?”

“Oh.” She grins. “Yeah, I think I know what you mean. But if you’re going to look at me, I want to look at you.” She

nods at my crotch. “You said I could see it anytime I wanted.”

“I, uh, I did say that,” I say, and I unzip myself.

She wriggles out of her jeans.

“Take...” My voice is really deep. “Take everything off for me. I want to see you.”

“Okay,” she says, grinning at me. She doesn’t wear a bra or any underwear. She doesn’t remove any of the hair on her body, and this—uh—this is fucking *hot*.

I didn’t think I liked that, but she’s this tiny little thing with little tufts of hair under her armpits and over her pussy, and her legs are peppered in a little bit of downy hair, and holy shit, do I like it. It’s about the juxtaposition of it, I think, about how she’s small and yet somehow wild. What I feel when I see it, it’s primal.

I also think about how hot it would be to shave her, both of us in a tub, her legs over my shoulders while I rub shaving cream all over her thighs and calves and then gently scrape her smooth?

My balls tighten almost painfully. “Fuck, you look amazing, Rhiannon,” I tell her.

She preens, but she’s blushing. “Show me your cock more,” she says. “Can I see your—”

I yank my shirt over my head.

She grins. “Thank you.” And then she parts her thighs and shows me the pretty pink center of her.

I wrap my hand around the base of my cock and squeeze.

She puts two fingers at the apex of her sex and begins making them glide around in circles, all the while looking eagerly at my cock.

I take in all of her as I begin to stroke myself, every bit of her skin. She’s so pretty, and she’s all mine, untouched, unclaimed, innocent. I don’t know if I’m going to last very long, so I slow down. I want her to come first.

I wonder if I can say something to help her along. I'm a little tongue-tied, so all I come up with is, "I like watching you touch yourself."

She sighs. "I like watching you, too. Your hand there, on yourself. Your fingers are so thick and... and I don't know, male, I guess." Her gaze flicks over my bare chest. "I like your shoulders, too. I *really* like looking at you."

Fuck. I'm *not* going to last. I let go of my cock entirely.

"Don't stop," she gasps, rubbing herself more furiously, her other finger going to dance over her nipple, not really pinching or rubbing it, I realize, just kind of barely touching the tip of one and then the other. Her nipples stand up tall and hard and rosey-brown. She has very nice breasts, smallish but round and dainty and I want to fuck her so hard that I make them bounce with every one of my thrusts.

So, I jerk myself, because she wants me to, and I'm helpless at the idea of this, of being arousing to her from doing so little. I've never really watched a girl play with herself like this, and it's powerful because she doesn't have the knowledge she'd need to do it for my benefit. She doesn't know how to pretend to please a man, and so, she doesn't. She just does it for her.

Pure, like I said.

I could get hooked on this, on her, on... *fuck*.

I stare into her sex, and it's changing color. It's not pink anymore, it's deep red, purplish in some places. It jumps a little, a small little convulsion rippling through it. "God," I say, still not very capable of putting words together. "Your pussy."

"Do you like it?" She spreads her legs wider.

"Yes."

She shivers in pleasure at this. I swear her nipples get harder.

"You... it was pink at first, and now, the more you touch yourself, the more it gets redder and more, uh, swollen. You pretty turned on there, Rhiannon?"

“Yes,” she gasps. “I don’t think it’s ever been quite like this. I’m just... I’m right on the *edge*, Easton.” Her voice has gotten throaty.

“Want to help,” I say softly. “Does it help if I talk about how much I like your pussy?”

“Mmm, it does.” She shuts her eyes.

“It’s like the most perfect pussy ever, I think,” I say. “It’s tiny and tucked away. It’s small and sweet and yet it’s somehow...” What’s the word? “Womanly, deep, *savage*. It’s... God, I’m so hard looking at those little tremors going through it.”

She gasps, biting down on her lower lip.

“I want to watch you come for me, Rhiannon.” I’ve never wanted something so intensely in my life. “Make your pretty pussy come. Do it for me, please.”

She lets out a strangled moan and then goes entirely still, all over still, her finger on her pussy still. The only thing that’s moving is her pussy, and I can barely see the way it’s jumping, little tiny movements that are just exactly like the way my cock feels when it—

I come, too, splattering my hand with my cum. I don’t care. I rub it into myself, fuck if any of that matters.

But she’s astonished. “Something comes *out* of your cock?” She’s sitting up on the couch even as I’m crumpling back into it, spent and sated and happy in this way that I don’t know if I’ve ever felt.

I pant, eyes shut, not answering. My hand is covered in drying, sticky cum.

“I mean, I guess I get all slippery down there, also, but I was thinking that was because something’s supposed to fit inside me. Why does that happen? If it’s supposed to make it easier to go in, it shouldn’t happen at the *end*.”

Right, okay, so here’s another moment in which I see two paths.

I get it, suddenly, the reason—the deep-down reason, the undercurrent—as to why men trick women into having sex with them.

It's because women have more to risk.

I should tell her.

I don't.

“Yeah, that's not supposed to happen inside you,” I say. “It's just, uh, it's a way to...” I make up something dirty and hot and a total lie. “It's a way to mark you. If I spill my cum all over you, it's like an animal thing, you know, like a scent thing. It just... I'll always pull out. And I want to come *all over* you.” I touch her now, my first time touching her. I trace the bottom side of one of her pretty tits. “Here.” I drag my finger up to her jaw. “Here.” I touch her lips. “In here.”

Her eyes are wide, but she likes this. She pulls me down for another kiss.

The naked kiss is out-of-this-world good, feeling her silky smooth skin all over me, pressed against me.

My dick is starting to perk up again, and I don't know how I manage to leave, really.

I want to fuck her.

I want to take her virginity.

I mean, I'm *going* to take her virginity.

But I guess I leave because sometimes, putting something off, something that you really want, it's its own kind of pleasure in a weird way. Stretching it out, it's good.

So, I leave her.

I lock her back in the tower, my captive little plaything.

I'll be back to toy with her some more.

Tomorrow.

SIX

THE NEXT DAY, I bring her breakfast around the outside of the tower, in the dumbwaiter. She's at the window, waving at me. I blow her a kiss.

I'm not going to be able to wait until evening to go in there, but I also need to figure some things out.

I don't want to hurt her, for instance. I mean, if it's just an inevitable thing, like if it has to hurt virgins, okay, I guess I'll just have to do it. My cock actually gets half-hard at this idea.

Maybe I do want to hurt her.

Maybe I'm very fucked up.

But, no, I mean, there's got to be a way to at least make it less, right? Humans have been having sex since the dawn of time and we've figured out how to build skyscrapers, have indoor plumbing, and fly airplanes. Surely, we could figure this out, right?

So, I don't do a lot of research on the internet before it becomes painfully obvious that I'm just a fucking idiot when it comes to women.

The issue, it seems, that causes painful sex is not lack of stretching but lack of arousal. When women are aroused, two things happen—one, their vaginal cavity deepens, which would make fucking sense, and two, they get wet.

Basically, seems to me, this whole myth of virginity loss being painful probably comes from men not understanding how to get women aroused. I feel superior to these generations of idiots for about two seconds until I realize I am on the internet googling this shit as a twenty-four-year-old man who's

had sex with double-digits of women and I did not know this shit.

Why didn't I care?

More disturbingly, why do I care about *her*?

I go to the window and look across the ruins of the vineyard at the tower standing there against the sky, and I decide it's just because she's so different than any other woman I've ever met. She's grown up in a tower. She's entirely innocent. She's intriguing.

Which makes sense to the point of how much I'm interested in banging her, sure.

Something new and exciting is always a fun fuck to achieve.

But this is going beyond just fucking her, it's something else.

I want to *please* her.

Why?

It's not because I care about her, because if I cared about her, I'd be more interested in disabusing her of the notion that she's trapped in that tower. I'd be making sure she got the inheritance that's coming to her.

I put my fingers to the pane of glass and I feel worried.

This woman scares me.

Maybe she'll be less scary if I put my cock in her, though?

On the other hand, though, there's the savoring thing. Now that I know there's no reason to rush it—I guess I thought if we had to get the painful sex over with, we should just do it—I don't know if I want to rush it.

Maybe I should work up to taking her virginity, very slowly.

My cock tingles and lengthens at this thought.

If she's my plaything, if I'm toying with her, let's make the game last as long as possible, right?

Because, who knows, maybe I fuck her and then I get bored with her immediately afterwards.

Some part of my brain lurches at this thought, sending out a flood of warning all down my spine. *No*, it says. *No, we don't get bored of this one. No, run away. No, we are fucked.*

I shove this aside.

Of *course* I'll get bored of her.

SHE'S GRINNING WHEN I show up with lunch. "I thought you wouldn't come until evening, like the past two days."

"Couldn't stay away," I say. I set down the food and then wind my arm around her waist and pull her flush against me. I kiss her, and she melds into me. I like this, being able to touch her whenever I want, feeling like she belongs to me. I think she fits perfectly against me.

Fuck, I like her.

We don't eat. We end up tangled up on the couch, making out furiously. She's straddling me. I'm dragging my hands up and down over her back, the curve of her hips, her ass, just touching her wherever I want to touch her.

I haven't kissed like this since I was a kid. Maybe not since that housekeeper's-daughter girlfriend of mine. It's heady and good and exultant. I feel a little bit high, as if I'm buzz-drunk, just on Rhiannon's kisses.

I am fucked, and deep down, I know it.

"Today," she says against my mouth.

"Today what?"

"Today, you have sex with me," she says in a soft, coy little voice.

I grin at her. "Not yet."

"No?"

"No, I, uh, I needed to find some things out, okay? I never took someone's virginity before."

"Oh," she says, sitting back. "Is it going to hurt?"

“No, not if we do it right,” I say. “We need to work up to it, though, like I said. Get you ready for my cock there. Get your system used to me.”

“How do we do that?”

“Well, I was saying before that I wanted to come all over you?” I say. God, I’m such a dick, telling her this shit. It turns me on to lie to her, for some reason. It turns me on to be the only source of information she has about all this. It turns me on to take her innocence. I’m not a good person. “That’s important. We should, you know, just paint your skin with my cum.”

She wriggles on my lap. “Okay.”

“And you should take my tongue and fingers in your pussy first,” I say huskily. I want to taste her, that’s the thing. I’ve never been much for going down on women, but it’s not because I find it unpleasant, mostly because I feel like they have a vested interest in pretending that they like it, even if they don’t. If they’re using me for money or status or social connections, they’ll put up with bad head and never let me know it’s bad.

Rhiannon and I are not going to have that problem, though, because I’ll teach her how to guide me.

“Oh,” she says, smiling, clearly pleased with this idea. “That doesn’t sound awful.”

“And I’ll teach you to take my cock in your mouth,” I tell her. “You should swallow my cum, probably a lot of it, just to get your system accustomed to it.”

“And then, you’ll have sex with me?”

“Uh huh,” I say.

“So, how long will all this take?”

“Oh, I don’t know, but not longer than two weeks. I promise to take your virginity before Madison comes back.”

“You swear?”

I nod.

“And you’re not allowed to do dangerous things or go get yourself infected or anything—in case you’re not immune. You are the only man I’ve ever seen in my life, and I get wanting to do it right, but it would be just my luck if you’d get yourself killed before I get to do this.”

Guilt again. For fuck’s sake. “I’m not going to get killed, I promise you.”

“I just want to know what it’s like,” she says. “I read two of those books you brought me, and in both of them, it did hurt but only for a minute.”

Fuck, I forgot that I am *not* her only source of information.

“I guess because it’s historical,” she says. “They must not have known how to do it right back then, I guess? One of them, she bled.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t happen unless you’re not aroused,” I say. I did read about that. It’s insane to me that for, like, centuries, people thought there was some way to tell if a woman wasn’t a virgin due to something inside her that actually doesn’t change regardless of sex.

“I mean, I’d rather it not hurt,” she says. “So, okay, we’ll do it the right way, but...”

“You know, maybe those books were a bad idea,” I say. “Maybe I should take them away.”

“What?” She sits up straight.

“I’ll get you different books.” Not sex books. Not books that are going to make sure you understand that I’m *lying* to you.

She climbs off of me and goes over to the table. She gets her tray of food, takes the cover off, and peers down at it.

“Oh, I thought I’d heat those up here,” I say, coming over to take it from her. It’s still frozen. I put it in the microwave, along with mine. “I just didn’t want them to get cold. Seems dumb to heat it up if we have a kitchen here.”

“Yeah, okay,” she says. A pause. She looks at the floor. “I’m sorry.”

I furrow my brow. “What?”

“For whatever I did wrong. Whatever I did to make you take the books.”

Shit. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“That’s how Madison is,” she says. “When I screw up, she takes things.”

My jaw twitches. “No, you didn’t do anything wrong,” I say. “It’s just, those books, I’m realizing they’re unrealistic, you know? They’re going to give you this weird, twisted idea about sex, and I don’t want... I’ll find you something else. You didn’t do anything wrong, I swear.”

She keeps her head bowed.

“Hey.” I close the distance between us. “You’re great. You are absolutely sweet and perfect, and please don’t be sorry. It’s me. I screwed up. I should have brought you something different. I’ll go out right now, after lunch, and find something —”

“It’s dangerous for you to do that!”

“I swear it’s not. I won’t go far. I won’t put myself in danger.”

She eyes me with real fear in her eyes and I feel really, really shitty.

But we eat lunch, I take the books, and I go back to the book store and get Harry Potter books, the whole fucking series, plus *The Hunger Games*, because they’re young adult, right? No sex. And everyone likes them.

I come right back, and I set her new books on the coffee table, and she’s coming down the stairs, excited that I’m there, telling me she was just up there playing guitar. She’s trying to figure out how to play one of the songs from *Dirty Dancing* on it, she says. The one at the end, about having the time of your life.

“You can do that?” I’m in awe. “You just hear it and figure out how to play it?”

“Well, nothing but time around here.” She gestures to encompass the tower. “So, I figure out all sorts of things.”

Fuck, is there nothing about this situation that’s not going to make me feel constantly guilty?

“You want to show me?”

She blushes again. “I’ve never played my guitar in front of anyone. Madison never seemed interested.”

I’m beginning to despise Madison. I need to figure this all out, why she’s done this to Rhiannon, how my father fits into it. As soon as I’m not distracted by other things, I’ll devote all my attention to solving that mystery.

“Well,” I say, “I want to hear you.”

“Maybe,” she says. “Maybe at some point.” Then she moves closer, shimmying her way into my arms and kisses me. “Thank you for the new books.”

Well, I’m actually a jerk for taking her books away from her, for deceiving her, but the kisses are sugary whimsy, her pretty pink lips on mine, and I’m getting that buzz-drunk feeling again, so I just go with it.

I pull her up the stairs and we lie down on her bed and kiss.

I roll her tiny body under mine and hold her wrists above her head and kiss her jaw and her neck and her ear lobe, and this makes her gasp and writhe and moan against me.

I take her top off—she’s still not wearing a bra—and I tell her that her tits are basically perfect.

She likes that.

I ask her to show me how she likes to touch them, and I study her fingers barely grazing her nipples. I see how tight and hard they get from her feather-light touches.

And then I try to mimic the touches with my own fingers.

At first, I think I’m too rough.

It's difficult, really, touching her so gently. She makes me feel huge and lumbering and clumsy, but I kind of like that about being with her. I like seeing my blunt, thick fingers on her soft, pretty breasts.

Anyway, she doesn't say anything, but I note her reactions, and the gentler I am with her, the more she sighs and the harder her nipples get. I play with her and play with her, enjoying the way she reacts—I don't think I've ever enjoyed this before, but it's power. I have complete domination over her body, and she's given it to me. She's surrendered to me, surrendered herself for pleasure. All I have to do is deliver it.

I ask her if I can suck on her nipples.

She says yes, dreamily, and I put my mouth on her.

But she doesn't really react much from the suckling, if I'm honest. I like it, and it's hot, but she seems to like my lips barely making contact with the tips of her more, my tongue lathing over the little nubs of her.

She's panting.

I'm playing with her bare flesh.

"Please," she says, finally. "Please, I want to come, Easton."

"Mmm," I say, "me too." I want to make her come, but maybe we'll work up to that. I push up over her, settle down so that we're nose to nose. I kiss her. "I guess you're allowed to play with your pussy, Rhiannon, since you've been such a good girl."

She flushes, gasping. "Oh, that's... why is that...?" She licks her lips. "I want to ask for permission."

"Yes," I say. "Maybe, from now on, to make sure we get this all right, the process of taking your virginity, I mean? From now on, you should get my permission before you come, okay?"

She writhes, moaning, her head tipping back, exposing the length of her creamy neck to me.

I kiss it. “Before I leave, if you think you’re going to want to touch yourself, you’ll need to ask, all right?”

“All right,” she says. “You know better than me how to do this. I’ll do what you say, Easton.”

My cock jerks. “Yes, yes, whatever I say. You’ll be my good, obedient girl, hmm?”

“I want to make you happy,” she breathes. “Can I touch myself now?”

“Say please.”

“Please,” she says promptly, gasping up at me.

“Go ahead,” I say. I straddle her chest as she’s worming her finger under her clothes to touch her clit. I free my cock.

“Oh,” she gasps. “Are you going to mark me for the first time?”

“Yes, sweet girl,” I say. “Going to mark your tits. Come on them and rub it right into your hard, little nipples.”

“I want that,” she gasps.

I give myself one tentative stroke. I’m about to burst here. “You have to leave it as long as you can. Let it settle on your skin, baby.” I don’t know why I call her that. I usually don’t bother with little affectionate words like that shit. I like to keep a certain kind of distance, but there’s no distance with her, none at all. “Let it soak into you.”

“So I get used to it, to you, to your cum,” she breathes, eyes focused on my cock. “Oh, God, I love seeing you touch yourself. It’s *so* good.”

I’m done for. My balls tighten up and I crest in a burst of sweetness. I spurt onto her, splattering those pretty little dainty tits of hers with my cum, and I like the fact that I’m soiling her. It hits her and possesses her. She’s sticky and cum-covered and mine. I groan and I hit another level of goodness and manage to eke out one more jet of semen, which splatters her skin.

She's sighing and gasping under me, and then she goes still again, and I realize she goes still when she comes, and I like that. I like knowing that.

I rub my cum into her breasts. "You coming for me like a good girl, baby?"

"Yes, baby," she says, saying it back easily, like it's not strange, but... well, I don't know, I gave her an array of movies, and maybe she heard people saying it on there. I wonder if I need to take the movies away, too. That'd be hard. She might have copied them onto the tablet's hard drive.

Why am I thinking about this?

"Mmm, I like it," she says, sighing. "I like being marked by you."

"Do you?"

She's writhing, half-lidded, post orgasm, a little sex kitten, her nipples glistening with the remnants of my own orgasm. "So much," she says.

"I like marking you," I say. I bend down to capture her lips. "I like making you mine."

She runs a hand down my back. "Are you mine, too, then?"

I gasp. "Yeah," I say. "Yeah, I think I am."

And we're kissing again.

SEVEN

I FALL ASLEEP with her in my arms in her bed, both of us half dressed. It's nice.

When I wake up, she's asleep, and I check the time. I need to get more food, so I sneak out carefully, quietly, not wanting to wake her, and I go to get more food.

I go back right away, though.

I could stay away from her, of course, but I don't want to.

She's awake when I get back, still topless, probing the crusty dried cum on her chest.

I get hard as all fuck seeing it's still there. But I feel bad, because it's gross and it's probably uncomfortable. I've had it dry on my own skin before. I know what it's like. There's a shower in the tower. It's up here, off her bedroom. I've had to come upstairs and use the bathroom on occasion since I've been staying for longer and longer periods of time.

So, I grab her and pull her in there, turning on the water and peeling off the rest of her clothes along with mine.

It's the first time we've both been completely naked together, and it's nice to be under the hot water together. I scrub her entirely clean, lingering on her nipples as they harden under my soapy, slippery fingers against her soft skin.

She takes the soap from me, giving me a mischievous grin. "Should I wash you, too?"

"Are you kidding?" I say. "You better, and do a good job, too."

"Wash you everywhere?"

“Please,” I say.

“Turn around,” she says.

So, I do, and then I’m treated to the absolutely erotic sensation of her small, sweet hands rubbing soap all over my shoulders and back. She sighs as she touches me, commenting on the wideness of my shoulders, the curvature of my back, and then she glides her fingers satiny over the curve of my ass.

I’m an attractive guy, but it’s mostly because I have nice facial features. I don’t lift weights. I don’t have huge, bulging muscles. I’m not fat or anything, but I certainly don’t have some sculpted body. She seems to find me amazing, though.

I’ve been, you know, admired by women before, but I never believed them. I always figured they were just saying what I wanted to hear.

Rhiannon is genuine, and it makes my dick hard but it also makes my heart squeeze in this painful way. I want to lap up the way she appreciates me, like a stupid, pathetic dog. It’s just... it feels *too* good. I didn’t know it could feel like this.

I let her wash my ass. I let her invade the crack of my ass with the soap, not saying a damned thing about it. It feels nicer than I think it would feel, for one thing, and I like that she wants to touch me *there*, and I—fuck—some part of me likes being vulnerable with her, even though the balance of power is very clearly tipped in my direction. I’m lying to her about everything.

Her fingers come forward to explore my balls, and I let out a mangled groan.

“Oh, you like that?” She gives them a squeeze.

“Gentle with those,” I breathe, tipping forward to lean against the wall of the shower.

“Ooh, could I hurt you here?”

“Yes.”

“So, you trust me, huh?” Her fingers, soapy, moving over that sensitive part of me, is like some kind of magic spell.

“Yeah, I guess I do,” I whisper.

“This need washed also?” Her other hand strokes my very hard cock.

“I mean... probably?”

She giggles. “You like this? Am I doing it okay?”

“You’re... *fuck.*”

She strokes my cock up and down. “Like this?”

“Just like that,” I gasp.

She fondles my balls and rubs my cock and she makes me come, and it’s transcendently wonderful.

In the aftermath, I’m kissing her, and she’s wriggled up against me, all of her nakedness against mine under the stream of hot water.

“We wasted it, didn’t we?” she says.

“Wasted what?”

“Your cum. You said you need to get it all over me.”

“Oh, right,” I say. “Well, we’ll make up for that later. After we eat.”

“You brought food?” She smiles at me.

“Yeah, needs to be heated up.”

She moves around me, to get out of the shower.

“Wait,” I say, stopping her, pulling her back against me. “You didn’t come.”

“Well, I have to ask permission, right?” she says, grinning at me.

“You do,” I acknowledge in a voice that’s somehow become a growl. She brings out something feral in me, I think.

“Well, I will later, don’t worry.”

I let her go.

We heat up the food in the kitchen, and I say we can watch a movie while we eat, which she agrees to readily.

We watch *The Princess Bride*—I really wasn't sure what to put on here, but I feel like this is a movie most people like, right? I don't know why I ended up with a bunch of movies from the 1980s on there, though. I guess because of my limitations of movies set before 2000, I picked a bunch of old movies.

She loves it. She laughs so loud at certain points that she snorts, and it's cute as hell.

Afterward, she pulls me up the stairs to lie in her bed with her.

We roll around and kiss and slowly end up removing all our clothes again.

I kiss my way over her breasts again and settle my face between her thighs.

She sucks in noisy breaths as I put my mouth on to her little slit. "Oh, God," she says. "Oh, God, you're really doing that."

I laugh into her. I kiss her clit—at least, what I hope is her clit. It's kind of a forest for the trees situation here, and I decide I need to remedy that.

She moans.

I lift my head to look at her. "Spread your legs nice and wide, baby, really let me see this little pussy."

She obeys me.

I see her clit now, right there, cute in its hood. I kiss it again.

She mewls.

"You like that?" I say.

"Uh huh," she breathes.

I remember the way she touched herself, the way she used two fingers to make circles around her clit. Should I lick circles? I poke her clit with my tongue.

She giggles.

Giggling is not what I'm going for. I lap at her clit instead, licking one long stripe over her.

She lets out a long, low sigh.

Then I lick a circle.

She moans again.

"Which is better?" I say, showing her long lick and the circle again.

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know," she breathes. "Maybe alternate them."

This makes me grin, and I do exactly that. I do that—back and forth—while her pussy trembles and swells and gets wet and eager under me.

She sighs and sighs. "You said..."

"What?" I ask her gently.

"You said I have to take your tongue," she whispers. "In my, um, my hole."

"Would you like that?"

"I don't know. I've never put anything in there," she gasps. "The first night, after you told me—after you showed me your cock and it was so big, I sort of thought about it. I put my fingers around it but... but..."

"My tongue will be gentle, baby," I soothe her.

She nods, but she doesn't say anything.

"You afraid?" I say, my voice as soothing as possible.

"I..." A pause. "Maybe." Her voice is tiny.

Well, she did bring it up, though, didn't she? I don't think she wants me to back off. I don't think I want to back off, anyway. "Well, you do have to take it. You say you want to give me your virginity, right, baby?"

"I do, I do," she says.

"Well, if you can't take my tongue, you can't take my cock."

“I know.”

“So, I’m going to tongue-fuck you then, and you’re going to relax and get penetrated in your tight little virgin hole for the first time, right?”

She lets out a whine. “O-okay.”

“You want this, I know you do.”

“Give me your tongue,” she says, all in a rush, and she’s afraid but excited.

I lick around her first. She’s wet and tart and my tongue slides in easily.

She groans. “Oh. Oh, that’s nice, actually.”

I remove my tongue. “Yeah, it is. You like that, and now you need to take a finger.”

“Uh huh,” she gasps.

I slide one finger inside her pussy. Her tiny little hole grips my finger, and she’s wet as all fuck.

She moans.

I moan. I start to gently finger fuck her as I lick her clit.

She cries out. “F-fuck,” she says. I don’t think she’s ever said the word before. She’s mimicking me, because I keep saying it, and I like that and move my finger more frantically in her.

I lick her.

She pants.

When she’s close, her voice is small and breathy. “Can I come now?”

“Good girl for asking,” I say in a guttural voice, loving this feeling, loving having her pleasure within my power. “Come for me, Rhiannon.”

When she bursts on my tongue, gently flutter-clenching my finger, it’s intense, better than anything I think I’ve ever felt in my life. I feel such a sense of accomplishment, like nothing I’ve felt.

I maybe haven't accomplished much in my life, true. Most of it has been handed to me.

But this, getting her off, making her make those sob-moans while I have my mouth on her pussy...

It's the best thing I've ever done.

I kiss her afterwards, urging her to taste herself on my tongue, and I drag my cock against her soft belly and spill all over her while she's clinging to me, while my cock is trapped between our bodies.

I sleep there, wrapped around her in her bed in the tower.

I don't want to let go of her.

EIGHT

IN THE MORNING, I wake up to a tell-tale tickle in the back of my throat. Man, I'm probably coming down with a cold, I think.

And then I sit up, thinking about Rhiannon, with no immune system, who I've just exposed...

And who is going to think that she's got, like, the plague that took down humanity.

Fuck.

Maybe she won't get sick, I try to tell myself. Maybe it'll just be me. I probably picked it up somewhere when I went out to get books, and maybe if I'm just showing symptoms now, she'll be fine.

Except I know she's going to get it, because we've been swapping all kinds of body fluids.

Damn it.

She wakes up and sees me looking down at her in horror, and she recoils. "What?"

"Okay, look, Rhiannon, you've been sick before, right? Like, you've had a cold?"

She blinks at me. "You're not immune."

"I *am* immune. I'm getting sick, but it's not that sickness, it's just a cold, and I'm sure I gave it to you, but you're going to be fine."

She shakes her head. "Oh, my God."

“You’re going to be fine,” I tell her. “I’m going to get us things, okay?” I scramble out of bed.

“What things?” she says.

“You know, just stuff to get through a cold,” I say. “Like cough drops and Nyquil and orange juice and chicken soup. Cans of chicken soup. Which I could totally have scavenged from somewhere.” Fuck. Am I really going to play this off like this? Am I seriously not going to come clean with her? What kind of douchebag am I?

“That sounds dangerous,” she snaps. “And if you are sick, and it really isn’t *the* sickness, it’ll only mean that you’re more likely to be too weak to fight off the sickness.”

“It’ll be fine,” I say.

“I’m going to die,” she says, flopping back on her bed. “I knew you were going to drag your feet and not have sex with me and that I was going to die anyway.”

“You’re not going to die.”

“You should have sex with me right now, before we get too sick,” she says.

I’m buttoning my jeans and looking at her and thinking about it. “No, we’re going to wait,” I say. “We’re going to go through this cold together and then feel better, and then we’ll do it.”

She yanks the covers over her head. “You’re a jerk, Easton.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Good thing you figured that out quick.”

BY THE TIME I’m back from the grocery store with what has got to be a suspicious amount of food and medicine and creature comforts, I’m feeling much worse.

Rhiannon, however, seems symptom free.

I don’t know what the right call is here. I’m feeling so gross that I typically wouldn’t be around someone right now. I’d spend a day like this curled up under blankets watching television. I certainly would not subject someone to my

presence when I'm feeling like this. I'm not good company, for one thing, and it's common courtesy not to be around other people when you're sick.

But I don't want Rhiannon to feel like I'm abandoning her, especially because she's kind of freaked out.

She paces in the downstairs of the tower, asking me questions about the sickness, how it starts, how fast it progresses, if I've watched people die of it.

I'm too sick to think up lies, and I don't want to contradict what Madison told her, and I don't know what to do.

So, eventually, I make an executive decision that I'm going to leave her here and that I'll come back to check on her in the evening. "You know, maybe you didn't catch it from me?" I say hopefully. She doesn't seem sick at all.

She seems to accept this. She's been keeping her distance from me ever since I came back.

I go back through the tunnels and crawl into bed and promptly fall asleep.

I wake up only hours later to the sun streaming in the windows. I'm shivering so hard that my teeth are chattering. Fuck, I've got a fever.

I go looking for a thermometer to see how bad it is, and I can't find one, so I venture into the part of the house where Madison lives. There, in her medicine cabinet, I find one.

Oh, fun, it's 100.9.

And there's a couple Covid tests stacked in the corner.

What the hell?

Ten minutes later, I'm gazing at the positive Covid test thinking that this is karma, that I brought this shit on myself. Of course, if I want to pretend with the girl in the tower that there's a plague ravaging humanity, of course I am going to get Covid.

And, for fuck's sake, she probably has Covid now, too, and I seriously don't know what that's going to do to her.

I need to come clean, I think. And I need to have someone monitoring her. If she really hasn't had much exposure to illnesses, she's got a very weak immune system. I know that people who haven't been exposed to even small illnesses like the common cold can be really badly affected by them, and Covid is sometimes deadly.

Her life is on the line.

I could have killed her.

I sit down on the toilet, holding the Covid test and shaking from fever chills and trying to figure out what to do.

Well.

She's not sick yet. And it's not as if I can get her admitted into a hospital or something if she's not showing symptoms. I just need to be close enough to watch her to make sure she doesn't end up with this in her lungs.

I'm vaccinated—well, no, I'm not current. I can't remember how many doses of the vaccine I had, but I've also had Covid already once, so at some point, I got lax about it.

Fuck.

I could call Francesca. She'd come back. She'd watch over both of us. She'd make sure that I wasn't zonked out on cold meds while Rhiannon's lungs are filling up with fluid and she's unable to breathe.

No, not doing that.

I could contact Madison. She left a phone number. But then she's going to know that I went into the tower, which I was not supposed to do, and I can't deal with that right now...

So, what I end up doing is taking a bunch of ibuprofen, wrapping up in a huge blanket, teeth chattering, and loading up several days' worth of food from the freezer.

Then I go back to the tower.

Rhiannon meets me at the door.

I'm wearing a mask at this point. We were supposed to be delivering the food in gloves and masks, after all.

“Okay, here’s the real truth, Rhiannon,” I say, shuffling across the floor in my blanket to the kitchen in the tower. “There was a pandemic. I mean, there is one. But it didn’t happen twenty years ago and it didn’t have the kind of death rate that all the horror novels predicted it would.” I load the food into the freezer there, leaning into the fridge as I talk. “It can be bad. It does kill people, but usually not young people, and I...” I shut the freezer and turn to look at her, remembering that weird theory about how the reason it wasn’t as bad for kids was *because* of their underdeveloped immune system.

Like, Covid symptoms were caused by the body trying to kill off a sickness similar to one the body had killed off before or something, and because older people’d had a ton of colds and the flu and other similar viruses over their lives, it made their immune system response really intense, and *that* was the problem.

But seriously, I read ten articles a day at the beginning of the pandemic about theories that scientists were making about the virus, and half of them got disproved. The thing that was so terrifying about the pandemic was just how much I realized that no one knows what they’re fucking talking about, even experts. Not because they’re not really real experts, but because science is actually really tentative.

All the scientific method can do is refine knowledge. It tests a theory, and with every test, every bit of data that is observed, it gets less wrong. It’s impossible to actually be right or to know *anything* for sure at all.

Rhiannon is hugging herself. “What are you *talking* about?”

“It’s a lie,” I say. “Everything that Madison told you, it’s a lie. You’ve been locked away here for no reason. You can leave. You’re not going to get sick—well, I mean, you might, but it’s probably not going to kill you. Society is still *out* there. It’s not the apocalypse.” I punctuate this with a volley of fever chills, my whole body shaking so hard that I nearly lose my blanket.

Rhiannon lurches over to me, and she grabs me. “You’re talking crazy, Easton,” she says softly. “You’re probably delirious with fever.”

“I’m not delirious,” I say.

She guides me into the living area and makes me sit on the couch.

I curl up in the corner, wrapping the blanket tightly around myself. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I’m sorry, I don’t know why I didn’t tell you the truth before, but—”

“Shh.” She rubs my arm, soothing me. “It’s okay. You’re okay. You just rest, all right? I’ll look after you.”

It feels good is the thing, the way she’s rubbing my arm, the way her voice is soft. I can’t remember the last time anyone was nice to me like that. I open my mouth to protest to her, to explain it all to her, but... I’m sick. It’s hard to think. My body is starting to get those aches that you get with this sickness, and I remember it from last time, and my brain is all foggy and...

“Shh,” she says again. “Close your eyes and rest.”

Shit.

I need to try harder to explain this to her. I need to stay awake, because I have to watch her and make sure she isn’t too sick. I know I need to do all these things.

But instead, I do what she tells me to do. I close my eyes. I burrow into the couch and a low groan leaks out of my lips.

I manage one more, “I’m sorry,” but the world is dark and the couch is good and I’m so, so fucking tired and feverish and achy and...

I fall asleep.

IT’S DARK WHEN I wake up.

I’m alone on the couch. I still feel like ass, but I manage to get up and climb the spiral staircase. Rhiannon is asleep in her bed. Her breath sounds even and easy.

Reassured, I curl up on the floor there, telling myself I won't sleep. I'll stay awake and listen to make sure she's breathing. I'm still wearing this mask, and it's uncomfortable. It's also a pain in the ass trying to breathe. I feel like these annoyances will definitely keep me awake.

But I obviously do fall asleep.

In the morning, Rhiannon wakes me, kneeling over me. Her voice is scratchy. "What are you doing on the floor?"

"It's..." I roll onto my back. Sleeping on the floor has done wonders for my body aches, that's for sure. God, I feel like death. Last time I had Covid, it was not this bad. I heard that the second time is worse. Or maybe I caught a different strain? Why didn't I just get another dose of the stupid vaccine? I'm such an idiot. "If it gets you, if it kills you, it's because of your lungs. I need to be able to hear that you're breathing."

"That's how it works?" She sits down next to me. "Your lungs? Like it chokes you to death?"

"I don't know," I say. "They had to put people on respirators, but if it got that bad, you were basically done for."

"I can breathe," she says.

"No, I think you're going to be fine," I say. "But you're sick now, aren't you?"

"It's not bad," she says. "My throat is sore."

"You've been sick before, right?" I say.

"Madison always assured me that because she was immune, it wasn't the sickness," she says. "But you do have it, don't you? You weren't immune."

Fuck! Fuck this stupid alternate reality she lives in. "No, you don't understand. It's not like that. People aren't immune to it." I think about that. "Well, I mean, I guess some people must be. Some people must not have ever gotten it, and I guess —" I shake my head. "This is not important. What's important is..."

What's important is that she's breathing, really.

She pulls my mask off of my face, which is a relief. “It doesn’t matter now. I caught it. We both have it, and now we’re both going to die.”

“We’re not going to die,” I tell her. “I’m telling you, it’s not that dire. It’s bad, but it’s only rarely that bad.”

“Come lie down with me.” She tugs on my hand.

I sigh. I guess it doesn’t matter now. She’s already sick. I let her help me up, and we stagger over to her bed.

Under the covers, the warmth of her body is a balm against the ravages of the fever racking my body. I should take more ibuprofen. I brought some in the big supply run. But that would involve getting out of bed. So, I just pull her warm, small body as close as I can to mine.

She tucks herself up against me, sighing. “It’s good. I’m so lonely, all the time, Easton. I didn’t understand how bad it was until you came. And this is worth it. I’d rather not live like that. I want this, I want touch. I need it.” Her voice cracks.

Fuck, when I think of her growing up here in this place, all alone, no one to hold her, it makes something in me hurt. I pull her even closer.

“It’s worth it, and this is a good way to go,” she said. “With someone, not all alone. When I was a little girl, and I’d get sick, Madison would leave me here, and I’d wonder if it was *the* sickness, even though she said it couldn’t be. I thought about dying all alone here, and I would sob myself to sleep—”

“I fucking hate Madison,” I growl. “What the fuck is wrong with her?”

Rhiannon touches my face. “She was just doing the best she could in a horrible world. She didn’t have to take care of me at all. She could have let me die.”

“That’s...” I mutter more obscenities under my breath. “She was lying to you.”

“Was she?” Rhiannon strokes my hair, gently humoring me. “But you lied, too, didn’t you? Saying you were immune? Just because you wanted me.”

I let out a breath, feeling helpless against this.

“It is why you lied, isn’t it? Because you wanted me?” She gives me a secret, happy smile. “And all that risk, going and getting me things, the books, everything else. You wanted me, and it made you crazy. You wanted me more than you wanted to be alive. It’s romantic, actually. We’ll die together—”

“We’re not going to *die*.”

“That’s why you’re sleeping at the foot of my bed listening to whether or not I’m breathing. Because you’re not worried about me?”

Well, she has me there. I guess... I guess we could die, actually.

She kisses me.

I feel like I tumble headfirst into her, get lost in that kiss with her. I think about what happens if I do actually get through to her about the depth of the illusion she’s been spoon fed. How betrayed and angry she’ll feel. She’ll blame me, and with good reason, and she’ll kick me out of the tower. Or she’ll run away or something. I don’t know, but she’ll be alone, and there won’t be anyone checking on her, and she is sick, and it is dangerous, and... and...

Maybe it’s better this way.

NINE

SHE GETS SICKER; I do too.

She has a fever. I bring the thermometer over and I take our temperatures. Mine is a whopping 102. Hers is only 100.7, not that bad. We take cold medicine and we watch movies on the tablet, sniffing, coughing, groaning.

We eat the chicken soup I brought.

We huddle in blankets with our red noses and our achy bodies.

At night, we huddle in her bed together, sometimes clutching each other close, sometimes throwing off the blankets when the cold medicine makes us sweat out a little bit of our fever.

She tells me about games she plays, looking out the window in the tower, about how she sometimes sees deer in the fields in the distance. She says she names them and makes up little stories about them, that they are separated from their families and trying to cross through the vineyard to find them, but that they keep getting lost.

“Do you remember a time when you weren’t in the tower?” I ask her.

“No, but Madison says she found me when I was about two years old. She couldn’t be sure, she says, but she thinks I was about that old. She saved me because she said she always wanted a daughter but she never had one. She put me here so that I would never get sick and she took care of me.” She tilts her head. “What about you? Do you still have your parents?”

“No, they’re both dead,” I say.

“Yeah,” she says, as if this is a commonplace thing. I guess, in her worldview, it is. “When did they die?”

“My mother died when I was younger,” I say. “And my father... he just died, like, weeks ago.”

“Oh, God, Easton, I’m so sorry.” She rubs my bicep.

“Nah, it’s not like that. He hated me. I hated him. He wasn’t even really my father.”

She furrows her brow.

“Yeah, turns out my mom cheated on my dad and passed me off as his. He still claimed me as his own, but he was never... he always resented me.”

“That’s horrible,” she says.

“It’s fine.” I shrug.

She shakes her head, rubbing my shoulder. “No, it’s not fine. You don’t have to do that. You don’t have to pretend that’s okay. That’s *horrible*. You didn’t deserve that. It’s nothing to do with you, what your mother did. Maybe he had a right to be angry, but he should never have taken it out on you.”

No one has ever said anything like that to me.

To be fair, I don’t tell people about this.

But when I interact with people, they’re not sympathetic like that. They have this idea, I guess, that I don’t feel pain because I have so many advantages, because I’m wealthy and privileged. They treat me like it’s a crime if I complain about anything.

I don’t deserve this from her, not with what I’ve done to her, what I’m still doing to her, not with everything. But fuck if I don’t really, really like it.

That night, in bed, her fever breaks and she sweats out so much that she makes us get out of the bed, and she strips off all the bedding and gets fresh stuff from a little washer and dryer that are tucked away in the kitchen. I didn’t even know they were there.

We're too tired to make the bed, and she chucks off her pajamas and makes me take off mine because they're all sweaty too.

Naked, we lay on top of a blanket laid out beneath us and we pull another one on top of us, and we start kissing.

My hands roam all over her skin, and she sighs into me. She's sweet and small and accepting, and I get hard.

She puts her hand on me there, stroking my cock, and... it feels good and it feels sexy but it mostly feels like that feeling before with her—the awe and sweetness. She makes me feel safe and happy and chosen.

I kiss her breasts and touch her pussy. She's wet and silky against my fingers, this perfect gushy tunnel of warmth and goodness.

It just... happens.

I'm on top of her, and our bodies are lined up, and our mouths are glued together. I get aware of the fact my cock is prodding her there, slipping around in the wetness between her folds, but I'm not trying to do anything. I'm simply caught up in how much I like being this close to her, and how my pulsing cock feels more like an anchor that's connecting me to her—her sweetness and goodness and innocence.

I want surrounded in that feeling of her.

And somehow, I breach her.

She lets out a little gasp.

I push further into her. It's the best thing I've ever felt in my life, and now my sensitive cock is gripped by her wet, tight heat.

She clutches my ass, pulling me into her, all the way inside her.

Fuck, this is home. I feel like—for the first time in my life—I've come home, and I'm finally in a place where I'm...

Fuck.

Loved.

I feel loved.

And I fuck her, feeling that love feeling washing through me like warm waves lapping on the shore of the ocean at night, the froth glittering in the moonlight. It's gentle and rhythmic and it's nothing but us, her and me, us together, us entwined.

I'm engulfed in her.

She lets out tiny, soft little sounds as I rock against her.

Every rock of my cock is a little trill of bliss.

"You're perfect," I murmur into her skin. "You're everything, Rhiannon. I'm fucking gone for you. You're destroying me." But my voice is muffled. I don't think she understands, because she doesn't say anything back except that her little sounds become moans.

I claim her mouth.

She holds onto me for dear life.

I break the kiss and I hover there, over her, our noses barely touching, as I gently work my throbbing cock in her perfect, perfect pussy. "I love you," I say.

"Oh, Easton." She touches my face. "Oh, I think, me too."

"You don't have to—" Why did I say that? Why do I say that during sex? What the fuck is wrong with me?

"I know, but I think I do," she says. "I think I love you."

My orgasm surges up out of nowhere, and I find myself stuttering out a blinding climax, like a crash of ocean waves, right inside her, just filling her little pussy full of me.

Not supposed to come inside her, I think.

But it's only once. And she was a virgin.

It's going to be fine.

In the morning, we wake up in each other's arms, and it sort of feels like a dream, like maybe I imagined it.

TEN

SHE'S STARING OUT the window, very quiet.

I'm lying on the bed, naked, blanket up over my legs and pelvis, my chest bare. It's morning. My stomach growls, and I think to myself this is the first day in a while in which I haven't felt like warmed-over death.

How many days have we been sick? I count in my head. Maybe four. I think four. There was the part at the beginning when I was too feverish and everything was hazy.

So, it's been a week, then.

Halfway until Madison comes back.

"Easton?"

"Mmm," I say, smiling at her. She's fucking beautiful, the sun lighting up her long, long hair.

"We're not dying," she says.

"No, we're going to be fine," I say. "We're getting better."

She touches the window. "So... so it wasn't the sickness."

Fuck.

She turns to look at me. "Tell me what you were saying before."

I swallow. "Uh... shit, Rhiannon, shit."

"No, I didn't want to listen to you before," she says. She comes over and perches at the foot of the bed. "You said there's no apocalypse. You said society is just out there."

I let out a breath. Okay, well, we're doing this. "Yeah."

“Really?” Her lower lip trembles.

I rub my face. “Look, I don’t even know where to start.”

She twists a strand of hair up around her finger. “You bring me all these things, more things than Madison ever brought. You came with bags of medicine and food and... where did you get those things?”

“A store,” I say. “I bought them. With money. Because...”

She gets up off the bed abruptly and walks out of the room. I hear her clambering down the stairs.

Shit.

I get up out of bed and find my pants, which are all gross with dried sweat, hers and mine. I’m in the middle of putting them on when she comes barreling back up the stairs with her tablet.

She pulls up an app on it. “Madison said I should never mess with these settings, so I never did.”

I look down to see it’s an internet blocking app, one that people use when they want to not be distracted for work or something.

“I asked her about it, and she said that the internet is full of its own sort of virus, an electronic one, and that if I enabled the internet on the tablet, it would make it so it didn’t work anymore. But that’s not true, is it?”

“No,” I say.

She snatches it up and disables the app. She’s shaking. “You tried to tell me, and I wouldn’t listen to you.”

“Hey, what you said... it was—it is—because of how much I want you. Okay? I know it’s the shittiest fucking thing I can even think of, deceiving you like this, but I just never felt this way about someone before, and you make me lose my mind—”

“It’s not your fault,” she says.

This surprises me. “Hey, I made things up, Rhiannon. I purposefully kept you in the dark—”

“You *tried* to tell me, and *I* wouldn’t listen.”

Yeah, I don’t think I tried very hard.

“So... there’s no sickness?”

“Well, there sort of is,” I say. “It’s called Covid-19. It’s like a very intense cold, and it does kill a percentage of people. It appeared about four years ago, and it’s mostly under control now. But, no, when you were two, there was no sickness, that’s for sure.”

“So, then why did Madison tell me that?”

“She doesn’t want you to leave this tower.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t ask her?”

I grope for words. “Uh, she said that you were mentally ill, that you had a complicated delusion, and that if I were to come into this tower with you, it would worsen your mental illness and that, um, that you were being held here for your own safety.”

“That’s why you said that thing about doctors,” she says softly. “You know... maybe... there was a man once. I barely remember. I was very young. Just a little girl. He came and brought these specific toys with him. He watched me play with them and asked me questions.”

“Uh, okay?” Wait, what is she saying?

She lets out a breath. “So, Madison isn’t going to save her family, then?”

“She’s been here non-stop with you for a long time,” I say. “She wanted a break, some time off, to herself.”

“Of course she would,” says Rhiannon. “I feel awful for doing that to her.”

“Wait, she lied to you to keep you in this tower—”

“I can’t leave the tower,” says Rhiannon in a very low voice. She is certain of this.

“You can leave,” I say.

She shakes her head furiously. “No.”

“But you really can. There’s no sickness—”

“I think I always knew that, deep down,” she says, and she goes back to the window. She presses her fingertips to the glass. “Certain things never quite made sense. Sometimes, Madison would contradict herself. She’d always be so vague about it, about what the sickness was, about my parents, my past. And if I asked too many questions, she’d get angry. Not in a yelling way, though, in a cold way. She’d tell me there were things better not spoken of and that I needed to leave well enough alone. She’d punish me by not coming back to see me, just bringing food around the front of the tower and sending it up, leaving me alone for weeks on end.”

“You know, everything you say about this woman makes me want to wring her neck,” I say. “And when she comes back—well, she’s not coming back. I own this fucking house, and I won’t let her back.”

Rhiannon looks at me, startled. “You own this?”

“Yes. I inherited it. Look, you’re... I don’t know why you’re here, but I think you’re my father’s biological daughter with some mistress of his—”

“We’re *related*?”

“No!”

“Right, you told me you’re not his actual son.” She’s reeling. She lets out noisy breaths. “Okay, okay, okay.” She presses her palm into the glass, as if steadying herself. “There’s a reason, okay, Easton? There’s a reason I have to stay in here. I know—I’ve always known, deep down—that it wasn’t the sickness, that she was making that up, because whatever it is, whatever the reason is, it’s *worse*.”

“That’s insane. There’s no reason for you to stay in this tower.”

“We have to make her tell us what it is,” she decides. “I bet there’s a way to contact Madison, then, if there’s society

still. Once, I saw Madison's cell phone. I know about cell phones from movies, just like I know about the internet. She never brought me movies with real people, but sometimes, there'd be these animal creatures who drove cars and solved mysteries and stuff. I don't think she realized what I was picking up from them. So, anyway, you could call her, right?"

"I mean, I could," I say. "But..."

"So? Do it."

"And say what?" I say. I am not relishing a conversation with Madison, which really makes no sense, because she's the person who's been manipulating and deceiving Rhiannon all this time, and I shouldn't feel ashamed—

Okay, okay, I really should feel ashamed, I guess. Because, this, what I've done here, is morally reprehensible.

But what Madison did is also morally reprehensible.

It's just not sexual assault.

Fuck.

"I'm not calling Madison," I say. "Let's just go. You and me. I'll take you back to my place in the city, and we can get you accustomed to the real world and I'll..." Keep fucking your perfect pussy whenever I want.

"No, I can't leave the tower," she says. "And I need to know why. I need to know the real reason."

"You can leave the tower," I say.

She folds her arms over her chest and glares at me.

I can't meet her gaze. "So, you're just staying here? Because, I'm leaving. I'm leaving the door unlocked, and you should just come through the tunnels, you know, do whatever you need to do, and..."

"I. Can't. Leave. The. Tower." She bites out each word.

"Whatever." I find my shirt. I shrug into it, and I go down the stairs. I'm at the bottom when she calls my name from the top. I pause. "Yeah?"

“Am I still a virgin?”

My jaw works. “Uh, no. No, sorry about that.”

“Do you still love me?”

My whole body goes tight. *If I loved you, Rhiannon, this wouldn't be like this between us. If I loved you, I would never have done what I've done to you.* “I don't know if I can live without you,” I say, and then I leave.

ELEVEN

I DO LEAVE the door open.

But I barely make it three hours before I'm back. The door is closed, but it's not locked because it has to be locked from the outside. I knock. Now I'm knocking, huh?

"Rhiannon, let me in."

"It's open," she says.

I pull the door open.

She's perched on the couch with her tablet, her brow furrowed, her hair falling in a curtain over one shoulder. She doesn't look up. "I was hoping you'd come back, because I was thinking about touching myself, and I need your permission if I want to touch my pussy."

I freeze, rock hard, gasping. "Y-you... that's not real, okay? You own your own fucking body. You don't have to—"

"Thought I was yours," she says. "You marked me and claimed me and took my virginity." She raises her gaze to mine. "Thought you couldn't live without me."

My lips part, and I let out several breaths so loud that they echo off the walls of the tower.

"Am I yours, Easton?"

"Do you want to be mine?" I'm choking on the words. My cock feels so hard that I feel like it might split open. I don't know how she can make me this violently turned on when she's so casual about it. She's telling me that I own her, but she owns me. I'm her fucking slave. It's done. I'm never coming back from this.

“I do,” she breathes.

Take her at her word. Except, I can't. “You agreed to this with me without knowing everything. You thought that you were living in a ravaged world where people were rare and that I was the only man you were ever going to see. There are...” Fuck. My voice is hoarse. “There are other men in the world, Rhiannon, a lot of other men, and you could have someone else. It doesn't have to be me.”

She looks around the room. “I don't see any other men.”

“But when you leave the tower—”

“*Fuck,*” she explodes, slamming her tablet into the couch cushion.

I wince.

She lets out a little laugh, a sort of helpless laugh. “Did I do that right? That's how you use that word? It's a new part of my vocabulary, so I'm still working it out.”

“Yeah, that's, uh, how you use it.” I swallow. “You're not leaving the tower.”

“No,” she says. “I'm not. And it just makes you angry and then you leave, so let's not talk about it anymore.”

“That's not why...” I come over to the couch, move the tablet, and sit down next to her. I take her hand. “Rhiannon, baby, I'm not punishing you by leaving. I'm not trying to teach you not to bring up certain subjects like Madison. I'm... I want us to be equals.” Oh, I do, huh? Really? I'm such a piece of shit.

“Are we not equals now?”

“Well, if I'm punishing you and giving you permission to pleasure yourself and having you say shit to me...” I squeeze her hand. “I guess I want you to do that because you want to, not because you feel like there will be consequences if you don't.”

She nods slowly, as if this entire idea of relating to a person doesn't quite compute for her. And, well, why would it? She has never had a relationship with anyone except

Madison, near as I can tell. That's got to have fucked her up. So, here I am, to fuck her up worse. "But there will be, right? Isn't that the way it is with people? Even in books or movies, when someone does something that another person doesn't like, they aren't happy about it. There are consequences."

I mean, she's not wrong. But... I squeeze her hand again. "Not with me and you. Or not with me, when it comes to you, anyway. Do whatever you want, and I'll just be here, even if I don't like it."

She pulls her hand out of mine.

I bow my head.

"So, then, will you stay?"

I lift my head to look at her.

"I have to stay in the tower, and you could go off into the whole, wide world and do whatever you want. Will you stay here, with me, instead?"

"Definitely." It's immediate, no hesitation.

She smiles, shy, pleased. "Thank you."

"No need for that." I get up from the couch. "Look, I know we're not talking about this, but I just want you to have the choice, okay?"

"Choice for what?"

I dig into my pocket, get out the key ring with all the Briarfeld keys, because I carry them around when I come to the tower, in order to unlock various things. I go through keys, trying them in the door that locks from the inside, the one that keeps her locked in, until I find it. I hold it up. "In case you change your mind." I set it down.

"I'm not leaving the tower," she says.

"I know," I say. "But this way, you could, and that makes us equal, both able to come and go."

She considers. Nods. Smiles.

I come and sit back down next to her on the couch.

She leans in and kisses me quickly. “A thank you kiss,” she breathes.

I grab her and pull her onto my lap and kiss her harder.

She groans against me.

We kiss in a frenzy, hands everywhere.

When we pull apart, we’re out of breath, and I’m digging my fingers into her hips as she straddles me, and she’s stroking my face. I’m a little stubbly. Didn’t shave during the entire sick time—and both of us are still a little stuffy and have lingering coughs—so I can feel her fingers riffling through my facial hair.

We pant, staring at each other.

I’ve got that buzz-drunk feeling again. I cannot get enough of this girl.

She chews on her lower lip, eyes half-lidded. “So,” she gasps, “I feel like we did it wrong. We skipped steps. I was supposed to get your cum into my system. I was supposed to put my mouth on your cock.”

“I made that shit up,” I say. “I just wanted to... savor you. I’m sorry.”

“It didn’t hurt,” she says. “And it was nice. But I got so worked up, and I never got to come—”

“Jesus fucking Christ, I’m so sorry.” What kind of asshole am I? I fucked her, and it was all for me, and I did next-to-nothing for her, and that was her first time.

“It’s okay,” she says. “I didn’t ask.” She gives me a coy smile. “But, I’m asking now.” A pause. “Baby. Can I come? Can I make myself come?”

“I want to make you come,” I say.

“Well, I’m yours to do with as you want, I guess,” she says, ducking her chin down to her shoulder in a cute-as-hell, shy way.

“Yeah, you are,” I say. “Let’s get you out of these clothes so I can look at you, huh? Can we do that?”

She nods. She rocks back and tugs her shirt over her head, just like that, and there are her pretty round tits.

“God, you’re gorgeous,” I say. “You have the most perfect set of tits I’ve ever seen.”

She bites her lip. “You’ve seen a lot of naked women?”

“None that compare to you,” I say.

“You mean that?”

God, I do. I put my lips to her nipples. “What would convince you,” I say as I suckle her, “that I think you’re exceptional?”

She sighs, hands in my hair, offering me her tightening nipples, enjoying the way I’m teasing and stimulating her. “I don’t know,” she whispers. “What is it about me?”

What *is* it about her? I wish I could make sense of it, actually. “You’re just so sweet and small and perfect.”

She writhes into me.

My hands migrate down to work on the button and zipper of her jeans. “And innocent, I guess? And untouched. Like, uh, you’re unclaimed territory, and you’re all mine to discover. I get to explore you for the first time, find out all your secrets, learn the ways to please you.”

“I want to please you, too, though,” she says, helping me to peel down her jeans, exposing her body to me. “And I don’t know anything about how to do it.”

“You’re doing that perfectly, baby,” I said huskily. “You have no idea how much you please me.”

“I think you need to teach me things, though,” she says. “Like you promised.” She touches my face. “Not right now, I guess, because I really do want to come, but you said I would have to learn to take your cock in my mouth?”

I smile at her. “Oh, that’s definitely happening, don’t worry.”

She kicks off her pants and returns to my lap. Now, I’ve got her entirely bare and all mine to play with.

I kiss her. “You want to suck me, then, huh?”

“I want to make you happy,” she says. “You put your mouth on me, so it only seems fair.”

“Well, it would make me happy if you were eager to taste my cock.”

She gasps, rubbing her nude little body into me. “Oh,” she says. “Well, sure, I want to taste you.”

“Yeah?” I breathe, running my hands all over her. “You excited about it? Looking forward to it?”

“Mmm,” she sighs as my hands find her sensitive spots.

“Tell me you can’t wait, baby.”

She lets out a breath. “I can’t wait to suck your cock.”

“Good girl.” I kiss her. My hand worms its way down to her pussy. I cup her there.

She moans.

“Tell me,” I whisper, “that you’ve been thinking about how my cum will taste.”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” she says, but I can hear the trepidation in her voice.

“You might not like it,” I say, squeezing her pussy gently in a little rhythm, “but you won’t want to hurt my feelings, right, so you’ll pretend for me, won’t you? You’ll lap it up and tell me it’s the best thing you’ve ever tasted.”

She groans, and her hips are moving against me, where I’ve got hold of her pussy. “I will, I will, I promise, Easton. Whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want?”

“*Anything* you want.” Her voice is throaty as her hips jerk against me.

“Anything at all?”

“Oh, fuck, Easton, what do you want me to do?” She seizes my hand and holds it in place as she moves her hips against it.

Is this going to make her come, just this? I don't even have a hand directly on her clit. I let her take control, holding me right there as she's such a sexy little thing, falling apart, taking over at directing her own pleasure. "Oh, all sorts of things." I squeeze her pussy gently.

She gasps.

"You like this, baby?" I ask her. "Just this?"

"Sometimes, I used to roll over in my bed and just rub into a pillow kind of like this," she pants. "It's how if I first figured out I could even, you know, do this."

"Really?" I'm intrigued.

"Can I come, Easton? I'm so close."

"Mmm, I don't know," I say. "Tell me, sweet thing, what did you think about when you were rubbing against that pillow?"

"I didn't know what to think about," she gasps. "Just things. I knew... I sort of knew it was about being naked. I knew it was about being wanted. I used to think about being a, um, a princess who was being shown off to all these prospective suitors and they kept making her take off more and more of her clothes, and they all wanted to inspect her, um, her pussy." She has her eyes closed, and she's rubbing herself into my hand. Her voice is ragged. She's crazy turned on.

"A princess, huh?" I say. "So, the men who came for her, were they princes?"

"I never got to the part where one of them took her home and... and enjoyed her—me, I guess," she breathes. "I didn't know what that would even be."

"You like being enjoyed?"

"So much," she gasps. "I like the way you want me. I feel like it makes me crazy."

I groan, squeezing her tighter. "I do want you. Fuck, do I want you. And I enjoy you, too, everything about you makes me very happy."

She cries out.

“You coming?” I whisper.

“I know I’m supposed to wait for permission, but I’m so turned on, Easton, I’m so turned on—”

I spank her ass.

She screams, and I feel her pussy clenching.

I rub the sting out of the spank. “Have to take your punishment for coming without permission,” I muse, and then I spank her again.

She goes stiff, head back in a silent scream, and I feel her cresting again.

I rain a volley of spanks and caresses onto her through the throes of her orgasm.

When she collapses against me, she’s jelly. She looks up at me with a thoroughly satisfied expression on her face.

“Oh, someone liked her spankings, hmm?” I say, gently teasing, caressing her face affectionately.

“I never... the way it tingled afterward, the way it made my whole body jerk,” she moans, rubbing her face into my shirt. “I never felt anything like that.”

“Good girl,” I say. “You’re just exactly perfect, you know that? You’re just exactly what I want.”

“I’m yours,” she murmurs.

“Yeah, you are,” I say. I arrange her back on the couch, and unzip myself. I take my cock out. I’m hard as all fuck. “You’re mine, and I’m going to fuck what’s mine, pretty girl.”

She sighs, limbs askew, eyes closed.

Her pussy is sloppy wet from her orgasm. I slip-slide into her like diving into a warm body of water.

She moans as I fill her up.

I moan, too. She feels just as nice as last time.

I find a rhythm, over her, moving my cock smoothly in and out of her sweet, wet pussy. I want to come in her again. I really want it.

I fuck her and fight with myself about it.

I can't come in her.

I will get her fucking pregnant if I keep doing this. I'm spoiled from Francesca, I guess. She had an IUD and we both were tested and were clean. I was exclusive to her, and she was required to be faithful to me. I came inside Francesca all the time. I love the way it feels to finish inside a pussy.

I want it.

I lean down to capture Rhiannon's lips with my own. I kiss both of her nipples. She clings to me, making little mewling noises as I gently fuck her, dragging my hard, huge cock in and out of her tiny, sopping wet pussy.

"I want to come inside you," I tell her.

"Mmm," she whispers. "You said you weren't supposed to."

"I'm not," I say in a scratchy voice. "But I want to. I want to so bad."

"Then do it," she said, opening her eyes to look at me. "Come inside my pussy, Easton. Please. I want your cum. I want it inside me."

Shit.

Fuck.

Damn.

It's like an explosion of white light behind my eyes. It's so *fucking* good.

TWELVE

THERE'S ANOTHER TEXT from Mitchell Thorn.

We need to meet to discuss this. It's important. Please get back in touch with me so that we can set up a time and place.

I think about ignoring the text, but I just text back that I'm still out of town, but that I promise I'll get in touch with him when I'm back in the city.

Thing is, am I *going* back to the city?

When will you be back? he texts.

That's the question, right?

I told Rhiannon I'd stay here with her and I meant it. I don't have anything to go back to. I've never had a job, not really. I've done some internships that were set up for me when I was in college. They were required by the program, and so I did them. My performance at that kind of thing varies, though.

Sometimes, I, uh, "apply myself" to whatever it is that's expected of me. I figure, why not actually try?

Other times, I don't.

Funny thing, either way, the consequences are the same. I mean, there are no consequences.

It doesn't matter, that's the thing. Nothing matters. I graduated college with a degree that was more about the fact that I was who I was than it was about anything else. Sure, from time to time, I'd have a professor who'd want to be ethical and say that if I wasn't doing the work, I'd be failing their course. And I'd either get my ass in gear or I'd pay

people to write papers for me. But typically, people were willing to let me slide on the fear of the threat of my father's wrath.

I don't think the man ever intervened for me, once, of course.

He didn't care about me.

I always knew that.

Anyway, this—with Rhiannon—it's the first time anything has actually mattered to me in my entire life. I'd be an idiot to leave this.

But I have to admit I don't know how it works. She wants to stay in this tower, fine. I'll let her do that.

Forever, Easton? You going to spend the rest of your life sneaking into a tower with a girl?

No, it can't last forever, I guess.

The problem here is Madison, in my opinion. She's planted seeds of terror in Rhiannon's mind. So, the thing to really do here is to let Madison come back and then show Rhiannon that Madison doesn't care about her.

Also, I guess I need to figure out what Madison's game is, why she's doing this at all. I might end up needing to leave Virginia to go back to the city and make contact with people in person in order to accomplish that, I suppose.

I text back to Mitchell Thorn, *I'm not sure, but possibly within a week or two.*

All right, he texts back. But if I don't hear from you before that, I'm going to need to force the issue. This really can't wait too long. Baum Wicker sent me the most batshit letter before he died, and I need to talk about it with you.

Wait, now I'm getting intrigued.

What did my father write to you?

Oh, no, not in a text message. We discuss this in person. You need to get back here.

I eye the message, feeling a little disappointed not to get more than that. I feel a bit of an urge to go back and see him now.

But no.

I have Rhiannon in the tower, and I have to teach her to give me blow jobs. I need to have sex with her in other positions besides missionary. I maybe should try to sneak her a Plan B pill and not tell her what it is.

She has access to the internet now. How long until she figures out what the actual purpose of sex is, right?

I need to come clean with her.

Maybe she'd like the idea of having my baby. Fuck, maybe I'd like the idea of it. I never thought I'd really want to get a woman pregnant, but she's different.

Fuck, wouldn't she be cute as hell with her belly all swollen and her titties full and round?

I get hard at the idea of having done that to her—altered her body by fucking her, put a piece of myself inside her, claimed her as thoroughly as a man can claim a woman.

But Madison is coming back, in a week, and I don't know how to play that. Madison did not want me to go into the tower with Rhiannon, and I'm sure she's not going to be pleased at the idea that I've been in there fucking her senseless and giving her Covid and telling her that all of Madison's lies are lies...

Yeah, Madison's going to be angry.

She'd be even more angry if it turned out that Rhiannon was pregnant.

Why am I so fucking hard thinking about knocking her up?

I end up gripping myself, jacking myself quickly and ferociously, imagining Rhiannon lying under me while I pound her, her little breasts bouncing, tiny nipples red and hard, gasping that she wants my baby. *Get me pregnant, Easton, please. Come in me and get me so, so pregnant.*

I am fucked.

Okay, sure, pregnant Rhiannon is hot, but children—babies—not hot. Not sexy. Not even close to sexy.

Right, so Plan B pill, and I lay it out for her, tell her the whole fucking truth, and... and...

What if she gets angry, though?

It's kind of insane that she found out that I was going along with Madison's lies and she wasn't angry with me about that. I don't know why that was, but maybe she's used to those lies, and so it seems to her that it's natural that I would parrot them. Maybe she can't really wrap her head about the way I deceived her.

But this?

This is different.

Okay, sneak her the Plan B pill, then.

I need to somehow do that today, though, right? I can't wait too long after coming in her or I don't think it'll work.

Okay, well, then I need to leave and go to the store, but before I do that, I'm going to call Uncle Marcus. I think I'm going to need his help.

"Where the fuck are you?" he says when he answers the phone.

"Virginia," I say.

"You went to Briarfeld, for fuck's sake."

"Well, he said something to me about it," I say. "He said it to me in the hospital. I was curious."

"For fuck's sake, are you an idiot? You don't have any idea what you stepped into there, do you?"

"I..." I take a deep breath. "Well, that's why I'm calling, Uncle Marcus. You got to tell me what's going on here."

"No, this isn't secure," he says.

He's always paranoid, and I don't know if it's because this conversation we're about to have is incriminating or if it's just

habit for him.

“All right,” says Uncle Marcus, “here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to text you a link, and it’ll be a website where we can talk on the phone securely without worrying about anyone overhearing, all right?”

“Sure,” I say.

“Okay, talk to you in five.” He hangs up.

I get the link. I follow it. It’s a website set up to look like a phone. It rings at me. I answer it.

“Easton,” says Uncle Marcus. “What did he say to you in the hospital?”

“Not much,” I say. “Just the name of the place and something about a tower.”

“Right, that tower. So, you know what’s in the tower, Easton?”

“I do,” I say quietly. *I am fucking what’s in the tower, Uncle Marcus.*

“You seen her?”

I cough. “I have, yeah.”

“She wasn’t ever supposed to be in a tower, Easton, you got to realize that. Your father—Baum—he was a complicated man who did some complicated things, but he had a certain level of decency to him, I swear to you. If he’d known that’s what that woman planned...”

“Madison Nevely?”

“The bitch herself,” says Uncle Marcus. “You don’t want to tangle with that. I’ve tried to tangle with it, but she’s steps and steps ahead.”

“Madison is?”

Uncle Marcus sighs.

“Why does she have her locked in the tower?”

“Fuck if I know!” says Uncle Marcus. “Baum tells me—all right, this is around when he gets the diagnosis and we’re

looking for bone marrow matches.”

“Right,” I say. “Rhiannon would be a likely match, wouldn’t she?”

“Rhiannon, eh?” Marcus chuckles. “So, she changed her name.”

“Did she?” I say.

“Changed her name, but locked her up anyway. Look, it’s... a lot,” says Marcus. “Here’s what you need to know for now.”

“No, not for now. Tell me everything,” I say.

“Baum remembers her, remembers he set up this safehouse for the girl, and he’s been protecting her for her entire life.”

“Protecting her from who?”

“From her father—well, he *thought* he was her father. Her mother’s husband, who was not freaking pleased to discover she was Baum’s baby. The husband paid to have the little girl kidnapped and killed. Baum intervened and saved her, but as far as the world knows, that girl has been dead for a long time. If the husband finds out she’s alive, he will kill her.”

Well, shit.

“Anyway,” Marcus continues, “she’s been hidden away for her own protection, but she was never supposed to be in a fucking tower, cut off from the world. Just, you know, hidden. Fake name, fake history, all that. She could have been going to school, having boyfriends—she *should* have been. For fuck’s sake, that woman is Bitch Supreme.”

“You mean Madison Nevely.”

“Fuck yes, that’s who I mean.”

“So, my father didn’t know that Rhiannon was in the tower.”

“Not until he tried to get the bone marrow. Then, we’re all being stonewalled. Girl has a mental illness, Nevely says. Girl has a complicated delusion that can’t be broken. Girl cannot be

tested for bone marrow or be a donor. It would shatter her fragile psyche. Then Nevely engaged in some kind of negotiation with Baum, asking him for all kinds of insane things in order to get access to the girl. Baum would have caved, but he was too ill by that point. Her negotiations broke down and she never got what she wanted out of him. Is she there, by the way?"

"Uh, no. She said she wanted a brief vacation because she'd been stuck watching Rhiannon for decades on end," I say.

"So, where is she?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, that's great. *Just* great." Marcus huffs.

"So..." I furrow my brow. "Someone wants Rhiannon dead, you're saying? Who? Who is it that was married to the woman my father knocked up?"

"No, no. I'm not getting into that with you."

"Why not?" I say.

"Complicated shit," he says.

"He's my biological father." It dawns on me, obvious as all hell.

"Oh, Jesus, kid, sometimes you're too smart for your own good."

"My father fucked his wife to get him back for fucking his own wife. That man tried to kill my father's offspring as payback."

"You're not wrong."

"So, my biological father is a fuckwad of a man who would kill a toddler girl?"

"Hey, what does any of that matter, in the end, Easton?"

"Tell me who he is."

"What's the point? You going to go talk to him? You going to interact with him?"

“Maybe.”

“And do what? You’re no match for this guy or his thugs or his reach or... near as I understand, he’s known about you ever since he tried to have that girl in the tower killed. If he wanted to know you, he could have reached out, but he never has. So, fuck him.”

“I still want to know his fucking name.”

“No.”

“He’s rich, I guess?” I say. “He’s someone I would know of? Is he like a mob boss or some shit? Come on, Uncle Marcus.”

“No, kid, no, this doesn’t matter. Here’s what you need to do. Get out of there. That girl in that tower, she’s a threat to your legacy and your inheritance, as I’m sure you’ve figured out.”

“Well, I did want to ask about that. Since the will has been read?”

“The reading of the will is not a legal requirement,” he says. “Executing the will of the dead man, that is. His will is pretty clear on who is supposed to inherit his money, and—”

“And you’re loyal to him, even in death.”

“I am, kid, you know it. He’s the closest thing I ever had to family. I like you, and I don’t want anything bad to happen to you. I feel, I don’t know, affectionate toward you, but...”

“But between me and him, you pick him.”

“Yeah.”

I sigh heavily.

“Sorry, kid. Hey, is she really certifiable, the girl in the tower? Is she crazy?”

“Not even a little bit,” I say.

“So, uh, why did Bitch Supreme make that shit up?” he says.

No fucking idea, none at all.

“That’s weird as shit, just saying.”

“It is,” I say.

“All right, look, Easton, take care of yourself. Get the fuck out of there. And—”

“What happens if I take her out of the tower?” I say.

“The girl, you mean? Well, well, well, Easton, what have you been up to?”

“What if I don’t, uh, tell her that she’s supposed to inherit the money? You going to seek her out and give it to her, or will you just make it all happen if she approaches you?”

He laughs softly. “You want to rescue her but cheat her out of her inheritance? That’s your play?”

“Never said I wanted to rescue her,” I mutter. “Just... you know... I like my pussy more conveniently located, I guess.”

He guffaws. “It’s about pussy, Easton? We both know you can have that ordered up anytime you want. Something specifically interesting about *this* pussy? Why? Because she’s actually his and you never were?”

“No,” I say, because that’s disgusting.

He just laughs. “You’re as fucked up as he was, kid. As fucked up as I am. Hell.”

And then he hangs up.

THIRTEEN

THERE'S FOOD IN the freezer in the tower, which is good, because I forget to bring anything when I end up there later.

I'm in a bad mood.

She's upstairs, playing her guitar when I get there, and I stand underneath, listening to her playing and singing. Her voice is pretty and it makes something ugly rise in me.

Something about her sweetness calls to me only because I want to mar it. I want to soil her. I want to leave her corrupt and cum-smearred, and I stalk up the stairs and she sees me and is startled but I just tear the guitar out of her hands and toss it on the bed.

Her eyes are wide.

"You're right," I say. "You can't leave the tower. Get on your knees."

She looks at the guitar and then at me and then, hesitantly, gets on her knees.

"That's very good," I tell her, looking down at her down there in front of me. "You look good like that, Rhiannon, on your knees in front of me. You're going to learn to suck cock now. You want that, right?"

She nods, but she looks worried.

I rub my thumb over her lower lip. "You want to do it correctly, don't you, baby? You want to learn to take me all the way down your throat? You want to learn how to get mouth-fucked if I want to take you there?"

She lets out a shallow breath and I can see the way her expression is both sharpening and relaxing that I'm turning her on even as she's getting a little anxious. "I want to do whatever it is you want, baby."

"Good girl," I tell her. "Take me out. I'm already hard as all hell for you."

She takes me out, stroking my cock with both of her hands.

I tilt my head back, enjoying the feeling of her sweet little fingers on me, her small and graceful hands.

"Why can't I leave the tower?" she breathes.

I look back down at her. "Someone's trying to kill you."

Her eyes widen.

"Yeah," I say. "I don't know who, though, not his name."

"I knew it was worse, I knew it was!"

"No, it doesn't make any fucking sense, though, baby, because why would Madison make all this shit up about a virus and everything?"

"She was trying to protect me."

"She didn't need to lock you away in this tower to protect you," I say.

"You just said I couldn't leave."

Right, right. She *could* leave. The girl who she used to be had a different name and everyone thinks that little girl is dead. So... no reason to imprison her in this tower, none at all. I caress her jaw. "Right, of course, I'm confused, baby. You need to stay right here, where it's safe, and learn all the ways to take my cock."

She nods.

"Yeah, Rhiannon, I like you right where I have you, on your knees in front of me."

Her lips part. She leans in and kisses the tip of my cock.

I moan.

She moans. She kisses the tip of me again, with tongue, very fondly. "I've been wanting to give this a kiss," she says, her voice very mature, a little throaty, and utterly fucking sexy.

I swear my cock doubles in size. "Kiss it all you want, baby," I tell her.

"It's pretty," she tells me, sucking the head into her mouth, licking the sensitive underside of me. "So, so pretty." Another kiss. "Oh, the first time I saw it, I was mesmerized. I don't know why, but it was just the neatest thing I've ever seen in my life."

I groan, sliding my hand into her hair, guiding her mouth onto my cock.

She sucks me, really sucks me, and it hurts.

I stop her. "Ouch, baby, just a little suction, okay, sweetness? Just enough to keep it in your mouth."

"Sorry," she breathes.

"It's okay, you've never done this before, and that makes it even hotter," I say to her. "I'm glad you like my cock."

"I do like it," she says, beaming up at me. "And I want to learn how to suck it, I do."

"Not much to it," I tell her. "Just like you rubbed me in the shower, but with your mouth."

She nods. "Got it, so less sucking, more up and down?"

"Exactly." I brush hair away from her eyebrows. "And I want to see how deep down your throat you can take me, too, okay? Might make you gag, but I'll like that. It'll feel good to me."

She lets out a little gasp.

"Will you do that for me, baby? Will you gag yourself on my big, hard cock for me? I'd be really grateful if you would."

She nods. "I want to, Easton." Her voice is different. "When you ask me things like that, it makes my pussy clench. I don't know *why*." She's barely able to talk.

“Because you’re my good girl and it makes you hot to make me happy,” I say to her.

“Yeah,” she agrees. “Like this?” She suddenly descends on me, all of the wet, warm tunnel of her mouth, and I feel the ring of her throat against the head of my cock.

I grunt.

She pushes me down further, swallowing me.

I nudge my way into that nice, tight wet little throat of hers.

She gags, and it jerks around my cock. *Fuck.*

She comes off, eyes shining, panting a little. “Was that good, baby?”

“That was fucking perfect, baby,” I say to her. “Aren’t you such a good girl?”

She beams. “You want me to do it again?”

“Yeah, let me stay in your throat as long as you can stand it, okay? I like the gags, so you can do that as many times as you need. If it gets too much, you pop off, but push yourself as long as you can, and I would *really* like that.”

“Yes, Easton,” she breathes.

“Good girl,” I say to her as she takes me into her mouth again.

This time, I fuck the tight little ring of her throat for some time. She gags three or four times but takes me all the way deep like a fucking champ. I’m so proud of her. When she pulls back, tears are streaming down her face, and I reach down to brush them away and whisper to her that she’s the prettiest, sweetest girl I know, and that I feel so honored for her to do this for me.

“Just move your mouth on me shallow for a bit now, baby, take a break, because you deserve it,” I coo to her.

“Concentrate on the the head of me, give me some nice warm and wet kisses, hmm?”

“Yes, baby,” she gasps and does just that.

It feels good, and I'm turned on, and I start to feel my balls tighten.

I touch her cheek. "Little deeper, little deeper, doesn't have to be all the way."

She complies.

I'm getting real close. "I want to fill your mouth with my cum," I say. "I want you to swallow every drop of it for me, be my good girl and do that, yeah?"

She nods vigorously, her mouth too full of me to talk.

"Just relax and be a little loose and let me fuck your mouth now, sweet girl," I say in a ravaged voice. I start to move my hips against her, dragging my cock in and out. I must go deep again, because she gags, and it tips me right over the edge.

I'm pumping my cum right into her, and she's swallowing it, even making little noises that sound appreciative.

Fuck, this is hot, pretty girl on her knees in front of me, taking her first mouthful of semen. I'm the only man whose dick she's ever seen. I'm the only man to put my cock in her mouth or in her pussy.

"Mine, mine, mine," I breathe as I empty my balls into her mouth.

When I'm done, I let myself go a little soft, just lingering there against her tongue and she seems content to hold me there in her mouth. I'm touching her face, and she's looking up at me, and I'm out of breath, and she's so pretty and perfect and claimed. God, she looks good with my cock inside her mouth.

I can't stop telling her that, what a good girl she is, how proud of her I am, what a good job she did taking me in her mouth.

Eventually, I do tug her up to hold her in my arms and kiss her.

I hold onto her for a while, liking the taste of myself on her lips, liking how it means that she belongs to me.

“Are you mine, Rhiannon?” I can’t help whispering against her lips.

“I am,” she says. “And you’re mine, aren’t you?”

“Yes, fuck yes,” I groan. “All yours.”

She lets go of me, moves her guitar, and lies down on the bed, holding out her arms to me.

I climb in with her, pulling her into my arms.

“Who is he?” she says. “The man who wants to kill me?”

I explain to her about my father and this man and my mother and the wives, and she gets it.

“So,” I say, tracing my fingers over her neck, “we’ll keep you here for now, I guess, since you don’t want to leave, and since you’re safe here.”

She nods, sighing in relief. “Good. I don’t mind staying here as long as you’re here.”

“Right, but we’ve got to figure out what to do about Madison,” I say. “I know you think she’s protecting you, but I’m not sure. And the person I was talking to about her calls her Bitch Supreme.”

“Madison cares about me,” says Rhiannon.

“But does she?” I say. “Really?” How did Madison even get all tangled up in this anyway? *Was* she one of my father’s mistresses? What made her want to do this?

“She does,” insists Rhiannon. Her fingers are on my cock now. She’s dressed, and I’m dressed, but my dick is soft and hanging out of my jeans. She starts to play with it. “Ooh, I like it like this.”

“Like what?”

“Floppy and bendable,” she says, giggling, moving my dick around all over. “This doesn’t hurt, does it?”

“No,” I say. “Not even a little.” I gasp. “But if you keep doing that, it’s, uh, not going to be floppy.” Because I’m getting hard as she toys with me.

“Oh!” she says, grinning. “Look what happened. Well, what are we going to do with it now that it’s like this?” She gives me a wicked look. “Got any ideas?”

I chuckle. “I mean... maybe.”

“I was watching one of the movies that you got me, and the girl was, like, sitting on top of the guy.” She sits up. “Is that a thing?”

I grin at her. “That’s a thing.”

“Can we do that?”

“Definitely,” I say. “But I want you fucking naked first.”

“God, I’m so wet,” she moans. “Sucking on you turned me on so much, Easton.”

“Did it?” Well, that’s cool. “Show me how wet you are.”

She grabs my hand and puts it down her pants.

I sigh, eyes rolling back in my head. I pull my hand back and lick my fingers clean. “I think I should lick you first, baby, and then we can fuck.”

“Okay,” she says, grinning widely.

I sit up over her. “Didn’t need much convincing of that, huh?”

She shakes her head. “No, I like it when you lick me. Will you put your finger in me again while you do it? I love that, having something inside and touching my clit at the same time. I can’t do that to myself.”

“Yes, definitely,” I growl, and I’m half-mad to get at her and make her feel good. I yank her pants off and my face is between her thighs as she’s letting out little giggles and yips, which turn to sighs as my tongue finds her clit.

She spreads her legs and relaxes and gives me access. “God, Easton,” she breathes. “You like licking me, don’t you? Does it turn you on to do it the way it turns me on with you?”

“Yeah, sweet thing,” I tell her pussy. “I think it must.” I kiss her clit. “Look at this little girl, shyly coming out to peek

at me.” I lick her clit again.

She moans.

“Good girl, such a good girl,” I tell her. “Good little clit, just relax and let Easton take care of this little clit.”

She sighs. “It’s yours, Easton, all of it, all of me.”

“This is *my* pretty little clit?”

“Take care of me, like you said.”

“Are you ready for my finger?”

“Yes, yes,” she gasps.

I worm a finger into her, crook it around so that I’m teasing her in a little come-here motion, and she begins to sob and sigh as I continue to lick her clit.

She likes that, doesn’t she?

Man, I like pleasing her.

I think I might do anything she says she likes, anything at all. It’s like we both command the other, the possession going both ways.

I keep at her and she sighs my name and says please, and I tell her she’s got my permission, whenever she can finish for me, and then I don’t stop until she’s still and silent and clenching on my finger, her little pussy convulsing against my tongue.

Then, while she’s still half in the throes of her orgasm, I tug her up on top of me and settle her right on my cock, spearing her as she straddles me.

Her eyes open wide and her mouth makes a round O.

I can’t help but laughing. “You like this position?”

“Your cock feels so good right there,” she moans and proceeds to start rutting into me with abandon.

Fuck, she looks good up there, seated on me, riding my hard cock.

I take hold of her hips and help her move against me while she sighs and gasps against me.

She reaches down and starts rubbing her clit.

“You going to ask permission before you come again, baby?” I tease her, grinning up at her.

“Yeah, when I get close,” she says, leaning over to put a finger in my face. “This is for me, you know. The other kind of sex, you on top, I think that’s for you.”

I’m not sure how I feel about that. “You don’t like missionary? We don’t ever have to do it—”

“No, we take turns,” she says. “I sucked you, that was for you. You licked me, that was for me.”

“Well, then, baby, I think it’s my turn,” I say.

She laughs. “Flip me over then.”

“Not in a million years,” I say in a raw voice. “Please, please, use me for your own enjoyment, Rhiannon. I’m here to make you happy.”

When she does ask if she can come, and when I tell her yes, please, *now*, and she falls apart on top of me, it makes me so hot that I fall apart, too.

Inside her again.

Shit.

FOURTEEN

THE REMAINING WEEK before Madison comes back passes in a flash.

A flash of a lot, lot, lot of sex.

After discovering the girl-on-top position, Rhiannon is now unleashed. She looks up lists of different sexual positions online, and she makes us try each and every one of them, and I'm just kind of along for the ride, which is fun for me, being tugged along by her enthusiasm.

Now that she has the internet, she's discovered that she's supposed to shave things, and she asks me about finding her a razor, and I tell her I don't want her to shave *anything*. Instead, I fuck her with her arms pinned above her head, running my nose through the soft, soft hair under her armpits—I never knew girls' hair there would be soft, since everyone removes it, but it *is*. At least *hers* is.

She asks me to spank her again one evening, shy and coy and writhing in the middle of her bed, her face going bright red.

"I don't know what's wrong with me, but I just can't stop wishing it would happen again."

So, I put her over my knee and assure her that she's a bad, bad deviant little thing to want to be smacked like that and she moans when my hand cracks down on the round, delectable globes of her ass.

I tell her whenever she's feeling bad and she needs a good punishment, that I'm happy to serve her.

I sleep every night in her bed.

We shower together each day, and she sucks me off in the shower and I fuck her up against the wall of the shower—facing me, facing away.

I do her on her hands and knees on the bed while I stand on the floor, digging my fingers into her hips, and she tells me later she loves it because my balls are flopping up to hit her clit and it feels *amazing*.

And, uh, I keep coming inside her.

At this point, whenever the thought comes up, I've gotten good at pushing it aside. I know it's bad, but we've gone past the point of no return at this point. I can't undo it. I can't mitigate it. It's done.

I'd rather not think about the consequences and just enjoy the pleasures of the moment.

Obviously, I didn't get her Plan B. I sort of got distracted and then too much time had passed. Women are supposed to take it the morning after, and there had been too many mornings.

I feel like shit about it, but it makes me hot to think of knocking her up, also. Overall, it's best not to think about it.

I can't believe that Rhiannon hasn't figured it out yet with all the googling she's been doing about sexual positions and stuff. Hasn't something, somewhere on the internet, clued her in that the purpose of sex is reproduction?

I start to convince myself, late at night, when she's in my arms asleep and I'm lying awake, staring at the ceiling in the tower and feeling guilty, that she must know. She knows and she's okay with it. Maybe she's even trying to get pregnant on purpose to keep me here. She already said she wanted me to stay.

It's possible.

But when I start thinking thoughts like that I start thinking about Rhiannon having a baby. I start thinking about how that even works. I can't let her stay in the tower for that. She'll need medical help. She cannot birth and raise a child in this place.

And I'm softening towards the idea of it all.

My own father—either my biological one or the man I thought was my father my whole life—was a bad, bad man. I know I can do better than him at fatherhood. The bar is ridiculously low.

And, I turned out okay, even with a shit experience of parenthood, so I'm sure my kid will be fine.

Rhiannon's not even twenty years old, though.

What kind of dick am I to have done this to her?

And I think I know the answer to that question. I'm a selfish bastard who doesn't care about other people's feelings, just about what matters to me, what I want, how I feel.

That sounds a lot like Baum Wicker, actually.

Fuck.

FIFTEEN

MADISON RETURNS WITH a car full of bags, as if she's been on some kind of shopping spree. She asks about Francesca, and I say she had to leave. She looks me over to ask if I got bored here, all by myself, and I say that I didn't.

I'm not planning on keeping things from Madison, because you lie to people whose opinion you care about, and I do not care about Madison.

On the other hand, I'm wary of her.

If Uncle Marcus thinks she's something formidable, then I need to be careful.

No, eventually, this all has to come out. I need to tell Madison exactly what I've done with Rhiannon, and how the odds are that she's pregnant with my child. I need to explain that we're going to find a way to get Rhiannon out of that tower.

I just haven't quite figured out how any of that is going to go.

So, I lock the door to the tower for the first time in a long time, and I pretend I haven't been going over there.

I spend my first night alone in over a week, and I can hardly sleep.

But I do sleep, and when I wake up in the morning, Madison is standing over my bed. She is at the foot there, and the dawn is streaming in around the blinds on the windows, and it illuminates her from behind. She seems huge, formidable, dark, and terrible.

I scramble up to a sitting position and look her over.

She moves, and the light illuminates part of her face. Now, she is half in shadow, half lit by the golden light of the sunrise. She sits down at the bottom of the bed. “You think she’s your sister.”

“No, I don’t,” I say. “She’s not my sister.”

“He told you,” she says, letting out a little sigh. “But of course he did. He was that way. I admired his relish for revealing painful truths to others. I admired his ruthlessness.”

“You’re talking about my father?” I say. “Or, well, *not* my father.”

She eyes me. “My Rhiannon isn’t good at hiding things from me, I’m afraid. She confessed it all to me, that she knew that there was no illness, that you’d come into the tower to see her, and when I asked what you’d done to her, she was willing enough to admit there had been intimacy. What were you thinking?”

“It, uh, wasn’t a thing that was done with my big head.” I’m chagrined at this point. “But let’s not make this about me. You have no reason to have put that girl in a tower like that. You want to get angry at me, but what right have you had to —”

“You took advantage of her innocence,” she says. “You’re his son, I suppose, even if you’re not his blood.”

I don’t like that. I’m allowed to think that my father and I are similar, maybe, but other people are not allowed to draw the same conclusions. I throw aside the blankets and get out of bed. I stalk out of the bedroom area of this guest suite and go out to the living room area.

Madison appears in the doorway.

“I want to take her away from all this,” I say.

“Oh, is that so?” says Madison. “Even if you know that if you attempt that, I’ll be sure to make sure your inheritance is taken from you? We both know whose money that is. It’s hers.”

I stand at the couch, head bowed, shaking my head, and somehow—oddly—in this moment, it’s not even a question. “If it means getting her away from you, yes.”

She’s surprised. “What will you do without that money?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “But, you know, my whole life, nothing has fucking mattered. I’ve never been in danger. I’ve never had a real challenge. Maybe I want to attempt something impossible. Maybe that sounds, I don’t know, exciting. And I care about her. I’ve never cared about anyone the way I care about her.”

She lets out a disbelieving laugh.

“It’s true.” I’m defensive. “Besides, she’s probably fucking pregnant, so—”

“You’re joking,” she says, appalled.

“Wish I was,” I mutter, and I can’t look at her.

“Did she say her period was late?”

“Well, no, but... I mean, I’ve been—without any protection—”

“Do you know anything about a woman’s cycle?” she says witheringly.

I brighten. “No,” I say. “So, you’re saying there’s a chance maybe she’s not?”

“I could have you put in jail for this,” she says, musing over it. “This girl, she has no defenses against a monster like you. She couldn’t have known what she was even risking. Does she think she’s pregnant?”

“Well, see, I didn’t exactly explain to her that—” Then I cut myself off. “Anyway, I’d like to see you have me arrested. While we’re at it, you explain how you’ve kept a girl in a tower her whole life and lied to her about why she can’t leave.”

“I’ve protected her. You’ve exploited her.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s true. What *reason* would you have to protect her?”

“Protect a child?” she says. “Why, all the reason in the world. It’s called common human decency.”

“No reason to lock her in a tower, though. You changed her name. Her father—or the man who was annoyed to discover he *wasn't* her father—thinks she’s dead. No one is looking for her, Madison. She could have had a normal life.”

“No, no, no,” says Madison. “Because someday, she would have started asking questions, and—”

“And then you tell her that if she digs into it, she gets herself killed, and she lets it go!” I say. “You don’t have any way to explain why you did this.”

Madison groans. “You won’t let go of that, will you?”

“Explain it to me.”

She puts her hands on her hips. “Well, explain your behavior to me.”

“What do you mean? My behavior makes sense.”

“Does it?” She shrugs.

“I mean, she’s attractive, and I wanted her.”

“Why *her*, though?”

I bow my head. “So, what? You... locked a girl in a tower just... just because you could?”

She shrugs again. “I wanted to see what would happen.”

Okay. Madison is insane, then.

“She can’t be pregnant,” says Madison. “That ruins everything.” She shakes her head. She looks me over. “All right, all right, you... is there anyway I can convince you to simply walk away at this point?”

“Walk away? Are you kidding?”

“Yes, let it go,” she says. “Go back to your life and leave all this behind.”

“What are you going to do to Rhiannon?”

“Well, leave Rhiannon here and you keep your money and your status as Baum Wicker’s child. Forget about Rhiannon and your life can go back to the way it was.”

“Maybe I don’t want it to go back to the way it was.”

“All right,” she says again, disappointed. “Fine. Here’s what we’re going to do, then. We’ll need to negotiate. You’ll want to protect Rhiannon and your unborn child, I imagine, though I have to tell you, I don’t think she’ll leave the tower willingly.”

“No, I realize that,” I say. “But if she is pregnant, she’ll need to.”

“How about over drinks?” she says. “This evening? Say, 5:00?”

“All right,” I say.

“And, no, you can’t see her until after we work it out. I don’t want you upsetting her at this point.”

“I think, when it comes to upsetting her—”

“You can go see her afterwards.”

I let out a breath. “Sure, fine, whatever.”

TWO SHOTS ARE sitting out on the breakfast bar in the vast kitchen of the mansion. Due to spending most of my time in the tower, I’ve rarely used this kitchen, which is all dark wooden cabinets and white marble countertops. The shots are in tumbler-sized glasses, and they’re blue—bright blue, like a robin’s egg.

Madison lifts one and takes a sip. “Blue caracao,” she says. “Isn’t it fun?”

“Are we here to have fun?” I say.

She nods at the shot. “Come on. We drink together, and then we pour another, and then we talk, and when we’ve come to an agreement, we take the final shot.”

It occurs to me that I didn’t have to agree to this.

I could have called the police and reported Madison for keeping Rhiannon prisoner for years. I spent the afternoon looking up people who have been arrested for imprisoning children. It's a thing that some crazy people do, usually to their own children, admittedly, when it's a woman. It's men who kidnap strangers and keep them locked up somewhere in their houses. However, those men tend to get those captive women pregnant and they keep the babies captive too.

Maybe I was too uncomfortable reading that to know what to do with myself.

Madison wants to say that we're equally to blame for abusing Rhiannon.

Maybe she's right.

But women do it—crazy women do it. They lock children up in rooms and starve them and punish them.

And why do they do it?

No one knows.

Just to see what would happen, as Madison said, is as good a reason as any.

I'm pretty sure Madison is a psychopath.

"Let's drink," says Madison.

"How did you get involved in this?" I say. "What connection do you have to anything? Were you looking for a child you could imprison, one that no one would miss?"

"A girl who everyone thinks is dead is a good bet," she says cheerily. "We can do this after. Take the drink, Easton."

I pick up the shot. It smells... off. I can smell the cloying smell of liqueur—probably whatever that blue stuff is she's talking about—but underneath, it's not right. Except, it's familiar.

She clanks her glass against mine. "Come on, then. Bottoms up." She starts to take the shot, and notices I'm hesitating. "Easton."

I tip the shot into my mouth.

Swallow it.

And then... the taste...

I drop the glass and collide with the breakfast bar, bent over, feeling it work its way into me. That was not alcohol.

“Not enough of a man for a drink like that?” says Madison’s voice, above me, somewhere above me.

I lift my head and stagger towards her.

She has a gun.

I freeze, wavering on my feet. Why bother making me a drink—whatever that was—if she was just going to shoot me?

She pours the glass full again, holding the gun on me. “More.”

“No,” I snarl. I think I’m going to vomit, in fact.

She presses the barrel of the gun into my forehead. “Maybe, Easton, if you take the shot, I’ll just leave you here, and you can call for an ambulance, and they’ll take you to the hospital, and you’ll survive. But if I pull the trigger, right now, *boom*. Lights out.”

“Fuck you,” I rasp.

“Drink it.”

My stomach churns. My head aches. I feel nauseous and dizzy and as if consciousness is swimming away from me. But she’s not wrong. If she shoots me, it’s over. I’m drinking poison, and I’m killing myself, but... but... there’s a chance...

I pick up the glass, gasping for breath. “Rhiannon. What are you going to do to Rhiannon?”

“Not while she’s pregnant, of course,” says Madison. “Don’t worry. I’ve thought about it, I suppose, and I guess it’s better, really, if she gives me a replacement to toy with. Another child. *Your* child. But, well, there was only one reason I ever kept her in the first place.”

I’m horrified. “To kill her?” I whisper.

“Just to see how long it takes her to die,” she breathes, smiling at me. “Drink *up*.”

No, here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to grab the barrel of the gun and hurl it away and then I’m going to hit Madison square in the face and knock her out. Then I’m going to get Rhiannon, and I’m going to—

But when I seize the gun, she jerks it away and pulls the trigger, and the bullet grazes the side of my head, and I cry out.

She puts the barrel against my forehead again. “Drink.”

And, *fuck*.

I drink.

And then, everything dissolves in pain and confusion.

SIXTEEN

I WAKE UP in darkness.

There's something in my mouth, something plastic, and there's something on my arm—no, *in* my arm, no—

“Easton.”

It's Francesca's voice.

I go still. I try to open my eyes. My eyes are open. I blink, hard, but I still can't see.

“Hey,” Francesca is saying, “Easton?”

I pull whatever plastic thing is in my mouth out. A respirator or something, maybe? It was breathing for me? “I can't see,” I whisper.

“Shit, they said it was a possibility,” she says. “You drank two shots of windshield wiper fluid, for fuck's sake, Easton, why did you do that?”

“It was a trick,” I say. “What about Rhiannon, what about Madison, what about the baby?”

“What are you talking about?” Francesca sounds worried. “You mean that girl in the tower? There was no one in there, Easton. Madison was pretending! She was in that tower herself, I think, taking that food when we were sending it up there. There's no girl. They didn't find anyone.”

“No, that's not true,” I say, trying to sit up. Fuck, how many things am I attached to here?

“Stay still,” she says. “You're still on dialysis. Madison found you, and I think she's freaking disturbed or something,

but she admitted to pretending to have... oh, I don't even know, some girl, the Thorn baby?"

The Thorn baby?

Mitchell Thorn, the guy who's been texting me.

It's him.

He's my biological father. He's the guy trying to kill Rhiannon.

"She was using that information to control your father. They were going to use this torture of this girl—who didn't even exist, because she's dead, she's been dead—"

"She's not dead," I say.

"For fuck's sake, Easton, there was no one in that tower."

"We saw her! You were there with me."

"I didn't see anything. Someone pulled up the food that day, sure, but I think it was Madison, pretending."

"You and I had a conversation, when I kicked you out, and you accused me of fucking her, which I actually did. I... I..." I don't know how to say this. "I had a relationship with her, okay? We were together, and if she's not there now—"

"Look, Easton, I don't know what you think happened, or how fucked up in the head you are, but you tried to kill yourself, and you sent me away, and none of that is like you."

"You think that I imagined Rhiannon?"

"You named her."

"You think I *hallucinated* falling in love with—"

"In *love*?"

I sigh heavily.

"I'm just saying, Easton, that doesn't sound like you either." Francesca's voice is laced with worry.

I'm annoyed. "Rhiannon is real, and if she's not there now, it's because Madison has her, and Madison is dangerous. Madison—I need my phone."

I'm thinking back to the kitchen, the shots, the gun. Why didn't I get out my phone in that moment? Or reach into my pocket and try to use the phone? Or...?

"Easton, no one knows where your phone is," Francesca sighs.

"I need to call Uncle Marcus," I say.

"He's here," she says. "He's been here. I'll go look for him, okay?"

I sag into the bed, still trying to open my eyes. I can't *see*. "Okay," I say in a tiny voice.

"Wait here," says Francesca, her voice soft and soothing.

I wait. In the darkness.

Until I hear his voice and I turn in that direction.

"Hey, there, kid," he says, and then I feel his hand resting on my ankle.

"Marcus, there really was a girl in the tower."

"Sure," he says. "Of course there was. But no reason to dwell on that, Easton, because you know what happens if she's found. You know what happens to your inheritance. Better to forget about her."

"But Madison made me drink poison, and she straight-up told me she's going to kill Rhiannon and keep our child captive after it's born. She's psychotic. She has to be stopped."

"How did she force you to drink it?" says Marcus in a very gentle voice.

I draw back. "You don't believe me?"

"I'm sorry, kid. I was in the wrong, you know that? I thought about it, after we had that conversation, you and me on the phone, where I told you I'd choose Baum. Why? He's dead now, Easton, he's *dead*. I spent my whole life doing whatever I could for him, and I... got nothing to show for it. I don't care about anyone. So, what? I'm not going to take care of you, when you're literally all I got? That's insane. You can count on me, kid. I will protect your inheritance with

everything in me. You got nothing to worry about on that score.”

I lick my lips. “U-uncle Marcus, that’s...” I swallow. “I mean, that’s amazing, and I know what it cost you to say that, and I’m touched, believe me, I am *touched*, but the woman I love is in danger. And she’s very likely pregnant with my unborn child. And a crazy, murderous witch of a woman has her, and I’m blind and in a hospital bed getting dialysis, and —”

“Shh,” he says. “Why don’t we just calm down, okay? You’re talking crazy.”

“You don’t think I drank that shit on purpose?”

“People commit suicide that way.”

“I don’t want to die!”

He’s quiet.

“Come on, you’ve got to help me,” I say. “We have to go the police or—”

“No police, not in this,” he says. “But, sure, okay, let me put some people on it, Easton. Let me get some feelers out on Madison Nevely.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“Now, stop worrying about all this and just try to get some rest. You have a lot of recovering to do.”

“But her life is in danger!”

“I understand,” says Uncle Marcus. “I swear to you, I will find out what I can.”

And what can I do? I’m attached to a machine that’s cleaning my blood, and I’m blind in both eyes. I’m recovering from a dose of poison that could have killed me. Probably was supposed to kill me.

I have no choice but to let Marcus handle it for now.

Fuck.

RHIANNON

SEVENTEEN

MADISON HANDS ME something sort of like a potato chip bag only it's long and cylindrical and narrow. "Open it," she says. "Pee on it."

I'm very confused.

I peer down at the thing now in my hand. "Pee on it?" I repeat.

"Get in there, you little whore of a thing," she says, pushing me into the bathroom. "Get in there."

Whore.

Well, then, she knows.

How did she figure it out?

I was pretty sure that if she knew about Easton, she'd try to put a stop to it. She's never liked the idea of my being near anyone except her, and I don't see other people, with the exception of that man, years ago, who made me play all the games. Anyway, I made sure to hide the fact that Easton was here. I didn't let her see my tablet, with the internet on it, and I made sure he took all of his clothes and everything with him when he left for the last time before she came back.

I haven't seen him since.

I don't know what's happened.

"What is this?" I say to Madison. "How do I pee on it?"

She makes a noise of disgust, as if I am too stupid to understand anything at all, and she opens it up. Inside, it's long

and thin. There is a little window in the middle. She uncaps the end. “You pee on this part.”

“Why?”

“To find out if you’re pregnant. Now, get in there.”

I stagger backwards and collide with the bathroom door.

Pregnant.

I know about babies, obviously, from little-kid books that Madison read me growing up. I know about being pregnant, growing a baby in your belly, and I know that all babies have fathers, and I suppose I’ve inferred that babies are somehow put there, in the mothers, by the fathers, in some way.

Even now, I’m thinking of some things that I read on the internet when I was looking up sex positions, things about contraception, which I didn’t look up, but which sounds— God, I’m an idiot, aren’t I, because contra- means against, and the word is conception, right? I’ve heard that word. The conception of a baby.

And...

Have I known this, deep down, in the way I knew that Madison was lying to me? Have I known there was some reason that sex was dangerous, that he’s lying to me about something, that he’s using me in some way, that no matter how much he says that he loves me and that he can’t live without me, there’s guilt coming off of him in waves, and he’s convinced that he’s doing me wrong in some way?

But.

I didn’t care.

Beggars can’t be choosers, and he’s all I’ve ever had.

When I saw him for the first time, standing below the tower, with that Francesca person, I thought to myself that I’d never seen a person I *wanted* before.

Before seeing him, I wouldn’t have even been able to conceive of such a thing. Wanted him for what? What was it I thought I’d do with him?

I didn't know, that was the thing, but I wanted him all the same.

I never wanted anything like I wanted that man.

And, I suppose, I've had him.

And I should have known, because wanting something the way I wanted him, it was a reckless sort of wanting, the kind of wanting that people are punished for in novels. Pip in *Great Expectations* wants to be wealthy and he wants Estella, and trying to get both of those things cause him nothing but pain. When Mr. Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* attempts to reach beyond his station and take what he cannot have, he does nothing but create anguish in everyone around him. He is not rewarded for such folly.

I know about this sort of want, this sort of ruinous want.

I know, and yet...

Life is not a story, Rhiannon, I told myself. Life is reality. It's all right. He's offering. Take what he's offering.

"Didn't tell you, I suppose, when he was sticking his hard prick into you again and again?" says Madison.

I can't speak.

She gives me a nudge, into the bathroom.

I take the pregnancy test from her, and I slam the door, shutting myself inside.

My mind is racing.

Maybe Easton didn't know.

Ha! No, everyone knows, even the characters in *Great Expectations*, everyone knows where babies come from, but they are too polite to explain it out loud, not to do it in ways that idiot girls like me can understand, anyway.

Easton knows what he did to me.

I want my tablet. I want to look all of this up. I want to make it make sense.

"Hurry up," Madison says.

“I can’t pee,” I say, and my voice sounds full of tears.

“Oh, fine,” says Madison. “Pee on it, leave it on the sink, and I’ll be back. I’ll be back later, all right?”

I wait until I hear her leave, shutting the door to the tower behind herself. Locking it. Locking me in.

I go out and find my tablet and my fingers shake as I look it all up, and I have realization after realization.

It’s not supposed to be inside you, he said.

“Fuck you,” I whisper out loud. “Fuck you, Easton.”

He made me beg him for it, when I didn’t know what I was begging for. He toyed with me. He had all the chances in the world to come clean—

He didn’t come clean about anything, did he?

No, he did not.

He didn’t tell me that there was no raging illness outside of the tower or that it was not actually the apocalypse or that he was putting *sperm* inside my body, because apparently that’s what it’s called.

He lied to me about everything.

I want to cry about that, I really do, but—for some reason—I can’t. Maybe I’m in shock.

I go back into the bathroom to look down at the pregnancy test.

But it’s not even about that.

All right, yes, it is. It matters, whether or not he’s spawned something inside me, whether or not a child has taken root in my womb, but right now, I can’t even wrap my mind around that.

I go and sit on the top of the spiral staircase. I talk aloud to myself. Funny, when you live alone, you get pretty good at doing that. I know it’s weird, and that I shouldn’t do it in front of Madison or Easton, but... it comforts me.

“What did you think was going to happen, Rhiannon? That he’d stay here, and sneak into see you at night after Madison went to sleep, and you’d just live your lives out here together?”

Well, no, I didn’t think that. I guess I didn’t think much about the future at all.

“You thought about marrying him. You thought about babies.”

Sort of. In an abstract way, I guess. I want him all the time, and when I want him, I want to, I don’t know, consume him. He has curly hair and dark, penetrating eyes, and I like the way his muscles move under his shoulders and the way his big, thick male fingers look wrapped around his reddened, swollen penis, and when I see him, I am alight in a need that overtakes my entire being. It makes me feel suffocated and expansive all at once. I am not in my right mind when it comes to Easton Wicker.

“You didn’t think to talk to him about whether he wanted to marry you, though. I guess he didn’t. He just wanted to have orgasms with you, even if those orgasms were going to mean you got pregnant. He didn’t care about you.”

I guess he must not care.

He pretends to care.

But he doesn’t.

Madison doesn’t care either.

I think I’ve also always known that. Even when I was a little girl and she used to have me call her Mommy, something that she changed her mind about only a few years ago. No more “Mommy,” now I had to call her “Madison.” When I was a little girl, sometimes she would say that she was my mother, other times she would talk about my mother like she was another person.

She told me that story about the apocalypse, yes, but it’s only been the past six or seven years that she’s been consistent with it. When I was younger, I don’t think she really bothered

much to make any sense of anything. I had to stay in the tower. It wasn't safe out there. That was the end of it.

I know, deep down, that Madison does not care about me.

But I can't...

I get up from the spiral staircase and I go to the window and look out at twilight stealing across the overgrown vineyard. I am terrified of the world out there.

Sometimes, Madison comes over in the summer and opens a window in my bedroom, and I get scared and close it.

I always feel like the window is trying to suck me out.

I always feel like, out there, with no walls, the world will be too big. It'll be like pouring water in a container too large. I will separate into small, shallow puddles. I will break apart.

I can't leave the tower.

But I don't think I can stay anymore.

I can't trust Madison. Before, I had no choice, because there wasn't anyone else. I thought she might be lying about things, or that she might be making up stories, because her stories didn't always match up, but she was all I had, and I had no one to contradict any of it, and what if she was telling the truth?

But then, Easton.

And now, it's all shattered.

I can't trust anything that Madison says.

I thought I could trust Easton, but...

I can't trust him either.

I climb down the spiral staircase, thinking about the stupid things he said and how I believed them. He didn't deny that he'd had lots of sex with lots of women, but he pretended that I was special in some way.

Yes.

Special because I was so stupid I let him do whatever he wanted with me.

I think of some of the things he did to me, how he took pleasure in my discomfort or even pain, how he seemed to enjoy humiliating me, how he wanted subjugate me and possess me.

He's awful.

But I'm awful, too, because all those things made me so very, very wet.

Maybe it's Madison's fault. Maybe she warped me in some way, so that I value only awful things and think they are love.

At the bottom of the spiral staircase, I go and find the key that Easton left me.

I hesitate in front of the door, waiting to hear Madison's approach, waiting to hear something to stop me, waiting for courage. I don't know.

I have to leave, that's the thing.

I don't know what waits for me out of this tower. It may be hell. It may be certain death. It may be something unbearable.

But the thing is, I can no longer bear to stay.

So, I don't have a choice.

I turn the key in the lock.

I step out of the tower and into a long, dark tunnel.

I let out a breath that echoes on the walls and ceiling of the tunnel.

Maybe I could stay.

Maybe I'll get big and round in the belly and Easton will rub me there and sing songs to our baby and tell me that I'm going to make a good mother, and we will call Madison Grandma and—

No.

I can't have a baby in this tower.

I can't raise a child here.

I start walking down the tunnel, walking into the darkness. I walk and walk and walk. It is cold and dark and clammy. Now that I am walking, I feel as though maybe I do have to pee, but it's too late, and there's no bathroom around anywhere.

I struggle to simply keep walking.

And eventually, I can't walk anymore, because I run into a door. I don't *see* the door, because it's dark in the tunnel, no real lights, and I'm mostly feeling my way along. So, I just collide with it.

I feel around for the doorknob. It's locked, but I'm on the inside, so I can unlock it, and I do that.

Then I open the door and step into a room with furniture covered in white sheets, dimly lit, a mirror on the wall behind a bar across the room.

I catch sight of myself in it, my long hair hanging limply over one shoulder. I look too thin and too pale. I limp away from the sight of myself, darting as quietly as I can through the sheet-covered furniture, until I come to a set of stairs.

Is that the way out?

I think it must be.

The lower level of the tower was below ground, and this seems like it's below ground too, judging from the lack of windows and the way the air feels and smells. Out means up.

I climb the stairs.

When I get to the top, I half-expect the door there to be locked, but it isn't.

I open it up.

The hallway is covered in a thick, luxurious rug, and there's a painting of swans on the wall. The lights overhead are warm. It feels welcoming.

I look to the left and see a long expanse of corridor, doors opening off it. At the end, a window with a table and a flowering plant in front of it.

I look to the right and I see a doorway to a kitchen.

There is a hand protruding out over the tiled floor, onto the hardwood of the hallway, and I recognize that hand.

I run for the doorway to the kitchen, and there he is. Easton. Laid out, face down, limbs askew, an overturned glass next to him.

I kneel down next to him, taking him by the shoulder.

He lulls back, and I see that his lips are blue, his nose is blue—an unnatural shade of blue, something not right, something terrifying.

A horrified noise escapes my lips. Not too loud, but loud enough.

Fuck, what is wrong with me?

I look around, eyeing the doorway I came through and another doorway, on the other side of the room, back and forth, back and forth...

My heart is pounding so loudly that I'm sure it's echoing off the walls. I'm on high alert.

But no one appears.

If Madison is around, she didn't hear me.

Or maybe she left.

No, I know that can't be true. She had plans for me, and she wouldn't have left without fulfilling them.

I don't know much about what to do in an emergency like this, and I don't know why Easton's lips are blue, but I've seen enough television shows recently—on Easton's streaming services, mostly, because he put every single app on my tablet—to know that there's one thing you do when this happens.

You call 911.

So, I feel around in Easton's pockets until I find his phone.

It's locked.

I use his fingerprint to open it up.

Then I'm lost.

How do you call people on this thing? It looks like my tablet, really. There are app buttons, there are...

What's this little picture of a phone at the bottom?

I hit that.

A number keypad appears.

Perfect.

I dial.

Nine. One. One.

It's ringing.

I clutch the phone.

"Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?" says the voice on the other end.

Oh, well, I don't... know. "I think he drank something," I say. "His lips are blue."

"All right, all right," says the woman on the other end. "Is he conscious?"

"No," I say, and my voice cracks.

"Is he breathing?"

"I... I don't know." I put my fingers under his blue-tinged nose. "I-I think so." Do I really feel breath or do I just want to feel breath?

"I see your address here as..." She rattles something off. "Is that correct? Oftentimes, when we attempt to triangulate cell phones, we're not as accurate as with a landline, so if you could tell us the address—"

"I don't *know* the address," I say. I almost wail it. "I have no idea where I am."

"That's fine. We're dispatching someone to your location now, as best as we can determine your location. Can you go out to the front of the house and look for a street number?"

"Um..." I hang up.

That's a terrible, terrible thing to do, I know. I should stay on the line. I should help Easton.

But instead, I tuck his phone into my pocket and run out of the kitchen, out of the other door, the one on the opposite side of the room.

I don't know where I'm going.

As I run, I think to myself about staying with Easton, waiting for the ambulance to show up—but then, I think they'll be angry with me for hanging up, and I don't want to be chastised for that.

And anyway, Easton doesn't really care about me.

I can't trust him.

I can't trust anyone.

I emerge into a foyer, and right there is the front door.

I run to it, throw it open, and step outside into the night air.

It's like the window in the summer, open in the tower, oppressive, too open, terrifying.

I let out a noise, and I sound like a whining animal, and I'm so afraid, just flooded with fear.

I want to go back into the house. But I don't. I force myself to go down the steps and down onto the ground below, gritting my teeth as I do it, clenching my hands into fists.

I don't know which way to go.

In the distance, against the night sky, I see the tower, and the lights upstairs are all lit up, and it's like a beacon. I walk towards it. I fight my way through the tangled vines in the vineyard, and I get to the bottom of the tower.

I look up.

Someone's in there!

Of course, Madison must have gone to look for me after she did whatever she did to Easton. I guess she did it. I don't think he did it to himself. I don't know how you make someone drink poison, though.

It's dark. I stand there, looking up at the window, watching Madison going to and fro.

Suddenly, the window opens.

I jerk, running for cover.

"How did you get down there?" comes the shriek of Madison's voice.

I pump my legs, running off into the darkness.

"Oh, no, you don't. You're mine." A crack against the night air, so loud, and then pain lights up my cheek.

She *shot* me.

EIGHTEEN

I KEEP RUNNING, pain lancing through my entire face, down into my shoulder, all down my jaw—and I think that the bullet must be working its way further and further into my flesh, that soon it will hit my brain and I will go down and die.

Except that doesn't happen, and I start to realize that the bullet just grazed my cheek, took out a big chunk of flesh there, and that I'm bleeding really bad, but I'm fine, and that the pain becomes concentrated only to the place where the bullet wound is if I stop clenching my jaw.

Madison comes after me.

I hear her as I'm running over the hills, into the fields that surround the property, as I'm dashing away in the darkness.

She rages and shrieks and screams.

She shoots the gun a few more times.

And then, eventually, I come to a stone wall, about three feet high, and on the other side is a road.

I don't know what to do. I watched this one movie on my tablet about hitchhiking, but it turned out that everyone in that movie was a murderer—the hitchhiker and the person who picked up hitchhikers. I'm pretty sure, though, that it would be safer to trust a person who picks me up on the side of the road than it would to trust Madison.

Pretty sure.

Anyway, I sort of walk along the inside of the wall, following the road.

A few cars pass by, their bright lights cutting into the darkness.

And then, maybe the fourth one screeches to a stop.

A man gets out. I see him illuminated in the headlights and he's wearing a t-shirt that says, *Yes, I'm a Pastor*. And in smaller letters underneath, *Don't Look so Surprised*. His hair is kind of spikey and dyed blond at the tips. He motions for me to climb over the wall.

"Come on," he says. "You look like you could use some help."

I climb over the wall and he's right there. He tilts my face back. "What happened? You're bleeding like crazy."

"I... I think it was a bullet." My voice is shaking.

"We need to get you to a hospital."

"No," I say. "No, I don't think so. I don't think I should do that." Part of me is still reeling from the sight of actual cars. I spent so much time thinking that there was an apocalypse, that society had crumpled, that technology was all rusting and disappearing.

I knew Madison was lying, but maybe some part of me *didn't* know.

"Okay," says the man gently. "Okay, that's fine. I know somewhere else I can take you, somewhere safe."

I let him guide me into the car.

It's so strange. They're just like the movies. I spend too much time running my fingers over the dashboard. It's *unreal*.

He settles into the driver's seat and pulls the car back out onto the road. He starts asking me questions, but I don't know how to answer them.

"Who had the gun?"

"Madison?"

"How do you know Madison?"

“She’s my... I’ve always known Madison.” She kept me locked in a tower and lied to me my entire life, and I think she tried to shoot me and she maybe killed Easton, and how do I know Easton? Well, he’s the man who took sexual advantage of me because I didn’t know any better and I’m probably pregnant with his child.

I can’t say any of these things out loud.

“It’s okay,” says the pastor. “It’s okay. You don’t have to tell me anything, all right? I’m not going to pry.”

He takes me to a house, and a woman opens the door. “River!” she says. “What the hell?”

“Language, Diana,” tuts the pastor, pushing me into the house. “Stitch her up, will you?”

The woman—Diana, I guess—examines my face and lets out several gasps of surprise or horror, I’m not sure which. She goes away and comes back with a towel, which she presses to my face. She brings my hand up to hold it there. “Keep pressure on it,” she says to me. Then she turns to the pastor. “She needs to go to a hospital.”

“Well, she doesn’t want to,” he says. “And I’m not going to force someone to do something that frightens them while I’m building trust.”

“If I stitch that up, it’ll scar much worse than if she goes to a hospital.”

“It’s going to scar anyway, right?”

Scar. I press the towel into my face, blinking, thinking about this, about how it might have been different if I’d been scarred from the beginning. Maybe Easton wouldn’t have been so tempted to use me.

“I want a scar!” I say.

They both turn to me.

“You’re the one who’s called to minister to perfect strangers, little brother,” says Diana. “Not me. You get that?”

“Stitch her up,” says the pastor.

Diana sighs. “You want a scar, on your face?”

“I want to be ugly,” I say. “Ugly women are safe.”

Diana tilts her head to one side.

“No joy there, I’m afraid,” says the pastor to me with a little smile. “You’re never going to be ugly. What’s your name?”

I let out a breath. “Rhiannon,” I whisper.

LATER, WITH MY cheek stitched closed and a bandage taped over half of my face, River, who is a youth pastor at a nearby church, takes me back to his place.

He has a guest room, and he shows me how to lock the door, even though he assures me that he’s not going to do anything to me.

“Because you’ve taken a vow of celibacy?” I say. I had heard of vows of celibacy before, but I never really knew what they meant, just like I’d heard the term virgin and sort of assumed it meant a young girl, not anything more than that. Now I understand the idea, though, now that I understand everything better.

“No, I’m not Catholic,” he says. “I can get married, but I’m not going to do anything like that until I do.”

Oh. I’m making connections in my head. Purity rings, that episode of the show I watched with all the kids, that sort of thing.

“Lock the door if it’ll make you feel safer,” he says.

But I don’t want to be locked in, and I don’t.

I sleep with the door a little ajar. I wake in the night several times, and I look, and every time I see the door is open, I breathe a little easier.

In the morning, I stay in bed and finger my bandage. I don’t know what to do now.

I have very scant information about my identity or the actual world. I’m just now remembering the reason I was in

that tower—supposedly, anyway—and that reason was because someone wanted to kill me.

Easton told me that his father—well, his fake father—found out that he wasn't Easton's real father, but that my father—well, my fake father—was. When my fake father discovered he wasn't my real father, he tried to have me killed. Supposedly, this man still wants to have me killed.

But Easton didn't know who that man was.

He only knew that the man had me kidnapped.

I don't really understand how it worked. My fake father paid kidnappers to kill me? But instead, somehow, Madison intervened?

I wonder if the kidnappers simply didn't want to kill me. It's a cold, cold person indeed to kill a child. From what I hear, even in prison, child murderers are reviled.

Anyway, who could this man be?

I have Easton's phone, but I can't get into it without his fingerprint, so I just tuck it away. Later on, after River feeds me breakfast, I ask if I can use the internet to look something up.

He lets me, but he hovers. He's curious about me.

I don't mind, I suppose. He doesn't have to let me stay here. He doesn't have to take care of me. He's only being nice.

I sit down at a computer in a little nook in his dining room, what he calls his office, and I search for kidnapped girls seventeen years ago.

It's fairly easy to narrow down.

Sage Thorn, two-year-old girl, kidnapped and later found dead.

That must be me.

Sage Thorn. I pull up a picture of the little girl from the first pictures when she was only missing, and there was an Amber Alert looking for her. It could be me, this baby-faced

girl, it could be. I don't... it doesn't feel like me, however, not in any real sense.

I look at pictures of Mitchell Thorn, my fake father, and I feel no hint of recognition. I look at pictures of Lisa Thorn, my real mother, and nothing about her feels familiar either.

I turn away from the computer. "I don't know why I looked any of that up," I tell him.

"What did you look up?" he says.

"That man thinks I'm dead," I say. "But if he found out I wasn't, he'd kill me."

"This is why you didn't want to go to the hospital."

"No," I say. "No, I just... I'm just afraid of everything, I guess. I don't know how to live in this world. I've spent my whole life hidden away."

"What about Madison?"

"Right," I say. "I guess she wants to kill me, too."

He regards me, silent, solemn. Finally, he says, "When you're ready, Rhiannon, we need to go to the authorities with this."

I think about that. "I don't think the authorities would be able to do anything against a man like this," I say. "He has too much money."

"The law is above things like that," he says.

"Is it really?" I say, and I mean it genuinely. I'm curious, because the only thing I have to go on is the television I've watched recently, and it's painted a pretty dim view of law enforcement, I'm afraid. But maybe that's just dramatization for entertainment. Is the real world a better world?

He sighs heavily, though, and simply nods. "I see your point."

Oh. Well, then.

He pats my hand. "It's all right. Whatever you want."

"I don't want to put you in danger," I say.

“No, don’t worry about that,” he says. “That’s in God’s hands. He put you in my path, and I believe he’ll protect us both. He has a plan for us.”

I don’t know much about God, truthfully. I like the idea of a plan, of someone benevolent and powerful, looking out for me. I like that idea a lot.

NINETEEN

I STAY FOR a week, then two weeks, and I feel guilty.

River's life is one of reactions. He goes into the church office every day around 9:00 in the morning. As soon as he's there, someone appears and needs him to do something or other. He spends the morning doing technological troubleshooting or helping to decorate the sanctuary with flowers or traveling out to see sick parishioners in the stead of the regular pastor, whose name is John, who is much older, who shakes my hand and tells me that God is looking out for me.

I tag along for most of these things, River telling me to sit back and relax for those first two weeks.

But after I express that I'm guilty, he says that I can help out. "It's a natural human tendency to want to give," he tells me. "It's God working through us. God made us in his image, and we have a goodness about us, a deep-down goodness."

I like this idea, too.

So, then, I am working full-time at the church, along with River. I am running coffee to secretaries and writing up the lyrics on the projections that go overhead during Sunday morning worship.

I attend church with River on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening, but I don't see him doing his youth pastor thing, because I'm just too old for the cutoff of the youth group. It's eighteen and under. I go to the adult bible study instead. River gives me a bible and I read along in

the bible study and listen as the people talk over what it all means.

I find, having read a great deal of books written in the 1800s, that the themes of the bible and Christianity in general seem *right* to me in a way that I can't quite explain. However, they also seem old-fashioned, as if these people are stuck in Dickens novel two hundred years after the fact.

Even so, I am drawn to the ideas of redemption and punishment and grace. They seem transcendent in a way that I don't wish to let go of.

So much of the contemporary view of everything seems whitewashed with its lack of sin. No one is in control of their own destiny anymore because nothing we do is bad or wrong. All the bad things in our lives, then, are the results of the outside world, of others doing us wrong.

And this, you see, means we have no control over it.

Being a sinner means I'm responsible.

And it gives me hope, because if I can just stop sinning, maybe things will get better.

River asks me about my past less and less as the time passes. Sometimes, we have dinner with his sister Diana, and sometimes his other sister Mary comes along, too. They ask me lots of questions, but River always makes them stop, saying that I'll explain in my own time.

I spend time trying to acquire as much information as I need about the outside world. River lets me buy whatever I need in terms of hygiene products, and I manage to shave my legs for the first time. I like them smooth, I have to admit. I also have to admit it's a big pain and takes a lot of time.

One evening, River is flipping through channels on his television set, mumbling about how there's never anything on and how immoral everything is anyway, when I decide to tell him that I don't think I want to go to the authorities at all.

"Why not?" he says. "Because I don't think they could really be that corrupt, and if so, we'll find someone who'll protect you. Maybe if we go to the FBI or—"

“Because,” I say, “I think I brought it on myself.”

“What?” he says. “No, definitely not.”

I take a deep breath, and I begin to talk about Easton Wicker, except I don’t mention him by name. I talk about the way I felt when I first saw him, about how gripped I was with want for that man, about how I enjoyed being degraded and used in perverse ways, about how I longed for him, dreamed about him, wished for him to come to me and use me.

As I talk, River clears his throat and shifts in his seat and seems uncomfortable, but he doesn’t stop me, either.

When I finally trail off, no more words, it’s very quiet as River simply gazes at me.

“So,” I say, “I think all of it was my punishment. I had to reject him, and when I finally saw him for what he was—an agent of temptation and manipulation and, well, lust, I was able to break free. I was ensnared by it, don’t you see? It was sin, and it was the broad path to destruction, and I was traipsing happily along it, and then I rejected it all, and God guided me to you.”

River coughs. His face is red. He’s hunched over a little. Wait, is he trying to disguise the fact that he has an erection?

I feel horrible. I’ve tempted River, of all people. I’ve brought this awful sin to his door. I start to stammer out apologies. “I shouldn’t have told you about it. I never meant to make you feel...” I gesture at him, wide-eyed, apologetic. “You know, aroused.”

He lifts both hands. “No, no, I’m fine.” He coughs again. “You were, er, graphic a few times, but...” He lets out a breath, relaxing, shaking his head. “You’re wrong, I think. It’s not your fault. You were innocent.”

“None of us are innocent,” I say. “None of us, not since Eve gave in and ate the fruit in the garden. All that was in me. I am human. I am weak and I have fleshly desires and—”

“Right,” he says softly. “I suppose you do.” He’s still staring at me.

“But not anymore,” I say.

He raises his eyebrows. “So, this discussion didn’t make you feel...?”

“Well, he’s gone now. I don’t know what happened to him,” I say. “It was only for him.”

River swallows, and I swear he looks disappointed. Then, he’s on his feet, brisk. “You should have said something about... If you’re pregnant, you need to see a doctor.”

“Oh,” I say.

“I can take you,” he says. “There’s a volunteer crisis pregnancy clinic with some midwives who are happy to provide care free of charge. I’ll take you tomorrow.”

I open my mouth to protest. I don’t know why, but I still feel terror at going to any sort of institution. What is the terror? Is it that someone is going to find me—Madison, Mitchell Thorn, Easton?

Or is it something else, something deeper?

A doctor will take care of me, but I’m not sure that’s what I deserve. I think, like the sinner I am, I deserve more punishment.

Also, I have not come to terms with the idea that life is growing inside me. It seems like an abstract notion, too strange to possibly be true.

The next day, we get a call in the morning that summons River to the deathbed of a woman from the church, the mother of two of the children in the youth group. So, I’m spared this doctor’s visit, and I’m relieved.

I spend the day at the church, doing odd jobs until I have nothing else to think of doing, and then I stay in River’s office and spend time on his computer in there. I am endlessly fascinated by the internet, by simply looking various things up. It seems that there’s no end to the things I don’t know about. I feel frustratingly idiotic, and the internet is the only way I can compensate for this flaw within me.

Which is how I discover something I didn’t know about.

Pills. That can be send in the mail to me. If I take them, this pregnancy issue goes away.

I want it.

I want it with the same fierceness that I wanted Easton in the first place, and I wonder at myself, so willing to get out of the natural consequences of my actions, so quick to wish for this solution.

But I can't have it, of course. I don't have money, and I know that River wouldn't approve. I have heard the word from the pulpit before in this church, in fact, in lists of sins against God.

Abortion.

I must be a sinner, and there is no other way to explain it all.

River calls the church and asks for me. I am summoned by one of the secretaries. I stand in the office, clutching the phone to my ear as he tells me that Mrs. Adams is worsening.

"I don't know if this is going to be the end or not, but I can't leave her sons alone with this. I feel I need to stay. Will you be all right?"

"Of course," I say. His apartment isn't far away. I can walk there. "It was my night to cook dinner, anyway." We have been taking turns. Whoever doesn't cook does the cleanup. "You do whatever you need to do. Don't worry at all about me."

He doesn't come home until after midnight.

I'm in bed, but I hear him, and I get up, throwing on a robe and going out to meet him as he comes in the living room.

He sees me, and his eyes are red and his nose is swollen. He's been crying.

I make him sit down at the kitchen table and I make him some herbal tea.

He pulls me down as I'm bustling about, looking for spoons and sugar and milk. He makes me sit in a chair

opposite him. “Life is very short, and God didn’t design us to live it alone, Rhiannon.”

I draw back from this, confused at the change of subject.

“I thought you were sent to me as a test,” he says. “From the first time I saw you, I was drawn to you, and I thought to myself, ‘Resist this. Help this girl. Do not take advantage of her.’ But, last night, your story...” He reaches out to take my hand.

I let him, looking down as he interlaces our fingers.

“Rhiannon, you need someone to care for you, to care for your unborn child. We’re a good team, aren’t we?”

I look up into his eyes, blinking. “What are you saying?”

“I wouldn’t...” He shakes his head. “Nothing you don’t want. We don’t ever have to—” He looks away. “That man, he clearly raped you again and again. I would never force you to do anything.”

I pull my hand back and cradle it against my chest.

“I think I am drawn to you, by God, to show you, slowly and carefully, of course, that... that sex doesn’t need to be like what you were speaking of. That it can be respectful and loving and, well, Godly. That there is no need for trickery or being ordered onto one’s knees or...” His voice drops to a whisper. “Being asked to *gag*.”

I get out of the chair, because—for some reason—when he talks about it, it hits me in a funny way, and I remember Easton, and I’m turned on again.

“Marry me, Rhiannon,” he says. “Let me be the father to your child.”

I gasp.

He gets up out of the chair and reaches for me again.

I let him touch me. I look up at him.

“It’s all right,” he says. “You don’t have to say anything. I won’t do anything you don’t wish, and we would not

consummate anything until we were wed, of course.” He reaches out and touches my cheek. “Think about it?”

I nod. Thinking about it is something I could do.

“May I kiss you?”

I hesitate. My urge is to say no, truthfully. I have never thought of River as a person to kiss. But I suppose, he has been taking care of me, and I’ve been living in his guest room, and there have been some little teasing digs from the secretaries, and he’s not unattractive or too old or... “All right.”

His mouth is firm against mine. He doesn’t use his tongue, but there’s something inexorable about the way he takes control of me. It’s a kiss, I suppose, the definition of one, but there’s something missing from it—the warmth, the drive, the need...

It’s a kiss, but there’s no passion.

He lets go of me.

TWENTY

RIVER FRETS OVER whether it's proper for me to stay under his roof if he's courting me. He thinks it's highly inappropriate, and that—if anyone understands the situation—they won't approve.

Of course, he also says that he probably shouldn't have had me here at all, that he was simply inviting disaster. He is only a man, in the end, and he has his own lower nature.

I can't imagine River losing control or giving in to temptation in any way. Everything he does seems so deliberate. And I don't want to go anywhere else. Besides which, I don't think I want to marry him.

River's sister Diana, the one who stitched up my cheek (which is scarred now, a big, ugly puckered line of red scar tissue on my skin), she doesn't go to church. She knows how to stitch up wounds because she was a medic with the army, but now she works as a manager for Bath and Body Works, in a strip mall out by the highway.

I call her the next day, when River leaves to go and help the Adams family in the wake of their loss. Mrs. Adams did indeed die last night.

“Diana, can I ask you a question?” I say.

“Sure, anything,” she says. “What's my brother up to with you, anyway? I hope you haven't developed some kind of crush on him. Mary and I think he's probably asexual, definitely aromantic, somewhere on the spectrum maybe, so if you're getting attached—”

“No, it’s not that way,” I say. “Um, what do you think about abortion? Do you think it’s wrong or right?”

“Probably depends on the situation,” she says. “Which is why I think the woman who’s pregnant should get to decide.”

I let out a breath. “If I could find money to buy pills like that, would you mind if I had them sent to your house?”

“Where’s River?”

“He’s away from the house,” I say. “Don’t worry, it’s not... Your brother didn’t...”

“Oh, no, I didn’t think that at all,” she says. “But I also figure he wouldn’t even be capable of entertaining a viewpoint outside of something biblical. But Jesus? He strikes me as someone who didn’t condone suffering, so—”

“I don’t know about that,” I say. “I think Jesus seemed to say a lot of things about suffering, but mostly that you should endure it now because you’d get rewarded for it in heaven. I mean, blessed are meek, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who are persecuted—”

“Yeah, good point. Well, whatever. Jesus or not, *I* don’t condone suffering. How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

“Yeah, I’m coming over. Sit tight.”

“Wait, what?”

But she’s there in ten minutes. She’s taken off work to take me to Planned Parenthood.

We get there, and it’s like a doctor’s office inside. I mean, like the doctor’s offices on TV. I’ve never been to an actual doctor’s office. I don’t know what I was expecting, but I didn’t expect it to seem so subdued and professional, I guess. I thought it would feel sordid. It doesn’t.

They ask for ID, but when I don’t have it, it’s not a problem. They ask for insurance, but that’s not a problem either.

We wait.

When they call my name, Diana comes back with me. She does all the talking, and they talk to her, not me. It's decided that I should take a pregnancy test, so I have to go and pee in a cup and put it through a small door in the wall of the bathroom.

Then I see a doctor, who asks me questions about my medical history, and I can't answer most of them.

The doctor goes out and comes back. She tells me the pregnancy test is positive, which I suppose I knew. Still, hearing it, it makes my heart pound.

"We don't do abortions here at this clinic, which I know you said she was interested in," says the doctor, mostly to Diana, because everyone's talking to Diana more than me. "But we can refer her to the bigger clinic in Jillsberg." It's a bigger city, not too far away. "Let's just see a few things."

She talks about how she wouldn't necessarily do this, but with all the holes in my medical history, she wants to be thorough. She uses a stethoscope to listen to my chest, and then my belly. But she furrows her brow and gives me a look. She gets up, gets another contraption, and then puts it on my belly. She goes and looks at the pregnancy test results, asks about the date of my last period again. I tell her.

"One minute," she says and then leaves the room.

I'm worried.

Diana seems worried too.

But the doctor is back soon.

We all end up in another room and the doctor does an ultrasound.

"You've miscarried," she says.

"The baby is dead?" I say. "But I thought..." I don't know a lot about miscarriages, but I thought I'd be able to tell.

"It sometimes takes a bit of time for your body to get the message," she says. "You're not too far along. You will probably experience this as a painful menstrual period, nothing more. It could start at any time. There's no need for medical

intervention unless something seems very wrong during that process.”

“Oh,” I say. Well, that worked out very nicely, didn’t it?

I’m numb on the ride home as Diana babbles to me from the driver’s seat, telling me about how she took her friend to the emergency room once in college, because she was having pretty horrible cramps and it turned out to be a miscarriage. “I forgot all about that. She didn’t even have any idea she was pregnant.”

They gave me birth control at Planned Parenthood, months and months of pills, all in their little blister packs in my pockets. Diana tutted over the fact that I didn’t have a purse, that I’ve just been wearing donated clothes that were on hand at the church. She said she was going to “have a talk” with her brother.

I try to talk with her in the car, to act as if everything is normal.

This is what I wanted.

I never connected to the idea of a baby, after all.

It seemed so strange and odd and impossible.

Why do I want to cry now?

When we get back to River’s house, he’s angry, demanding to know where I’ve been and why I didn’t say anything to anyone about it. Diana wags her finger in his face, says that he doesn’t know what he’s doing, says that he’s no sort of person to be taking care of a girl my age.

I walk slowly through the house and go into the guest room. Into my room.

I lie down on the bed and stare at the ceiling.

Suddenly, now, I can imagine all of it. I imagine my belly swelling. I imagine the feeling of something inside me moving around. I imagine my arms full of sweet-smelling tiny arms and legs, a small baby face with tiny eyes blinking out of focus. I feel a surge of something... I don’t know what it is. In some strange way, it reminds me of the way I felt in Easton’s

arms after sex, a feeling of happiness and togetherness and love.

And now, I've lost that.

I roll over, burying my face in the pillow.

The tears I shed are mostly silent.

I DIDN'T TELL Diana that River asked me to marry him.

I think I want to pretend that hasn't happened, because it makes everything so very messy. I suppose I need to think about the future. I can't stay here under River's roof forever. Even if he were to decide that he didn't want to marry me anymore, I would eventually have to leave.

Marrying him is sort of the easiest thing, in some way. He'd take care of me. I'd be here, and I'd spend my days working at the church, and I guess eventually I'd have his babies, and that would be my life.

It wouldn't be a bad life, I suppose.

But I can't help but feel that I'm exchanging one cage for another.

The tower was awful. Easton was very bad to me. But even though he lied to me about a number of things, there was one thing that was true, and that was the way he wanted me. He wanted me like a madman, and I wanted him back just like that.

I know that sort of desire is sin and destruction, a lit match that will eventually explode.

But I think I might rather burn than this.

River is pleased I'm not pregnant. He talks about our impending nuptials as if I've said yes. He speaks often about the way we'll have sex, how it will be proper and loving and respectful. I don't know if I want sex to be like that.

Maybe, if I'd never tasted the fiery passionate destruction of Easton Wicker, maybe then I could have been satisfied with Godly sexual contact.

But I don't think so, in the end.

I don't know why I'm this way. Is it Madison's fault, did she warp me in some unseen way? Or is it something innate within me, some awful inner nature of sin?

Anyway, I have to leave.

But I don't know where to go.

I start hinting around that maybe I could have a paid position at the church, but River makes out that I'm sort of working for my food and place to sleep, which I guess makes sense. But that puts me in a bind. How can I get money to take care of myself if I'm already working full-time just to eat and have a roof over my head?

I decide maybe I could get an evening job. I'll just sleep less. I ask River if he would mind driving me.

And then it all has to come out, I suppose.

"Why do you need another job?" he says.

"Well, I need to save up money," I say. "Because I need to be able to take care of myself." I'm honestly not sure how I'm going to get a job, considering I don't have a driver's license or a birth certificate or any of those things, but maybe I can get something under the table? Maybe I can get a fake ID?

"You'll stay here with me," he says. "I'll take care of you."

And here it is. I can't keep stringing him along like this forever. "I don't know, River," I say. "I don't think we, um, mesh in that way."

He raises his eyebrows. "Mesh in what way?"

"A romantic way, I mean," I say. "There's no..." I gesture with my hands. "No spark."

"We don't need a spark," he says. "We make a good team, and we enjoy each other's company. And besides, I think you're looking too hard for that spark, which isn't a spark at all, it's just abuse. It's just somehow enjoying being used by a very bad man. It's a weakness within women, put there by the devil."

I don't know what to say, because the truth is that the idea of being used by Easton—it's arousing. I suppose that doesn't make sense, though. I shouldn't like it, should I?

"That's why God sent you to me, so that I can show you another path, the path to righteousness," he says.

"But I don't think I want to marry you," I say. "I'm sorry, because I like you a lot, and you've been good to me, but I just don't... I don't feel anything like that for you."

"You don't know what you want," he says. "You're confused. You've been twisted up and deceived. Besides, I am stirred towards you, stirred in a way I have never quite been stirred."

I blink at him. *This* is him being stirred? He seems... well, the same as ever.

"May I kiss you again?"

"I don't know," I say, because I didn't really like the last kiss.

"Just a kiss," he says, coming for me.

I surrender to his firm and insistent mouth on mine again. He clutches me close, holding me tightly against him, and I feel his erection. It's firm and insistent too. It doesn't pulse or throb. It isn't warm. It would be like being fucked by a slab of granite. I can imagine him over me, working himself into me, over and over again, his expression grim and serious, his body like a boulder pinning me to the bed.

"No." I push him off.

He blinks at me, confused, hurt.

"I'm sorry, but I don't think you should do that anymore," I say in a tiny voice.

He eyes me. "You never said no in your tower."

"I wanted him," I say.

His expression goes very tight and a little ugly for just a moment. Then it relaxes. He shakes himself. He rubs the back of his neck. "You don't want me."

“I...” I hunch up my shoulders. “I’m sorry.”

TWENTY-ONE

THE NEXT DAY, we have a conversation in his office, and he is all apologies.

“I don’t know what came over me,” he breathes, standing across the room from me.

I am sitting in the chair that goes to his computer, but swiveled around to face him, so the screen is at my back.

“I’ve never been affected before,” he says, running a hand through his hair. “Not really, not like this. Truthfully, the idea of it, the nudity, the—the *fluids*, the sweat... I always thought it was disgusting. But I suppose, somehow, with you, maybe because you’re so sweet and small and innocent, maybe because of that, maybe because of your long, long hair, I don’t know, Rhiannon, but something about you, it overrode the disgust, and I thought, well, maybe I could do it. Maybe I wanted to do it.”

I don’t know what to say to this.

He keeps talking, so I guess it doesn’t matter that I’m simply staring at him. “That’s not an excuse, though. I committed one of the classic blunders of all men everywhere—assuming that my attraction for you was reciprocated, simply because I was attracted to you. But isn’t that the tragedy of love, after all, in so many stories and poems and plays? Unrequited love? Imbalance of attraction? It’s a test given to us by God, and I am afraid that—thus far—I have quite failed. I have not been Christlike.”

“Well, you’ve been very good to me, River, and it’s not as if—”

“No, no, I put awful pressure on you,” he says. “I’m not that sort of man. I’m not like him, that man in the tower with you. I won’t be like him.”

Maybe if he was more like Easton, I’d marry River, but I don’t say that out loud.

“You can’t stay with me anymore,” he says.

“Oh,” I say, drawing back, disappointed, frightened.

“Don’t worry, I’m not sending you out onto the streets,” he says. “But there is a shelter for women, one that is associated with a number of the churches here. It’s likely the best place for you to go. They’ll help you get yourself together and apply for jobs, transition out of homelessness. And I’ll help, any way I can, you understand. Name it, and I’ll do what I can, whatever is in my power. When you’re close to wanting an apartment or something, I may be able to help you with the first month’s rent and all that. I mean it, you call on me, but no strings attached.”

“Do I have to leave your house?” I say in a very small voice.

He lets out a breath that sounds nearly agonized. “If you stay, I may do something I regret even worse than what I’ve already done, I’m afraid. I don’t seem to be myself around you.”

And that is the only time, for one fleeting moment, that I find River even remotely attractive.

TWENTY-TWO

THE FIRST NIGHT in the shelter, I get my hands on a pair of scissors.

I don't know why I do it.

It feels right.

I wrap my hand around my hair and cut it. I stand there, looking at myself in the mirror, holding my long tresses in one hand, looking at my face in the mirror without all my hair. I look older, I think, wiser, more world weary.

I think it suits me.

TWENTY-THREE

A STRANGE THING happens several weeks into my stay at the shelter.

It's common practice for the shelter to contact the Vital Registration Office for various states based on the information that's given, and they find a birth certificate for a Rhiannon Nevely, in New York state, with my birth date.

I don't understand this, frankly, because it doesn't make sense.

For one thing, Madison isn't supposed to have been looking after me until I was two years old, so to have registered this birth certificate for two years prior is very strange. For another, Madison told me that my birthday was just made up, that she celebrated my birthday on the day she had found me.

I look up Sage Thorn again, in the small computer lab in the shelter. It has three computers with internet access, and we have to sign up for half hour blocks of time. When your time is up you have to give the computer up if there's anyone else who's signed up.

This time, I'm all alone in there, though, and I find out that Sage Thorn's birthday is a completely different day than mine. In fact, Sage Thorn, if the date on my birth certificate is correct, is seven months older than me. Well, I guess I'm seven months older than I think I am.

Because I *am* Sage Thorn.

I go and look at the pictures of her again, and this time, I do feel some sense of familiarity. I study the little girl's face,

and I feel like that *is* my face.

I don't know what Madison did to get me this birth certificate. Maybe my biological father, Baum Wicker, greased some wheels with his money and connections and got it set up for me.

Whatever the case, it's good news.

It means that I can start a new life, and that I don't have to worry about Mitchell Thorn looking for me to come and kill me.

TIME PASSES.

I focus on myself, which is nice, instead of doing things at the church. The people at the shelter are good resources, but I don't lose touch with River.

He sees me from time to time, but it's only friendly, and there's no renewal of his romantic intentions. I am relieved by this.

River helps me learn to drive, and I get my driver's license. I don't have a car or anything, but it's handy to have a real ID. I start applying for jobs, and even without any real experience or a high school diploma, I'm able to start waitressing at a little corner cafe, just down the street from the shelter.

Things are looking up.

One day, as I'm taking out trash in the back of the cafe, I notice a car in the alley. It's gleaming and gray and nondescript and it stands out like a sore thumb.

I stiffen, holding the garbage bag poised over the dumpster, watching the car.

A man gets out of the passenger side. He's huge, bulging muscles, bulging thighs, sunglasses on his face, and there is a gun strapped to his waist.

I drop the garbage bag, letting out a shriek, and I run.

I sprint down the alley as the man with the gun pursues me. "Ms. Nevely, we only want to talk," he calls after me.

I push over a metal trash can behind me, into my path, to block him from pursuing me.

But he just leaps over it like a hurdle on a track.

I turn back to the front of the alley and another man is there. He has a gun, too.

“Get behind me, Rhiannon,” he says, drawing his gun.

I skid to a stop. Who is *that*?

I look back at the man pursuing me and then forward at the man with the gun.

I’m trapped.

The man with the drawn gun comes for me, long strides down the alley. He grabs me by the arm and tucks me behind him, sighting the man in pursuit. “Freeze.”

Sunglasses stops, holding up both hands. “Hey, let’s not get crazy here. Mr. Thorn just wants to talk to her. He’s been looking for her for months.”

That man is from Mitchell Thorn? No. He must have somehow known about me. When I started using my birth certificate, it triggered all this.

“That’s not happening,” says the man with the gun. “Back away, and leave her alone.”

Sunglasses sighs heavily. “We’re not going to hurt her.”

“Back *away*,” says the other man. He turns to look at me. “Sorry, Rhiannon, but I think you’ll need to come with me for now. It’s for your own safety.”

EASTON

TWENTY-FOUR

THE ONE THING I can't figure out is why Madison stuck around and tried to play mind games with me about Rhiannon.

I guess it let Rhiannon get away, since no one was looking for her. No one knew Rhiannon existed. Maybe that's what Madison wanted.

But I don't understand why she wanted Rhiannon to get away. It seemed like she was trying to kill Rhiannon. She told me that was her plan. Why save Rhiannon?

Maybe she was just protecting herself.

Apparently, Madison wasn't actually expecting the ambulance to arrive. At first, everyone thought that Madison called 911 and reported my apparent suicide. But I heard the recording, and that was Rhiannon.

I don't understand why Rhiannon left the tower.

She said she never would.

But she found me, and if she hadn't called for help, I probably wouldn't have survived. I have her to thank for that.

And then she disappeared.

After I tell the police what Madison did to me, she gets arrested. I don't understand why she didn't flee. Maybe she was banking on the idea that I would never come out of the coma and that her version of events would be believed. Her version of events conveniently made it look as if she hadn't done anything criminal. She hadn't kept a girl locked in a tower for seventeen years and she hadn't forced a man, at gunpoint, to drink poison.

I guess, if I hadn't woken up, no one would have known she was lying.

But I did wake up. And now, she's in jail.

Honestly, maybe it's just typical of this kind of criminal mind, who knows? I'm often amazed at the audacity of the killers in true crime shows, the way they are so certain they can get away with ridiculous things.

That guy in *The Jinx* was taken down by his own handwriting, right?

That woman that Renee Zellweger played in that one show, she thought that she could go pick up a guy, pay him money, and then pass him off as an intruder in her house that she'd shot. She made a zillion mistakes, not least being that her cell phone was entirely traceable.

My cell phone.

So, for some reason, I don't think of this until I'm home, out of the hospital, back in New York, and Uncle Marcus has had zero luck tracking down Rhiannon. Admittedly, the guys he hires usually track credit cards or stays in hotels or spending sprees in gambling establishments.

There's no paper trail for Rhiannon.

But anyway, a good month after everything happens, I think of it.

Rhiannon called the ambulance on my phone, and no one knows where my phone is.

I just have Apple track it, and there it is.

Marcus sends some guys to go check things out. She's staying with some pastor from a church, and she looks good, she looks happy, she seems fine.

I don't know why I don't do anything about it. I tell them to just watch her, and I don't make any kind of contact.

I wish I could say it's because I don't want to hurt her anymore or whatever, that she's gotten free, and I care about her safety or happiness or any of that.

And it kind of is.

But it's mostly vanity.

I'm very fucked up.

I cannot see. The blindness is permanent. My body is ravaged and I still sleep a lot. I can only eat certain, bland foods.

I'm twenty-four, and I'm an old man.

I can't bear her pity.

I still remember the way she looked at my cock the first time, the way her gaze flicked over my shoulders, the way she found me powerful and strong and virile. I... now...

Fuck.

So, that's why, in the end, I think.

But then, one day, Marcus calls me to say that one of his men had to intercept an attempt by Mitchell Thorn's men to interact with Rhiannon, and that she's with his guy.

"Yeah, bring her to me," I say hoarsely. "Bring her to me now."

I can't do much, but at least I can save her from Mitchell Thorn.

RHIANNON

TWENTY-FIVE

I STILL DON'T have a cell phone, because I've been saving up money for real expenditures, like an apartment, like a car. Maybe it's something I could have asked River for. I realize I've done very little research into how much cell phones even cost.

In a lot of ways, I still live in a tower, I guess. I'm not in the real world yet.

The guy with the gun, whose name, he says, is Tommy, lets me call River on his phone, though. I say that the people who were after me have found me, but that I think these people are trying to save me. Tommy says he's employed by the Wicker estate, so I guess I can trust him.

River doesn't think so.

He wants to call the police.

He wants to come and storm in and take me away.

But I tell him not to do that, and when he keeps pushing, I end up begging him not to, especially when I find out I'm being taken to Easton.

My whole body goes taut, every part of me on high alert.

Easton.

"Yes, take me to him," I say, and my voice is a little hoarse. I cross and uncross my legs, feeling antsy. I fiddle with the collar of my shirt. Just the thought of him affects me.

So, we drive.

It takes hours. We stop at one point at a little convenience store, and I get chips and a soda, and I eat nervously, wondering what it will be like to see him again. Tommy tells me that he's been tailing me for weeks on end now, so I guess Easton could have made contact with me at any point, and he didn't.

I wonder why not.

I don't ask Tommy this. Somehow, I can't bear to hear the actual answer, because I think it's that Easton is done with me.

I was interesting to him before, when I was innocent and captive, his own little corruptible girlslave, but now... now, he's done with me.

And I cut off all my hair.

I haven't regretted that once. When I did it, it felt like a declaration of independence and identity.

Now, I just feel shorn and ugly.

I finger the puckered scar on my cheek.

He won't even want me.

Eventually, we're in traffic outside New York City. I swear, we spend a good two more hours barely moving, sitting on bridges, sitting in tunnels. The sun goes down.

Finally, we pull into a parking garage in the bottom of a tall, tall building. It gleams in the streetlights, in the moonlight. It's imposing and menacing in the darkness.

Then, Tommy herds me through the parking garage, his huge body between me and everything else, looking here and there, hand on his gun. He puts me on an elevator and we go up and up and up.

When the door opens, it opens directly into someone's living room. The carpet is bright red, and the furniture is aggressively dark and ornate. It's like walking into a boudoir, into a still-pulsing womb.

Francesca is sitting on a couch, glass of champagne in hand. She smiles at me. "I was waiting for you."

Tommy looks her over. “What about Mr. Wicker?”

“I’ll take her to him,” she says. “She and I have things to discuss first.”

I feel uncertain. Where is Easton? What if he’s not even here? What if I’ve made a terrible mistake? What if I let my desire for him make me do stupid, stupid things and now I’m going to pay the price? What if these people are going to kill me?

Well.

Story of my life, right?

Tommy leaves.

Francesca pours me some champagne and pats the seat of the leather couch right next to her.

I sit down. I sip the champagne.

It goes into my nose, and I sneeze.

She laughs softly.

“Sorry,” I say. “I never drank champagne before.”

“Of course not,” she says. “That’s not champagne. It’s just white wine. Usually you drink champagne out of flutes—never mind.” She laughs again, shaking her head.

I feel annoyed now. I fold my arms over my chest. “Where is Easton? Does he want to see me or not?”

“Oh, he wants to see you,” she says. “But I’m going to ask you to leave and not do that, of your own volition.”

I draw myself up. “I just rode hours and hours to see him.”

“But you did leave him there, dying, unconscious, at Briarfeld.” She raises her eyebrows.

Right. I’m actually still angry at him, I guess, but I want to see him more than I want to yell at him.

“Why did you do that?”

“He used me,” I say. “He lied to me. He took advantage of me.” I think of what River said, that he raped me, and I don’t

quite think that's the right word, not exactly, but it's... it's... "I couldn't trust him, not then."

"But you can now?"

"I..." No, I guess I can't. "I don't know," I say softly. "I don't know, but I guess I would give him the chance to explain, to give me his side of the story."

"He doesn't have a side, I'm afraid," says Francesca. "I know him. I've been with him for almost five years now. Did he tell you about me?"

"Well, I think whatever he told me about you was a lie," I say. "Are you his girlfriend?"

"I'm a companion," says Francesca. "He pays me, but I care about him. He's got a lot of rough edges, but deep down in there, somewhere, he's sweet and sad."

"I know this," I say softly.

"Do you." She eyes me.

I nod. "I do. Yes, I do. And I... he... the way I want him, the way he wants me, it's..." It's too powerful to worry about stupid things like whether or not he's nice to me.

No, wait. I *can't* mean that.

She sighs. "He only wanted you because... because you were a novelty."

My worst fear, given words, aloud. I flinch. I down a huge gulp of the sparkling white wine, which sure as fuck *seems* like champagne.

"And he's not the same now," she says. "Whatever it was that happened to him at that vineyard, in that tower, he's... look, you don't want this, not really. And he thinks he wants you, but eventually, no matter what he says, he'll realize that he's better off with someone like me."

I can't look at her. I suppose she's been here with him, all along, probably sleeping in his bed, probably fucking him, and I've just been dodging River. Why didn't I move on? Why did

I think... I raise my gaze. "Wait a minute. You don't really believe that, what you just said."

She sips at the wine, eyebrows raised. "You don't think so?"

"No," I say, "because if you did, you wouldn't care if I went to see him. If he's going to realize he's better off with you in the end, why not just bide your time?"

"I don't want him for me," she says.

I scoff.

"Believe me, little girl, I don't know why I haven't walked away." Her voice is steel. "I can think of twenty better futures for myself. I'd be happier without him, and I know it." She points at me. "You see it, too. That's why you ran from him. He's damaged. And no matter what he does, that damage isn't going to get healed. He's just going to keep doing whatever it is that he's doing, again and again, and it'll hurt me over and over again, and I—"

Now, I feel uncomfortable. Because he was awful to me in so many ways, and I don't really understand why I'm here at all.

She sighs. "I'll be better for him than you will, do you see that? Every time he hurts you, he hurts something innocent and pretty and fragile. It twists him even worse. He's so guilty, but he can't stop. You're a temptation he can't resist, but it's bad for him to give in."

"So, you're the sacrificial lamb," I say, and I'm a little sarcastic. "You're just putting yourself into his crosshairs for his own sake, and it's so selfless?"

"Well, I love him," she says with a shrug. "I wish I didn't."

"I love him," I say.

"Then let him go," she says.

I let out a noisy breath, an angry breath.

“I’ll take you to him, then,” she says. “You have to talk to him. I see that now. But you think about what I said. Think about what you’ll be able to handle. When he orders up escorts and you come home to find him balls-deep in hired pussy, how are you going to deal with that? When he gets on some hot wax kick and gives you second degree burns on your genitals, how are you going to deal with that? When he looks you in the face and tells you that when he told you he loved you, he was lying—”

“He’d never say that to me,” I interrupt. I get up from the couch.

She looks up at me, and I see that—somehow—I’ve rattled her. She finishes her wine all in one big gulp and stands up. “Well, come on, then.”

She escorts me over the red carpet, past a kitchen with dark countertops, down a long hallway, and then stops in front of a closed door. “He’s blind,” she says.

I gasp.

She pushes the door open and gestures for me to go inside.

I stand there, hesitating, reeling.

“Hello?” calls Easton’s voice.

I draw in a breath. I swallow. I smooth out my clothes.

And then I walk into the room.

TWENTY-SIX

HE'S WEARING SWEATPANTS and a white t-shirt, and he's sprawled out on a hospital bed that looks incongruous with the rest of the decor in the room. There are medical machines in a clump next to the bed.

He looks at me but doesn't. His eyes aren't focused, and he's leaning forward, leaning toward me.

"Easton," I breathe.

He scrambles to the foot of the bed, seizing the guard rail on one side, arching his back, stretching his neck, like a cat begging for a caress.

I go to him. I give it to him. I touch him, sliding my fingers over his cheek and his neck.

He lets out a breath, smiling. "You smell like you. I forgot how good you smell."

"Easton," I whisper.

He tugs me down onto the bed with him.

Then we're kissing, and it's perfect, it's like coming home, it's everything I wanted in the world, and I can't let go of him, and I won't.

He wraps strong, strong arms around me and tucks me down into his chest.

I squeeze my arms around his midsection. I'm still saying his name, I realize, just saying it over and over and over again.

His fingers are shaking as he explores my jaw, my chin. "You—I should have told you—I probably got you—Have

you had your period since—?”

“I miscarried.”

“Oh,” he says, rocking back, letting me free. His hand trails down to find my hand and he entwines our fingers. He raises his voice. “Francesca, I know you’re listening outside the door. Go away.”

Nothing from Francesca.

I don’t see anyone at the door. I crane my neck, trying to see through the open doorway.

“Fine, then, you’re going to hear this part,” he says, voice still loud. He refocuses on me. “She won’t leave. I *want* her to leave. I don’t really get it, you know. I’ve been awful to her. But then, I’ve been awful to you, and here you are.”

“Well,” I say, “you should stop being awful.”

He laughs softly, ducking down his face, his sightless eyes.

“Why are you blind?”

“Side effect of the poison Madison used,” he says. “Causes blindness. Sometimes, it resolves, they say, but doesn’t look like it in my case. It obliterated my optic nerve.”

“So, that’s what Madison did? She poisoned you?”

“I deserved it,” he says.

“No, you didn’t.” I furrow my brow. “Was she trying to kill you?”

“She didn’t want me to take you away.”

“So, she tried to stop that, and keep me there. What was she going to do if I was pregnant?”

“Bad fucking things,” he said. “She’s a bad fucking person.”

I nod. “Yeah.”

It’s quiet.

He speaks up. “I don’t want Francesca here, and I’m sorry you had to see her right when you arrived. They don’t treat me like a person anymore, not now that I’m all... impaired. I’m sort of an overgrown child, I guess.”

“Very overgrown,” I say.

He laughs.

I laugh.

He touches my face. He finds my scar. “What happened?”

I put my hand over his fingers there. “Well, my beauty has been ruined, so I guess it’s lucky you’re blind.”

“Impossible,” he says, certain of this. “You’re very, very...” He finds the edges of my hair. “You cut your hair.”

I duck away from his exploring fingers, uncomfortable. “Look, you have things to answer for, Easton Wicker.”

“I know,” he says.

“You lied to me.”

“I know,” he says.

“You treated me as if I was—”

“I *know*.”

It’s quiet.

He’s touching my scar again. “I *am* sorry, Rhiannon. But you should understand that I’m not the sort of man whose apologies are worth much. Ask me to, I’ll grovel for you. I’ll buy you gifts to mollify you. I’ll swear to you that I’ll never do it again. But... in the end...”

I kiss him.

He moans against my lips.

“Do you want me?” I ask him, my voice a fierce whisper.

“I...” He’s confused. “Is it all right to want you?”

“*Do* you?”

“Obviously,” he growls.

“How much do you want me?” I take him by the chin, line up our noses. “Tell me how much, Easton.”

His jaw works. “I want you like I want to see the sunrise again. I want you like I want to breathe. I want you and I can’t stop wanting you—”

“Good.” And then I’m off the bed. “So, come get me.”

He tilts back his head, sightless, slightly out of breath. “You... you mean...”

I go across the room to the door. I peer out in the hallway. Francesca is nowhere to be found. I shut the door. I lock it.

When I turn back, he’s climbed off the bed and he’s taking unsteady steps towards me, his hands out, grasping at air. “You going to laugh at me?” His voice is gravelly, affected.

“You want me to?” I say. “You want me to be cruel?”

He walks towards my voice, surer of himself, reaching out for me.

I duck out of the way.

I dance to the other side of the room.

“Not fair,” he complains.

“What are you going to do to me when you catch me?”

“When I catch you? You going to let me catch you?”

“No, I won’t let you. If you catch me, it’ll be because you earned it,” I say. “What will you do with me?”

“I want...” He starts toward me again, dogged, head down, voice going velvet at the edges. “I want to taste you. I want to touch you.”

“Taste where? Touch me where?”

“Peel your shirt up and find those little pink, hard nipples of yours,” he breathes. “Lick them and suck them. Put my hand on your pussy, feel you leak your wetness right on my palm.”

I lick my lips, holding still.

“You’re wet for me now, aren’t you?” He lets out a little laugh. “I can smell your cunt, you believe that, Rhiannon?”

My breath goes erratic. I move again. “You have to catch me first.”

“If I catch you, I’m going to make you come, but then I’m going to fuck you,” he says. “I shouldn’t fuck you. I know that I shouldn’t. This isn’t at all what we should be doing for this reconciliation. There are so many things we need to be talking about.”

I back away from him. He’s getting closer and closer. “You’re a very bad man, Easton Wicker,” I say in an unsteady voice.

“I am,” he says darkly. “And when I get you, I’m going to do very bad things to you, Rhiannon.”

I feel his words like a jolt, a promise. I almost trip over my own feet.

And then, he’s there, practically on top of me, seizing me by the arm. “Hey,” he gasps, tugging me close.

I melt into him, offering him my lips.

He kisses me hard, and it’s warm and wet and full of fire, nothing like those kisses with River, and I know I need this, I need this intensity, and I will pay the price for it if I must.

He pulls away. “Take us back to the bed,” he orders.

I do it, leading us there.

I climb onto it and he climbs over me and sets to work on my clothes, just like he promised. He rubs his hands over my smooth legs. “You shaved.” He’s not pleased.

“Everyone shaves their legs, Easton!” I protest.

“Tell me *this* is still here,” he says as he touches my mound and finds it mostly covered. I tried shaving it, but the painful growing-back-in part, with all the ingrown hairs? Ugh. So, I didn’t do that again. “Good,” he growls. He puts his mouth on my clit. “You want my finger inside you while I lick you.” It’s not a question.

“Yes,” I say breathily. I’m entirely naked at this point. He’s still wearing all his clothes.

“Beg.”

“Please?” I say.

“Please what?”

“Please, I need your finger inside me,” I say. “Please, please, Easton.”

His finger is so fucking thick, and I haven’t had anything inside me in a long time.

I let out a noisy breath, writhing on his bed, as he curves that thick, wicked finger inside me and licks my pussy and I feel myself building toward a height of goodness that I can only feel with him, as if I’m traveling into the stratosphere, high above the clouds, where the air is thin.

I go higher and higher, until I can see the stars.

And then, I burst, exploding like each of the stars falling from the sky, every crescendo better than the last.

He’s over me before I’m quite finished coming, pressing the thick, thick head of his cock against my slippery opening.

I groan.

“Good girl,” he says. “Spread your legs and get fucked.” He enters me and the full force of his hips come against me, nailing me right down into the bed, pinning me with his weight and piercing me all the way deep inside.

I let out a keening cry, and—for some reason—I buck up against him, as if I’m trying to get him off of me, even though it feels *amazing*. I love being filled by him. I always have. I love being claimed and possessed and I love the feeling of surrendering to his desire for me.

He groans, groping his hands over me until he finds both of my wrists. He stretches them out over my head, pinning me down.

I fight him, moaning, “Fuck me, Easton, I’m yours.”

“You *are* mine,” he pants, out of breath, his hips taking on a frenzied rhythm as he fucks me hard into the bed, fucks me in a frenzy.

“Please,” I say, and I’m still fighting, practically thrashing, trying to get my arms free.

He leaves one hand at my wrists, holding me there like it’s nothing to him. He’s so fucking strong. And he puts his other hand at my throat. “Take it,” he growls.

“Yes,” I agree, straining against that hand at my throat.

He holds me down and fucks me.

There are moments when I can’t breathe because of his hand there, moments when it’s painful, and the pain seems to light me up somewhere, making my pussy clench on his intruding member. It’s good, fuck, it’s good, *fuck*, I missed him.

He’s out of breath, and so am I. Our bodies are sweat-sheened, and I can smell the co-mingled scent of us in the air. I had forgotten that heady scent, how it drives me out of my mind.

I get an arm free. I push my palm into his chest.

He grunts, plucking it away, gritting his teeth as he glares down at me like some ferocious beast, and that’s what I want. I want to be claimed by something strong and untamed, something too much for me, something that mirrors this urge that rises in me when I’m near him.

I wrap my fingers around his throat.

His chin tips back and he lets out a high-pitched noise of surrender. “Rhiannon,” he whispers.

I squeeze my fingers into the skin of his neck, digging my nails into him.

“Fuck, *fuck*,” he moans, and then he comes.

He sinks all the way into me and lets go, and I can feel him twitching inside me, filling my pussy up.

I let go of his neck.

He wheezes.

“You fucking bastard,” I breathe, turned on and angry all at once. “You just came inside me again.”

He swallows. “I just... I didn’t think—”

“Well, I’m on the pill now, not that you bothered to find out.” And then I pull him down and seal our lips together. “I love you, I love you, I love you,” I breathe into his mouth, and I feel alive right now, truly alive, as if all this time when we’ve been apart, I’ve only been *existing*.

EASTON

TWENTY-SEVEN

RHIANNON IS ASLEEP in my arms, and I feel better than I've felt in ages. Having her close, it soothes something inside me, some ragged wound I wasn't even aware existed. I need her.

I won't let her go.

I hear the door open. "Don't come in here, Francesca."

Silence. But I hear her breathing.

"I'll come out there," I say, and I carefully disentangle myself from Rhiannon. I'm still practically dressed. I only pushed my clothes out of the way to fuck her. I was rabid for her. I felt like some kind of out-of-control animal. It's powerful that feeling. Terrifying, but addictive.

I need it.

I need her.

I managed to climb out of the bed. But then, I'm just stuck in a sea of darkness. I haven't really spent much time trying to figure out how to get around now that I'm blind. People have canes, I guess, but I can't see myself like that. It makes something twist inside me painfully, and I won't submit to it.

"I'll come to help you," Francesca says softly.

"Don't even think about it," I say forcefully. "Stay there." And, with sure feet, I walk directly to the sound of her voice.

"That was good," she says softly as I approach. "You haven't done anything like that—"

“You’ll wake her,” I cut her off. I feel around for the door, push myself through it, shut it behind me.

Then, touching the wall in the hallway, I walk away from my bedroom, walk until I feel the corner of the hallway that tells me we’re coming into the open area that encompasses the kitchen and living room. I stop there. I turn in the direction where I think Francesca should be. “You have to go.”

“I guess I know that,” she says, but it’s from a completely different direction.

I feel myself flush in embarrassment, reorienting myself to face her.

“Easton,” she says, her voice full of compassion. She touches my shoulder.

I shrug her off, irritated. “I never wanted that from you. I don’t know why you always *do it*.”

“Sorry.” She’s hurt.

“Just... you... and now it’s worse,” I say. “I don’t want your fucking pity.”

She laughs softly. “Oh, right, of course. Easton, you make *so much* sense.” Sarcasm is dripping off her words.

“Why are you here?”

“You don’t want pity,” she says. “You don’t want sympathy or any human fucking emotion at all, because I guess that would mean you’re weak or something. But you also do nothing to prove that you have any substance whatsoever. This apartment? Did you earn it? No, it’s your father’s money. Do you have a fucking job, Easton?”

“Stop it,” I say.

“Oh, you’d rather my pity now?”

I scoff.

“Even me,” she says. “You didn’t earn me either. You pay me.”

“I stopped,” I say. “I stopped paying you and you didn’t leave.”

“And it still didn’t mean anything to you,” she says. “Maybe you did earn me, you fucker. Maybe somehow, even though you shouldn’t have, you got to me. But you don’t want me. I’m no prize. I’m no innocent, wide-eyed *teenager*.”

“I never told you that I wanted you,” I say. “I thought we were clear on this arrangement from the beginning.”

“So, this—with her—it’s real?” she says.

I hang my head.

“You got her by trickery, didn’t you?”

“She came back,” I say in a tiny voice.

“Tell her about the money,” she says. “Give her the money. It’s her money.” Because now Francesca knows everything, knows that my father isn’t really my father, knows about the will, knows it all. “It’s not even yours. It’s all you have, though, right? If you were penniless and blind and as emotionally fucking stunted and damaged as you are, where would you even be, right? You’d just shrivel up and die, I guess.”

I stiffen. “You know, I really think—”

“Really wish I’d go back to pitying you now, hmm?” Her voice is sharp.

It’s quiet.

“You might not understand this, Easton,” she says softly. “But all along, I’ve been the only real thing you’ve ever had. And you keep throwing me away.” A pause. She caresses my cheek. “Goodbye. Don’t ever contact me again.”

I hear her walking away, down the hallway toward the room where she keeps all her stuff. I stay in the hallway as I listen to the sounds of a suitcase coming out of the closet, dresses and shirts coming off hangers and being swept inside. I’m still there when she rolls it past me, over the carpet into the living room (I still hear the wheels, even though the sound

is muted), and over to the elevator. I hear the doors swish open and the elevator beep.

“Goodbye, Francesca,” I whisper into the silence of the apartment.

I feel like shit.

RHIANNON

TWENTY-EIGHT

I WAKE UP and he's not there.

I get up, get dressed, and go wander into the apartment. He's sitting on the couch in the living room, in his rumpled sweats, and his head rises at the sound of my footfalls.

"Rhiannon?"

"Hey," I say.

"We need to talk," he says.

"Yeah," I say. "We really do."

I sit down on the couch and eye him. Just being this close to him makes my body react in funny ways. I want to be closer to him, and I find myself scooting closer until I can put a hand on his knee.

He lets out a relieved breath and pulls me in closer, winding his arm around me.

I bury my face against his chest. "I'm sorry I left you there. I'm sorry that I ran."

"No, don't be sorry. You were right to run from me. You shouldn't be here with me at all."

"Because you're bad for me?"

"Yeah, I think I am," he says.

"What happened? You said Madison poisoned you?"

"The first drink was a trick. I didn't know what it was until I'd already swallowed it. The second one, she made me do it at gunpoint."

“But why would you do that?”

“If I hadn’t, I’d definitely be dead,” he says. “It was less risky to take the poison than to take the gunshot, I guess. Or maybe because, deep down, I’m just very pathetic.”

I rub my face into his shirt. I know that the right response is to disagree with him, tell him that he’s not pathetic, but I don’t say that for some reason.

“Why did you leave the tower?” he asks me. “You said you never would. Did you use the key I left you?”

“I did use the key,” I say.

“Well, I’m glad I gave it to you, then. It was one sort-of right thing that I did.”

“Madison brought me a pregnancy test, and I realized...” I pull away from him now. I sit back into the couch and pull my feet up, sitting cross-legged. I fiddle with the hem of my jeans. “You were using me. You were lying to me. You lied to me about everything, and all just because you wanted to fuck me.”

I expect him to disagree with this and tell me it was true love or something, because I feel it between us, and it *is* love. I don’t know how I’m sure of that, but I am.

But he says, “Yeah, I know.”

And it’s quiet again.

“Did you leave me because you wanted me to die?” he asks.

“I wasn’t thinking like that,” I say. “I don’t want you to die. But you... you weren’t good to me, and I couldn’t trust you. I realized that there was no one I could trust, and I just... ran.”

“Fair,” he says with a curt nod.

“I guess you’ve been here, fucking Francesca,” I mutter, more bitter about this than makes any sense. I’m ridiculously jealous.

“No,” he says. “No, no sex. I’ve been recovering, and she’s just been here, being my fucking nursemaid, acting like

her and me, like we're *real*."

"Oh," I say, knowingly, still bitter. "So I'm supposed to believe that I'm real to you."

"Aren't you? Don't you feel it?"

I sigh. "I don't know what I feel, not really. Because, yes, this is overwhelming and exciting and I can't get enough of it, but..."

He waits.

"But you're bad for me," I say finally.

He sighs. His hand reaches out, and he feels around until he finds my hand. He entwines our fingers. "You, uh, you were staying in some house with some guy."

"He was a youth pastor," I say witheringly.

"So, he didn't try anything with you?"

"He wanted to marry me," I say.

"Oh," he says, and there's that same bitterness in his voice, that same jealousy.

"But I didn't... well, I let him kiss me a couple times, but he wanted... he said..." I squeeze Easton's hand. "He said that the way you and me had sex, it was wrong, and that sex didn't have to be like that, that it could be sweet and loving and stuff. And I just don't think I want that kind of sex."

"What the fuck? We've *had* that kind of sex," says Easton, hurt.

I pull my hand out of his. "When?"

"Your virginity, when I..." He rubs his face. "Didn't even bother to get you off."

"Easton, it doesn't matter. Now that I'm with you again, I don't think I can leave."

"Good, because you really can't leave," he says.

I sit up straighter. "You're keeping me prisoner?"

He shrugs. "Maybe. Sort of."

“What?” Something spikes through me, a hot sense of indignation that I also seem to feel in my clit for some awful reason.

“All right, I need to come clean.” He spreads his hands. “Although, truth is, I told you this already. I just didn’t explain the implications.” He lifts a finger. “No, one thing I didn’t tell you is that Baum Wicker’s will leaves all of his assets to the children of his loins, meaning that, uh, I shouldn’t actually have inherited anything. However, you, it’s all yours.”

I look around at the apartment. “W-well, that’s stupid. I mean, we should split it or something, or—”

“Here’s the thing, I don’t know how we do all of that without exposing you to Mitchell Thorn. Like, he knows you exist now, right? He sent men to kill you. And the only way I can protect you from him is if I have this money. If I give it up, then you’re on your own, and... and I can’t risk that.”

I blink very hard.

“Legally speaking, I guess you don’t exist—”

“I have a birth certificate,” I say. “For Rhiannon Nevely. I don’t know how or when Madison set that up—where is Madison, anyway?”

“In jail,” he says. “She made me drink poison. She’s been arrested. She’s awaiting trial, but she’ll go away for a long time. Hell, if you want to press charges against her—”

“Well, that seems like that would put me in Mitchell Thorn’s crosshairs again, wouldn’t it? If that’s really your reasoning.”

He rubs the back of his head. “You think I should fall on my sword and give you the money.”

“I think we should split it or something!”

“I mean, something like that would be the right thing to do,” he says. “I just feel like it’s not sinking in what kind of person I am.”

I let out a disbelieving sound. “No, it is, actually. It really is.” I get up off the couch and start pacing.

“Here’s the way I figure it,” he says, leaning back into the couch. “You stay here with me, and I keep you safe. And as long as you’re with me, anyway, you get access to all of the money. Hell, if you want me to, I’ll marry you, then it’s all half yours. Easiest way to split it.”

“That was the most romantic proposal in the history of the universe,” I mutter, still pacing.

“You don’t like the idea?” he says.

“You just want to keep me locked in another tower,” I say. “This skyscraper of yours.”

“Yes,” he hisses, leaning forward. “I want to find all your birth control pills, flush them, and fuck you every day until I get you pregnant again, and then I want to keep you here, my wife, mother of my children, my little fuckthing, and that’s all I want for the rest of my life. You are *all* I want.”

My pussy clenches. I’m wildly turned on. And very, very afraid. I stop pacing. I just breathe.

“I... if you want to leave, take your chances out there... go.”

“What if I try to fight this legally?” I say in a tiny voice.

“You’re going to have to prove that you’re actually my father’s daughter and that I’m not his son. And Uncle Marcus, the family lawyer, has told me I’m essentially the only person on earth he’s loyal to now. He’ll do anything to protect my assets. You can’t even pay for a lawyer, Rhiannon.”

I hug myself. My lower lip is starting to tremble. “You’re... you’re awful.”

“Yes, I know,” he mutters. “I feel bad about it, if that matters.”

If I leave, I can go back to the shelter and my job at the cafe, but Mitchell Thorn knows where I am, so I’ll just be signing my death warrant.

I don’t have a fucking choice here.

I *am* his prisoner.

ALL RIGHT, I'M staying but I don't want to get pregnant. The problem is, of course, that I don't have my birth control pills. Well, I have my purse, which has one blister pack, with two more weeks' worth of pills.

He's blind.

Surely, I can hide those from him. I search the apartment and decide the best place is in Francesca's old room. He won't go in there, and I can sneak in there to take them when he's sleeping. He falls asleep after sex a lot.

That gives me two weeks.

Two weeks plus the final week of sugar pills, my period.

Three weeks.

Three weeks to figure something else out.

And, then, for now, until then, I get to just enjoy him. Play-pretend this is what we're doing. Be wanted and taken and ravaged by him again and again. Be his fuckthing prisoner, which makes me so, so wet that I'm ashamed of myself.

Then I find him in the kitchen, feeling around in the refrigerator, mumbling something about how he needs to get one of those label makers that make ridged words so that he can figure out what the hell is even in there.

I shut the door to the fridge, push him back against it, and kiss him. "I want to see your chest," I say. "I want you totally naked. Then I want you to fuck my mouth."

He smiles, pleased, and I can see that his cock is stirring, standing up, making a tent of his sweatpants. "You know, Rhiannon, you've gotten bold since the last time I saw you."

"Have I?" I run my hand down his chest, all the way down to his groin. Then I pause there, just above his hard cock. "Isn't this how you wanted me? Not the prisoner you were hoping for, Easton?"

"I'll just have to train you better," he says, seizing my hand, putting it on his groin.

I grab his penis and squeeze—too hard.

He lets out a cry.

I dance away from him. “I don’t know about that. I think maybe you’re the one who needs training.”

He lets out a labored breath, rolling his head back against the refrigerator. His voice comes out scratchy. “Well, all right, then. Maybe you’re right. What do you want me to do?”

“I told you,” I say. “Take off your clothes. And from now on, no more sweatpants and ratty t-shirts. You’re going to keep me prisoner, you better look the part of a jailer.”

He groans. “You want a strip tease, Rhiannon?”

“Nice and slow.”

He yanks his shirt over his head, not slow at all.

“Bad Easton,” I say, but my voice is full of the desire that’s rising in me. He’s beautiful. I want to run my fingers all over his broad shoulders and his flat stomach. I want to tangle my hands in the hair on his chest.

He hooks his fingers into his sweatpants and pushes them and his boxers down in one fluid motion. He kicks them off and spreads his hands presentationally right at his pelvis, displaying his thick, hard erection, which is pointing right at me.

God, I want to lick it.

I lick my lips instead. My voice comes out scratchy, too. “Did I hurt it, your cock, when I squeezed it?”

“It’s recovering,” he says, moving away from the fridge, coming for me.

I back away, colliding with the kitchen island.

He presses into me, trapping me there. He gets a handful of my shorter hair. “You’re letting this grow, got that?”

“You think you can stop me from cutting my hair? Going to hide all the scissors, Easton?”

He kisses me roughly.

I moan into his mouth.

He tugs on my hair.

I cry out. The pain lights up a line to both of my nipples and my clit. I writhe into him, rubbing my clothed body into his erection.

He sighs, kissing his way down my jaw, my neck, giving my hair little painful jerks every so often as he does. "Tell me you're mine."

"I'm yours," I say immediately. "Who do you belong to?"

"You, Rhiannon, you," he says. "I belong to you."

"I own you," I gasp.

"Yes," he says in a ruined voice.

I sink down to my knees. "I own this." I kiss the head of his penis.

He lets out a long, happy sigh.

"Say it," I say.

"You own my cock," he breathes. "Now suck it like a good girl." His hand is still in my hair. He retightens his grip and guides my mouth onto him.

He tastes like sex and sweat and all my worst decisions. I eagerly take the mouthful of him, letting out a pleased groan as I take him all the way down my throat.

"Fuck, Rhiannon, that's perfect," he sighs. "I did train you well, didn't I?"

I sloppily suck his cock, my head eagerly bobbing against him. I *really* like this. The first time I did it, I was kind of amazed at how *nice* it was. It feels as good as kissing, only deeper and more intense, getting all these sensitive places inside my mouth plumbed and stimulated.

He pulls my hair again.

My whole body clenches.

His hips move a little, and the thick head of him fills my throat, and I get my first little gag.

I like the gagging too. I'm ashamed of this, because it seems so strange and wrong to like it, but it makes my entire body spasm, and when my clit is all aroused and swollen, I swear I *feel* it there.

There's something so wonderfully intense about it, going to this odd place where pleasure and discomfort reside together, where the lines get blurred.

I swallow him, and he steadily fucks my throat, hand in my hair. His breath is hitching noisily with every thrust, but I can't make noise, because he's sealed me off, tucked deep into my throat, fully having me there.

I take it as long as I can, through several gags, including one that's so intense I worry I might actually vomit, which I don't think I want to do. When I move my head back, he lets me.

His fingers in my hair go gentle, a caress. He toys with my earlobe as I come off for a second.

Then I take the tip of him into my mouth and suckle that softly.

"Such a good girl," he tells me, his voice cracking. "I remember just how you used to look with your mouth full of me. I wish I could see you."

I bob off to pepper him with kisses. "I want to taste you, Easton."

"Do you? You miss having a mouthful of my cum?"

"So much," I say, gasping. I squeeze my legs together around my clit, which is pulsing at me. I'm crazy turned on right now.

"You want to beg for it, baby?" He's still toying with my earlobe.

I do. "Please come in my mouth, Easton."

"Fuck," he sighs. He pushes his cock back into me.

I go at him again, bobbing and dragging my tongue against the underside of him.

“Oh, holy fuck,” he says, his voice strained.

And then the salty thickness of him is spilling out into me everywhere, and I do like the taste of it, as much because it seems forbidden as because it’s his, I suppose. I swallow it down as best I can, but it was a lot. Some of it dribbles out of my mouth.

His thumb finds it, wiping against my lower lip. He pushes that into my mouth along with his cock. “Get every drop, that’s a good prisoner. Got to make the jailer happy, after all.”

Fuck, I nearly come when he says that. Something is *wrong* with me.

I suck on his cock.

He pulls out, letting out a little noise of distress. “Too sensitive right now, baby,” he breathes.

I stand up and he cups my face and kisses me.

“God, I missed you,” he says.

“Yes, you did,” I say. I kiss his neck. “Easton, I want to come.”

“Oh, that’s right, you’ve been gone for such a long time, and how many times did you make yourself come without my permission?”

I gasp.

“Were you touching yourself, baby? Touching yourself late at night in that youth pastor’s house?”

I squirm. “Sometimes,” I admit.

“Touching yourself and thinking about me?”

“Always,” I gasp. “But... in my imagination, you always gave me permission.”

“Did you ask, then? Did you ask pretend-Easton if you could have an orgasm?”

“I did,” I sigh. It makes me so hot. “And I’m so wet right now.”

“Are you?” He undoes the button of my pants and slips his hand down to slide in between the lips of my slippery pussy.

I let out something that sounds like a sob.

“Shit, baby, you are wet. You really like sucking me, don’t you?”

“You know I do,” I whimper.

“Fuck,” he gasps, moving my hand onto his cock, which is half-mast. “You’re—shit—I never get hard again this fast.” He unzips my pants. “Take these off, sweet girl, they’re just in the way.”

I shimmy out of my jeans and my underwear.

He rubs his hands over my bare hips and ass appreciatively. Then, he lifts me up onto the kitchen counter. Settling between my legs, he pushes his cock into my wetness. “Need to be inside you again,” he tells me. “Need to fuck you, baby, fuck this pussy. You’re not allowed to come, though.”

I doubt I could come from just his cock. It doesn’t seem feasibly possible, but I am crazy, crazy aroused right now, and everything is swollen and sensitive, and his cock is just jammed into me in the nicest and sweetest of ways. I wonder if I could...

He sets a steady rhythm, holding my hips as he rocks against me, into me.

“Oh, Easton,” I can’t help but exclaim, “you feel so good inside me. I missed you in me.”

“I bet you did, baby,” he murmurs. “I bet you were all alone and so, so empty, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” I gasp, throwing back my head.

He kisses my neck. “There you go, much better now, hmm? Is that just what you needed?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” I squeeze my pussy around his cock, and little warmup tremors go through me.

“Happy to fill you right up, anytime you need it, baby, just ask.”

I grab at him, anywhere I can get purchase—his shoulder, his neck, his arm, his waist. As he thrusts into me, I begin to feel as if my pleasure is increasing, like a journey over rocky topography towards some higher peak. His cock moves in me, battering me, stroking me, rubbing up against me. I hit sweet cliffs of goodness and valleys of intense pressure and stimulation. My clit throbs, neglected, hungry, and my pussy tries to come, reaches for it, but... but... it's just out of reach.

“Going to come in you soon,” he says at some point, after a long stretch of nothing between us except swear words and noises of pleasure. “You want your pussy full of my cum, too, just like your mouth was?”

“Please, Easton.”

“You're such a good little eager prisoner. You enjoy being held captive here, don't you?”

“Yes,” I breathe.

He reaches between us and finds the nub of my clit. “Good girl, good girl, just for saying that, you can come, baby.” He gently traces me.

I'm so freaking stimulated that it doesn't take much. I tip off the edge into a freefall of pleasure, my pussy clenching hard on his cock.

“Ah, fuck,” he breathes. “There we are. Coming with you, sweet thing.”

I capture his mouth with mine, and we convulse together, wrapped up in our pleasure, tied together, part of each other.

“Love you,” he gasps against me, his voice tattered.

“Love you, too,” I say, clutching him close.

TWENTY-NINE

WE SETTLE INTO a rhythm that includes a lot of fucking.

We don't fit easily into Easton's hospital bed, which is only a single, so we start sleeping on a bed in a guest room. We climb into the bed at night and we fuck before we go to sleep. This is often soft and sweet. He likes to spoon with me, his body wrapped around mine, and then slip his hard cock into me, and we rock together that way to a gentle ending before we fall asleep. I love the position because I can squeeze my legs around my clit as he fucks me. Sometimes, I even come that way. Sometimes, we need to finish me off after he's done—his finger or mine, squirting into me in the aftermath, rocking me off to dreamland.

We wake up tangled up in the mornings and we fuck.

Easton likes to go down on me in the mornings, saying that he has my pussy for breakfast. It's a nice way to wake up, his mouth between my thighs. He licks me until I come and then he fucks my sensitive, just-climaxed pussy.

Then we have actual breakfast. Easton has all his food delivered, so there's never any reason to leave, not for anything. The groceries just appear at his door, brought up by Easton's doorman. Also, he has a set of meals delivered that are already cooked and portioned up. They're created by some big-deal chef, and curated exactly for Easton's dietary preferences and caloric needs. But breakfast, we usually cook together, me wearing one of Easton's shirts and him in the pajama bottoms. Sometimes, breakfast gets burned, like, if Easton lifts up my shirt to press into my bare ass, and then

decides he wants to bend me over the counter and have me right there.

At first, I am doing most of the cooking, because Easton thinks his blindness means he can't manage anything at all, but he starts to take over more and more of it, realizing he knows his way around his own kitchen, and finding ways to get around his blindness. He does order a label maker, for instance, so that we can make labels for him. Then he knows what's salt and what's oregano.

We make smoked salmon and poached eggs. We make avocado toast and bacon. We make hollandaise sauce over organic chicken sausage and home fries.

Then we usually lounge out on the couch with various screens.

Easton gets me a cell phone and a tablet and a laptop, because he seems to think all of these things are necessary. He curls up with headphones and has the internet read to him using a robot voice that crawls the web since he can't read anymore. He is insistent that he doesn't need to learn Braille or something, disdainful of that.

Sometimes we watch TV together.

At some point, this devolves into more fucking, usually on the couch, which is how I discover that sex is positively amazing with me face down and a pile of pillows right under my mound as Easton ruts into me from behind. The all-over pressure while he fills me up is simply fantastic.

Sometimes it just becomes oral sex. I suck him while he's still got his headphones on, his hand lazily in my hair, not paying a bit of attention to me as I service him. He does this to me, too, but I can never pay attention to whatever it is I'm looking at online while he goes at me. It's too distracting.

Around midmorning, I make us both shower and get dressed in actual clothes. We shower together a lot of the time, which—you guessed it—just means more sex.

Dressed, we clean up the kitchen and straighten up the fucked-on couch and make the bed.

Then, well, there's nothing else to do except more screens.

Oh, and usually, around this point, Easton and I will get into an argument about my birth control pills.

He sometimes goes looking for them, but he gives up pretty quick, complaining loudly about being blind and how unfair it is that I've hidden them from him, to which I retort that it's beyond unfair for him to think he has the right to control my body and force me to have his children. It's criminal, and he should go to fucking jail.

Which usually devolves into more fucking, sometimes with him perched between my legs with his hand on my belly, murmuring to me about how hot it would be for me to be pregnant, how much he wants to see my belly stretching and growing, how sexy it'll be to know that I belong to him.

"You do belong to me, don't you, baby?" he'll say, fucking into me.

"I do," I'll say.

"Don't you want to have my baby? Don't you want me to get you pregnant?"

"No," I'll say. Usually. Sometimes, heat of the moment... Well, there have been a few times when he's fucking me that I'm throatily begging for him to fill me up, get me pregnant, make me really his, make me his forever.

I don't *mean* it.

He makes me insane.

Time slips away, and I'm not getting any ideas for how to get out of this. None at all. The sex is the problem, I think, because it makes me all stupid and horny, and we do it so much that I never have much of a chance to scheme.

I'm thinking when I get my period, that'll mean there's a break. He won't want to have sex with me then, and I'll be able to *think*.

But the morning that it happens, he puts his mouth down there and then stops, grinning up at me as if this is some new and sexy hot thing he's discovered. He does not lick up my

blood, though I wouldn't put it past him. He fucks me, though, fucks me like it doesn't matter, fucks me anyway.

And that night, the first night of my period, I get the idea.

"Look," I say, "if you want me to get pregnant, I should probably see a gynecologist first, just to get checked out and make sure everything's okay with me."

"You're just angling to leave."

"You'd let me leave if I wanted, right?" I say. "Like, what if I want to buy clothes or something?"

"I'll get anything you want delivered."

"What if I want to go and try things on in a dressing room? You could come with me for that. You wouldn't stop that, would you? Let's say I do get pregnant. I'll need a whole wardrobe of maternity clothes."

"Yeah, yeah, of course," he says. "So, I can come with you to the doctor's office."

"Yes," I say. "But you have to wait in the waiting room."

"Do I really have to?"

"Yes," I say.

He's quiet, regarding me.

"I can't leave, Easton, remember? If I leave, Mitchell Thorn tries to kill me."

He nods slowly. "Right."

"Good, so I can make an appointment—"

"I'll take care of it," he says.

"I still have an insurance card that I got when I was staying at the shelter—"

"No, I've got this," he says. "And if you try to get them to prescribe you more birth control, I'm going to find out."

Shit. This, of course, is my plan.

THIRTY

I DO RESEARCH on the internet.

I had thought one of those IUDs would be my best idea. When I was at Planned Parenthood, they did a quick rundown with me on options, but I couldn't get anything like that at the time, not until my body had miscarried the tissue. They said once that happened, I could have it put in as soon as forty-eight hours afterward. On the other hand, they could give me pills and I could start them on my own without having to come back for another appointment. I opted for the birth control pills.

I realize that Easton and I haven't talked about the miscarriage at all.

He hasn't even asked.

He doesn't even want the details.

He's just obsessed with this idea of knocking me up again, but it's not for a good reason. It's some kind of kink for him. For me, too, I guess, when I respond to it.

But I'm not an idiot. I know that a baby is a big fucking deal.

Anyway, the thing about the IUD is that—apparently—there are strings, and I will be able to “check” them, which means he'll be able to feel them too. Maybe not with his dick—maybe it's not quite that sensitive, but he puts his finger in me often enough and he'll feel them eventually.

So, then what does he do?

Apparently, he can just pull on those strings and the thing will come right *out*.

So.

No fucking IUD.

I'm guessing the implant is the best idea. It'll be under my skin. Removing that won't be easy for him.

But he is going to know.

I decide this is fine. Because if he won't be reasonable about this, then... then...

I chuckle softly to myself, staring at the tablet screen on the couch as I'm thinking this. What? Was I thinking that there was some element of this relationship of mine that was good or healthy? Was I really thinking that?

"What?" says Easton. He has one ear bud in his ear, but not the other one.

I turn and give him a fully vicious look, which he—of course—can't even see. "Fuck you," I snarl.

He jerks back, looking me over. "What? What did I do?"

"What did you do," I mutter, shaking my head. "As if you don't know."

"You're in a bad mood because you're on the rag," he decides.

"I hope you die," I say. "That's the only way I ever get free of your stupid, horrible ass."

He's hurt. He grimaces. He shifts and tugs the earbud out of his ear. "You want free, go." He gestures to the elevator. "You can leave any time you want, and you know it. I don't have a fucking gun to your head."

Something suddenly occurs to me, and I sit up straighter. "You... you said that after you woke up, Madison went to jail."

"Yeah, I told the cops what she did—"

“So, what did they think happened before that? That you tried to commit suicide?”

“Yeah, so?”

“And it’s just your word against hers,” I say.

“Why are you asking me this shit?” He gets off the couch.

I shrug. “No reason.”

“Oh, come on, Rhiannon, don’t be like that with me. You really hate me?”

I sigh.

“I love you,” he says.

“If you loved me,” I say, “I wouldn’t have to plot how to keep autonomy over my own fucking body, you bastard.”

His lips part. He stands there, just gazing sightlessly at me. “This is about birth control?”

I roll my eyes. He can’t see that. I flip him off. He can’t see that either. “No, you dick, it’s about giving me some fucking razors to shave my damned legs.” I get up off the couch and flounce out of the room.

“YOU’RE GOING TO leave me.” He’s standing in the doorway of the bedroom. It’s late.

I’ve been avoiding him all afternoon and evening. I’ve had cramps, and I told him that through the door, and he’s left me be. I’m sitting on the bed now, wearing one of his shirts and a pair of leggings, no bra. My hair is still in a towel, because I took a late shower. Not to look presentable or anything, just to feel a little bit clean for two seconds. I hate the way my period makes me feel uncomfortably soiled all the time. “Leave you? I can’t, because of Mitchell Thorn,” I say, glaring at him.

He steps into the room. “For now, yeah. But you’re going to figure a way around that. And you hate me.”

I sigh heavily. “I don’t.”

“You do,” he counters. “And with good reason. I get it. I mean, all women hate me, Rhiannon.” He considers. “Not

Francesca, but... that was why I didn't want her."

I furrow my brow. "What? That doesn't make any sense."

"Just... you know, I want a woman with a modicum of self-respect," he mutters. "You, you know, you're right to hate me."

"So stop being hateable!"

"Yeah, okay, I'll just go in and undo all of my childhood trauma and internal programming and turn into Prince Charming."

I flop back into the pillows on the bed, sneering at the ceiling. "Go away."

"I can't let you leave, that's the thing," he says. "And you're going to. You'll find a way, and then you'll go. But if I get you pregnant, maybe not."

I shake my head slowly. "No."

"Yes," he says. "If you're pregnant, you're mine, really mine. Like, in a primal, animal way. And if you're pregnant, you need me—"

"You're looking at this all wrong," I say.

"Am I?"

"Yeah," I say. "Because it's one thing to subject myself to this, with you. It's a completely different thing to put an innocent child through it. You're so fucked up, Easton, and I cannot let you near a *baby*."

He's hurt again, and he draws back in shock.

"If I get pregnant, I will be seven times as motivated to figure a way out of this," I say. "I will leave you and I will destroy you. If I get pregnant, that baby will become the center of my world. Not you. You won't matter to me anymore, because I won't... I'll have to... In a primal, animal way, I'll be a *mother*."

His jaw works, and he rubs a hand over the back of his neck as he hangs his head. He's thinking about what I'm saying.

It's quiet.

"Is that why you left me to die, before? Because you were pregnant?"

"I didn't know I was pregnant," I say. "I didn't take the test."

More silence.

He sits down on the edge of the bed, far away from me. "I never asked you about any of that, huh?"

"You did not."

"Was it bad? Did it hurt? Were you scared?"

"It wasn't much worse than getting my period. If I hadn't had the positive pregnancy test, I probably would have never known I was pregnant. I wasn't very far along when I lost it."

"So, when did you take a pregnancy test?"

"At Planned Parenthood."

"Why were you there?"

"To kill it," I say in a low, low voice.

He flinches.

I pull my knees up to my chest. "I mean, I don't know. I don't know if you can kill a thing that can't live outside of your body. Is that killing something, or is it just like taking an antibiotic or removing a parasite—"

"That's how you would think of our child? Like a parasite?"

"No," I say. "No, not anymore. No, after I lost it... something changed. I didn't want a baby before, and I still don't. I'm not ready to be a mother. I'm too young. I don't have the resources or the capacity or the experience or the—I'm not ready. But if you got me pregnant again, I don't think I'd be able to get an abortion now. I just... I had this moment..." I don't even want to explain it to him. "Never mind."

“I’d be with you, you know. It’d be us together. You would have the best, most comfortable pregnancy of any woman on earth. I would treat you like a goddess. I would tend to your every whim. You’d—”

“I don’t want to have a baby with you, Easton Wicker. I don’t think you’d be a very good father.”

He considers. “Yeah, I mean, you’re probably right about that. I keep reminding myself I’m not thinking about the fact there would be a baby at the end of it. I just, you know, we’d get a nanny, and you and I—”

“No,” I say. “I would be gone by that point. Please believe I would be gone.”

He nods. “Right.”

THIRTY-ONE

AND THEN, WITHOUT any discussion about it, he starts pulling out.

He likes to pull out and finish in my mouth, making me beg to taste him, but he also likes to spatter me with his release—on my tits, on my belly, and once on my face, which I hated because it got in my eyes and stung like a motherfucker.

The appointment with the gynecologist is happening. He shows me that he has it set up, but I can't get in for five weeks, because of new patient rules.

I'm pretty sure there's somewhere I could be getting in quicker than that, but I let it go.

Maybe I won something here.

Not sure.

Something between us seems different now, and I'm not sure if I actually like it, as fucked up as that might seem. There's some level of intensity knocked out of our joining, without him insisting that he come inside me, insisting that he wants to impregnate me. The sex is still good, and it's still arousing, but... it's less hot than it was.

This makes me ill.

And maybe it's why I keep thinking about Madison in jail.

Maybe I'm sick of this feeling of disgust for myself.

Maybe I just want it all to stop.

So, one day, I leave. It's early in the morning, and Easton is still asleep. It's easy to go. I just go down the elevator and

all the way to the ground floor. It's also been easy enough to find one of Easton's credit cards and set it up as the payment method on Lyft. I have the app on my phone, and I order up a car, and it comes and picks me up.

I have it take me to the bus station. There's an ATM there, and I get a cash advance on Easton's credit card, which is a shit thing to do and all, because if he doesn't pay it back right away, the interest is insane. But he can afford it, so whatever. Then I use the cash to buy a ticket on a bus all the way back to Virginia, because that's where Madison is locked up in jail.

I get to the prison mid-afternoon. I'm informed that prisoners have to submit a list of approved visitors, and just showing up doesn't mean that I'm allowed to go in to see her. But I say that I'm positive she put me on her list.

And.

She did.

So, very soon, I'm sitting in the visitors' area with Madison. It's a room lined with tables, and she's on one side, her hands shackled together, wearing a jumpsuit, and I'm on the other.

She shakes her head at me when I sit down. "Wasn't expecting to see you here."

"I can't believe you let yourself get locked up," I say. "Doesn't seem like something you'd do."

She shrugs. "Everything's a poker game. Sometimes, it seems like you got a great hand and then it turns out someone else's hand is better. You just never know. Got to try to play, though. If you fold, all you end up with is nothing."

I guess this is true. "You're probably wondering why I'm here."

"Back to get help from me," she says. "I knew you'd need it eventually. You might think that I wasn't being a good mother, keeping you locked away in that tower all this time, but I was protecting you, you know? I kept you from so many awful things, so many terrible men? The world is not a safe place for pretty young things like you."

“I really don’t need to hear your justification for kidnapping a toddler—”

“Kidnapping?” She throws back her head and laughs. “Oh, yes, of course you believe that business I told Baum, of course you do!”

I freeze, blinking at her, thinking it all through. The birth certificate, the seven month age difference, all of it. I cover my mouth with one hand. “Shit,” I whisper, “I’m not Sage Thorn.”

“No, you’re not. That little girl died,” she says. “It was a tragedy.”

“But Mitchell Thorn—”

“Identified the body and would *know* that,” she says.

“So... I’m not actually Baum Wicker’s daughter,” I say softly. “Who are my parents?”

Madison just laughs and laughs.

I know it, then, with a chill that settles into me. “You.”

“Me,” she says.

“You’re my biological mother,” I say, feeling heavy and strange and awful. “And my father?”

“He and I were going to experiment together,” she says. “I did bring him by that one time so that he could run his tests. He was a psychologist, and he was quite curious about the effect it would have on you, being so isolated. But he wanted to control every aspect of the entire thing, and I didn’t want that.”

“The man who came to play those games with me?” My voice is a squeak.

“He threatened to go to the authorities when I wouldn’t give him the access he needed,” she says. “Then he became tragically suicidal and ended his own life.”

“You mean, you killed him,” I say. “How many people have you poisoned?”

She glares at me.

I look up at the cameras in the corners. “Well, this... none of this...” I rub my forehead. I’m reeling now. I don’t know how to proceed.

My plan had been the following: Tell Madison I would help support her claim that Easton was suicidal and say that he made it up that she had forced him to drink the poison. Then, with him arrested, find a way to claim my inheritance from Baum Wicker, and use that to protect myself from Mitchell Thorn.

It wasn’t a great plan, and there were a bunch of bits that needed to be filled in, but I had the shape of it, and I needed to see what Madison would say to even try to fulfill it.

But now...

“If Mitchell Thorn doesn’t think I’m Sage, why is he trying to kill me?” I say.

“He’s not trying to kill you, you idiot child,” says Madison.

“He came after me!” I say.

“Oh, probably because Baum was in touch with him at the end of his life, telling him all the twisted stories I’d told him. He’d want to know why some girl was pretending to be his dead daughter, I imagine, but I doubt he’s homicidal.”

“She wasn’t his daughter!”

“Yes, well, he never knew that, I don’t think, not until Baum decided to gloat over it.”

“So, he didn’t kill her in the first place.”

“It was a kidnapping gone wrong, child, a horrible accident. Why are we talking about this? Is this why you came to see me?”

“I don’t know why I came to see you,” I say, getting up from the table.

“Well, don’t leave,” she says, reaching for me. “I missed you, Rhiannon.”

I gaze down at her.

“Didn’t you miss your mommy?”

“No,” I say. “Actually, I did not.”

I walk out.

THIRTY-TWO

WHEN I LEAVE the jail, there's a sleek, gunmetal-gray sedan parked near the door, and—upon seeing me—a man in a suit with a balding head gets out of the back seat and comes for me, waving at me. “Rhiannon Nevely, I promise I'm not going to hurt you.”

“Mitchell Thorn?” I call.

“I had to come in person,” he says, hurrying over the sidewalk, offering me his hand. “The minute I got word you were on the move, I dropped everything. It's very important for me to talk to you.”

I shake hands with him. “I'm so sorry. I was confused about a lot of things.”

“I can understand,” he says. “So am I. I'm hoping you can clear some things up for me.” He gestures to his car. “Will you go for a ride with me?”

I hesitate, in spite of what I've just learned. What if he really is out to get me? “Maybe we take separate cars and meet in a public place? Just to be safe?”

He inclines his head. “I can deal with that. There's actually the remnants of a shopping mall down the road a bit. It's got a food court and everything. Would that suffice?”

“Sure,” I say. I get out my phone to get another Uber.

He waits with me until it shows up. “So,” he says, “you're about the age my Sage would have been, I see. I often think about where she would have been, what she would have been doing... seeing you, with all of the craziness...” He gives me a

sad look. “God, I can’t say I don’t wish you were somehow my Sage brought back to life.”

This hits me hard, and I do something that’s maybe stupid. I cancel the Uber, and I get in his car.

We drive to what’s left of the mall. Some of it has been turned into condos, but half of it is still standing.

He buys me Orange Julius. I’ve never seen a food court except on movies, and I’m delighted to discover Orange Julius is real.

We go into the seating area, which is just like the movies, bright because of the skylights far overhead, full of the mingled smells of Chinese food and pizza, a huge room of rows of tables and chairs.

We sit down together, near a little stone circular planter full of greenery that might be plastic.

He asks me questions about Madison and the tower, and I explain the way she was manipulating Baum Wicker.

“Why?” he says. Then he shrugs. “Money, I suppose. And that whole house to herself. Not a bad deal for her in the end, I guess. But there’s something clearly wrong with her.”

“Yeah,” I say. “She’s mentally disturbed. She admitted to killing my biological father. Well, not out loud, but... And she tried to kill Easton.”

“Easton,” he says. “You can get him to talk to me.”

I let out a breath. “Oh, he’s your son, isn’t he?”

“I just want to talk to him,” says Mitchell, shaking his bald head. “This, all of this...” He sighs heavily. “I don’t know how it all turned out this way. It’s a sad business.”

“You and Baum Wicker were business rivals?” I say.

“He and I were competitors in every way,” says Mitchell. “But what happened with Cynthia and me, that wasn’t about him. I know he interpreted it that way, but it simply wasn’t the case. I’m not saying that whatever Cynthia and I had was some kind of epic love story. It’s not always that way between

men and women, you know? Or, well, there are different kinds of love, I suppose.”

“What do you mean?” I say. “What different kinds?”

He sits back in his chair, contemplating his own Orange Julius sitting on the table in front of him. “Well, I’m very old, you see, Rhiannon, and old men tend to look at everything in their past with rosy glasses. A thing can feel like love and still hurt a lot of people, including yourself. You understand?”

I nod. “Actually, yes.”

He shrugs. “Well, let’s say that there’s a gold standard of romantic love, the kind where you want another person in your bed but where you also just like to make her laugh. The kind where you have that feeling, often, that she completes you in a way you didn’t know you needed completion. The kind where you want her there, with you, at night in your arms and in the morning across from you at the breakfast table. Where she’s family as well as your lover. It’s rare, and it’s not a steady thing, either. You can feel it strongly for years and then the bottom can drop right out of it and she suddenly feels like a stranger—somebody you used to know—a woman who shares your life that you only remember having feelings for. But... if you wait these parts out, you often find the thread it of it again, or you fall in love with her afresh—with whoever it is she’s become while you were too busy to notice. That’s love, real love, that’s...”

“Is that you and your wife?” I say.

“Oh, yes,” he says with a smile. “But you know who never had that, who was never loved like that, and who deserved that kind of love? Cynthia Wicker.” He picks up his drink and toys with the straw. “You can hurt the people you love, you know. Well, perhaps you only hurt the people who love you, in the end. You’ve heard the phrase, but it’s true, because no one else cares what you do. It’s only love that opens us up to pain. If you never love, you never hurt.”

I think of Easton, and I suck down a big swallow of Orange Julius.

Mitchell is talking. “My Audra, she’s a force, always has been. She... well, when we got married, she told me that she was mine forever and that she’d always come home to me, but that I shouldn’t get any ideas about thinking I could lock her down. She was then, and she is now, wild and free, and her own woman. I started my own infidelities to attempt to make her jealous, because *I* was jealous. Didn’t work, of course. She couldn’t have cared one bit about any of them. Until Cynthia. I wouldn’t have considered it, truthfully. Seemed beneath me, poaching another man’s wife in that way, and I knew Baum wouldn’t like it, would hate me for it, in fact. He’d see it as lowering our competition into the muck, and the gloves would come off. If I did this, we’d descend to some other level, and I knew it. But when Audra seemed even the slightest bit concerned because I was talking to Cynthia—innocently, mind you, innocently, at first—well, I couldn’t stop myself.”

“So, you started it?” I say. “Just to get back at your wife?”

“I wanted to hurt Audra,” says Mitchell. “She hurt me, and I wanted to hurt her back, because that was the way our love felt at that time. I didn’t expect to find Cynthia so, well, fragile and lonely and sweet. I never loved a woman like that, I have to say. It’s not for me—that’s not what I want from a life partner, a little broken bird who is fluttering her wings in terror and begging for my help. I can see why some men might want it, though, because there is something heady in it, being wanted in that way, being needed. Audra never needs me, you see, which is what I quite prefer, but being so necessary to Cynthia Wicker?” He shakes his head. “Well, it’s no wonder there was a child, in the end, I suppose. I was mad with it, not the least bit careful. I loved her. I adored her. But when she wanted me to leave Audra to be with her, I wouldn’t. I think, the night she asked, she saw it in my eyes, that my adoration of her was never going to be enough. I think, that night, she was going to tell me that she was pregnant, but she changed her mind. So, I never found out.

“And then,” Mitchell continues, “it ended. Audra had begun an affair with Baum in retaliation, which I knew, but I didn’t care about that, because I knew I was the one yanking Audra around for once, that she was reacting instead of

making me react. So, I didn't mind it at all. I had no idea it was still going on as late as when our little Sage was born, however. I had no idea that Sage wasn't mine, really, you must believe me. But recently, when Baum was on his death bed, sending me messages that I needed to get the girl out of the tower—who he said was Sage—so that she could give him bone marrow, I went and looked at baby pictures, and I should have seen it. Sage did look like Baum. And Baum told me that he'd raised my son as his own. He gloated over this, but..." Mitchell bows his head. "Here I am, and I feel as if he's given me a gift. I have a living child, you see?" His eyes are shining.

"I do," I say. "So, you and Audra, that... you're still married, and you just had that volatile sort of relationship all along and—"

"Oh, no, after Baum, after Sage, she..." He shrugs. "A flame inside both of us went out. You can't imagine it, the pain of losing a child. First, our poor little girl was kidnapped, and then there was no ransom note. We waited and waited, knowing deep down that if they weren't asking for money it meant... But yes, they'd accidentally suffocated her trying to keep her quiet. Her little body wasn't far away from our house at all, just left there, tossed aside when she was no good to them for their scheme to get money out of me. Something inside me broke that day. And Audra?" His face twists. "She never quite recovered. You don't, you understand? You can't."

My heart goes out to him. "I'm so sorry."

"Due to complications with Sage's birth, we couldn't have another child," he says. "And I haven't told her about Easton, but I wonder... perhaps she'd like to meet you."

"Me?" I touch my chest. "But I'm no one. I don't have anything to do with your story at all. I'm not your long-lost daughter. I wasn't stolen away from you and put in a tower. I'm no one."

"Well, I'll ask her first, of course. Maybe you're right. Maybe she won't want to meet you. But maybe she will. If she says yes, will you meet with her?"

"I suppose so," I say. "But she won't."

“Will you speak to Easton for me?”

“I don’t know if I’m going to speak to Easton again,” I mutter. “I sort of just, um, escaped him. I thought, however, that I had an inheritance coming to me, but it turns out that I don’t, and—”

“Oh?” says Mitchell.

“Apparently, Baum Wicker’s will stipulates that his assets are only to go to his biological children, and Easton shouldn’t have inherited at all. But I suppose that Baum doesn’t have any children, so that would mean his money didn’t go to anyone.”

Mitchell raises his eyebrows. “Ah, I see.”

I tilt my head to one side. “If you hadn’t lost a child, do you think that you and Audra would still be in love? Considering the way she treated you?”

“Oh, entirely!” Mitchell chuckles.

“But she was constantly cheating on you and not even trying to hide it.”

“Yes, some people wouldn’t like that.”

“You didn’t like it.”

“I did,” he says with a laugh.

“You just said—”

“I’m not saying it was something I would have signed up for, but you can’t imagine what that kind of passion does to a marriage.”

I furrow my brow. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“She was never mine, you see, so I was constantly fighting for her, constantly winning her, constantly in a state of high excitement. Whenever we were together, there was a feeling that I must show her why she must continually choose me, and it meant that our lovemaking had a level of intensity that nothing else could quite touch. I never got bored with her, not back then, not during all that. It was probably the best time of

my life, all told. I miss it. I miss the way she was, then. She was a force.”

Maybe I can sort of see that, but I wouldn’t want to be in a relationship like that.

On the other hand, I wouldn’t want to be held prisoner by a man who refuses to let me shave my legs and tells me that I belong to him, either. And yet, whatever it is with Easton, it’s undeniably enticing.

“You must understand that there was a foundation under it all, though,” Mitchell Thorn says. “As I said, she was my one and only, and I was hers. No matter what we did, we were both committed to each other. And also, I...” He smiles. “There’s also been a level of like between us. I wouldn’t hurt her, not deliberately.”

“She hurt you, though,” I say.

“I don’t think she understood that it hurt me,” he says. “Not until Cynthia. I don’t think she could fathom the pain because it had never occurred to her to think of it from my side.”

“Well, she should have,” I say.

“Maybe,” he says. “Maybe so. Love is a strange thing. The *things* you can forgive someone when you love them.”

“But *should* you?” I whisper.

“Why not?” he says. “Who has ever been hurt by forgiveness?”

“What if you forgive someone who doesn’t deserve to be forgiven?”

“If they deserved forgiveness, it wouldn’t need to be granted,” he says.

“True,” I say. “But sometimes, you shouldn’t be with people, if they hurt you and abuse you and... and frighten you. And if you can’t control yourself around them. And if—”

“Hmm, we’re talking about something quite different here, I think.” Mitchell eyes me. “Is this my son, then? Is this what

sort of man he is?”

My lower lip trembles.

Mitchell reaches across the table. He doesn't touch me, but he reaches his hand out, and it's reassuring in some way I can't explain. “You can forgive someone and not go back to them, you know?”

EASTON

THIRTY-THREE

“THERE’S A MR. Thorn here to see you,” says the man at the front desk in my building, and I’m livid. How could he have gotten to her? How could he be here? What happened?

I race down to the lobby, intent on confronting him before I report him to the police. I want to tell him exactly what I think of him, and how horrified I am that he would hurt an innocent girl, simply because she doesn’t happen to be his daughter. I can get down on my own, but I can’t find him by myself, so—to my chagrin—I have to get the elevator doorman to walk me over to him. I hate being blind.

The first thing Mitchell Thorn says to me is, “She’s very much alive, first of all.”

Oh, all right. I see what this is. “What do you want from me?”

He laughs. “No, no, I’m not... I was never going to kill her. Baum was misinformed. Rhiannon was never Sage. They’re entirely different people. Madison Nevely only used Rhiannon to manipulate him.”

I sputter. “That can’t be true.” Except it sounds exactly like something Madison would do, actually.

“Invite me up,” he says. “We have a lot to discuss.”

“I’m not inviting you into my home,” I say.

“All right,” he says with a shrug. He touches my arm. “How about if we go around the corner to the little coffee shop next door, then?”

“Where’s Rhiannon?”

“She’s told me some things,” he says. “I agree with her that it’s likely a good idea if the two of you don’t see each other for now.”

“What sort of things?” I say.

“Oh, don’t be that way,” he says, and I can hear the contempt in his voice. “I swear, all young people seem to act as though they’ve invented sex. It’s all the same, silly boy, and has been so for a thousand years. I’m not shocked or anything. This way.” He tries to guide me away.

“Let’s go up to my place if that’s what we’re talking about.” It’s a split-second decision.

“As you wish.”

We take the elevator up, and I show him into my living room.

“I’m not offering you refreshments,” I say.

“If I’d brought you up, I think I’d have taught you to be more polite,” he says mildly. “You favor Cynthia, truly, though. I’d never see it, not looking at you. You’re mine, but I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“Look, just because you happened to contribute some DNA to me doesn’t mean you get to tell me what to do,” I say.

“No,” he says. “Of course not.”

“I thought you...”

“Yes, I know what you thought of me. That I had killed my two-year-old daughter, my beloved Sage. That I was so intent on killing her that I would have kept trying if I had discovered I’d failed. And why? What reason would I have had to kill a little girl?”

“Well, she wasn’t really yours,” I say. “Or... did we get that wrong?”

“No, no, I suppose that bit of the soap opera is all very true. Yes, Baum and I got each other’s wives pregnant. But really, Baum wasn’t pleased about your existence, was he? But he didn’t kill *you*.”

“Well, no,” I say.

“So, truly, what kind of monster would I have to be to do what you said?”

“People are monsters sometimes,” I say.

“I suppose,” he says. “But that’s quite a lot of monstrosity, I’m afraid. I have to admit, I’m a bit offended.”

“You want me to apologize or something?” I glare at his general direction, best I can, anyway, without actually being able to see.

“Oh, never mind,” he says, laughing. “You’re quite on the defensive, aren’t you?”

“What have you done with Rhiannon?”

“Lord, boy, nothing. Well, she’s staying with myself and my Audra. We’ve taken a bit of a liking to her, I have to admit. Audra wants to dress her up and take her to every party in town, I think. I’ve asked Rhiannon if she’d like to go to college.”

“College,” I say softly. “I guess she is... that age.” I blink and then I sit back into the couch. “So, you’re just going to take her in? You don’t know her.”

“I know, I know. But it’s... well, she’s nothing like our Sage, and we lost our daughter when she was two years old, so getting an adolescent girl all these years later, it’s not... it’s nothing at all like having our daughter back, but it’s... it’s...” He shrugs. “It feels like our daughter might have come home in some way. It strikes me that Rhiannon hasn’t had anything easy in her entire life. Just a series of struggles and blows, over and over again. She might be due for a happy ending, that’s all. Maybe a fairy godmother, or surrogate father, as the case may be.”

I’m stunned. He’s serious?

“What about you?” he says.

“What about me?”

“You in need of a father at all?”

“What?” I stiffen. “No. Fuck, no.”

“Well, then,” he says. “You’ll leave her be, then, I think. You’re worse than she described, aren’t you? She must have had some softening view of you because she claims to love you, but all I see is Baum Wicker—younger, blinder, bitterer.”

I sneer at him.

“Keep the money,” he says. “I won’t interfere with that, even though we all know it’s not yours. Keep it, but you stay away from Rhiannon.”

I hear the sound of him moving away from the couch. I suppose he intends those to be his parting words.

I shoot up from the couch, clutching the arm of it for balance. I don’t know where he is, so I don’t know where to direct my words, but I say, “She and I need to talk.”

“That’d be up to her, I suppose.” His voice is farther away than I’d anticipated.

I let go of the couch and I go after him. Now, I’m walking blindly towards the sound of his voice. “You don’t understand it. She might have told you things, and they might sound awful, but the thing is, I am *in love* with her. I’ve never felt the way I feel for her, ever, in my entire life. I can’t just let her go. I won’t do that. I’ll fight for her with everything that’s—”

He collides with me, large hands taking me by the shoulders. “You’re about to run into that umbrella stand,” he says quietly.

I sag, utterly defeated.

“There are different kinds of love,” he says. “And some of them inflict a great deal of pain.”

“If she leaves me, then what do I have left?” I don’t know why I say that out loud.

“That would be up to you,” he says.

Me? Look, I’ve never done anything, never wanted anything, never achieved anything until... her. She’s the only

thing I've ever wanted for myself. If she doesn't want me back

And why would she?

I back away, bowing my head, shaking all over. I'm shaking too hard to speak.

"Do you need a father, Easton?"

"I don't need anything or anyone," I bite out, the response immediate.

"Except her," he says, his voice knowing and amused.

I groan, backing further away.

"Let me ask you something," he says.

"All right," I say, since he seems to want a response.

"If I keep a dog, and I keep it in the dark, in a cage, and I only take it out once a day to give it exercise and food and a place to do its business, and then I put it back in, that dog may well survive, but am I seeing to its needs?"

"No?" I say, confused. What the fuck are we talking about?

"That dog, however, he may become quite used to his cage and his darkness, and when someone else attempts to take him out into the light, to let him go and run in the fields, under the sun, or when they offer him food at more than one interval a day, when they attempt to help him, he may resist. He may, in fact, think he doesn't need these things, because he survives just fine as his master has trained him. In fact, he may come back to me, his master, over the person who treats him better, mightn't he?"

"I guess so," I say. "But I haven't been kept in a cage in the dark—"

"You think that anyone, anywhere needs no one and nothing, Easton?" he says softly. "You think there is a human being on earth—indeed any creature of any species—who can survive all alone?"

“Well...” When he puts it like that... “But my father, he
—”

“Was your father well adjusted and thriving? Or was he simply bitter and sad and angry?” He touches me again, and I shy away from it. His voice is soft. “Do you want to be like your father?”

My throat closes up.

Shit.

I haven't felt like I was going to cry in...

I swallow it.

But he's embracing me, out of nowhere, and I haven't... my own father... the only person I've touched lately has been her.

It feels nicer than I want to admit to myself.

THIRTY-FOUR

“IF YOU DO this,” says Uncle Marcus, “you lose everything. The will stipulates that—in the case of all of Baum’s issue being gone—that the money will simply be divided amongst various charities.”

“Yes,” I say. “That’s what I want. I don’t want anything else belonging to this man. And this money of his, it should be used to do something good for people. I’m not going to do anything with it.”

“I don’t think you’re understanding what will happen to you,” says Marcus. “You’ll have nothing at all.”

“I have a degree from a pretty damned good college,” I say. “I have some internships I completed and some contacts. I already have a fucking job lined up.”

Marcus is surprised. “You’re going to work?”

“Yes, I’m going to work,” I say.

“Where are you going to work?” he says.

“Well, I never took my LSAT or went to law school,” I say. “I don’t know if I even want to do that. But I made some connections through my internships, and I managed to get a position doing research work for Brown, Brown, and Jalks, and they’re doing a lot of cases about the environment and protecting nature and animals and things like that.”

“I didn’t think you even cared about that.”

“I mean...” I scratch the back of my head. “I like trees. And deer and shit. I mean, who doesn’t like that shit?”

He just laughs.

“I just figured, like, it was going to feel better to do something that benefited somebody else besides me for once.” I shrug. “I mean, because, you know, people need other people, and we need the earth... Like, on a basic level. We need it for food and stuff, but also, also... you know that feeling you get, when you see the sunrise or whatever? There’s, uh, there’s that feeling.” I shrug again, embarrassed. I’m not used to admitting to having emotions or whatever. It feels like admitting to having weakness. It feels like admitting to being tainted and damaged.

Marcus is quiet for a long moment. Then he says, “Yeah, okay. I guess I get what you’re saying. Your father, this was all he wanted for you, you know that? For you to care about *something*.”

“Did he want things for me?”

Marcus sighs.

“Yeah, I don’t think he cared,” I say. “I think he wanted me to fail. I think he wanted me to suffer.”

“I think he got worse at the end,” says Marcus. He sounds sad. “But he did care about you.”

I scoff.

“Hey, this is good,” says Marcus. “This, actually, kid, this is good.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “I’m proud of you.”

“It’s honestly not even going to be that hard,” I mutter. “I’ll start getting paid, and I’ll be fine. I have to move out of the penthouse, yes, but I’ll be able to absolutely afford a place to live and to feed myself and everything else. It’s not like I’m going to be destitute.”

“You, uh, you might have to cook for yourself.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Can you do that? With... with the eye-thing?”

“You can say ‘blind,’” I say, laughing. “Yeah, I can cook.”

“Okay,” he says.

“Look,” I say, holding up my cane. “I can even navigate my way down city sidewalks now.”

Marcus chuckles. “Look at that. What’s next, dark glasses?”

I laugh, too. “Yeah, complete the cliché, right?”

“What brought this on?”

I’m quiet for a minute. It’s hard to know how to explain it. “He, um, he didn’t think much of me.”

“Your father.”

“Baum Wicker. He didn’t think much of me. My mother did, I think, but she held me at arms’ length, too. She was a fragile sort of person, in a way. She loved me, but she didn’t have the strength to override that message I was getting from him, which was that I just wasn’t worth anything.”

“Oh, shit, kid—”

“No, believe me, it’s not easy to talk about this. I feel like some kind of idiot pussy.” It’s the product of therapy, believe it or not, therapy that I’ve gone to because Mitchell thinks it’s a good idea. She’s going, too, Rhiannon is. We’re talking sometimes, but... well, all of that is crazy complicated. Anyway, both of us, we’re getting lots of therapy. “Yeah, uh, so, my other caregivers, they were just in and out pretty fast, and so I got another message in my head, which was basically that anyone who took care of me was probably going to abandon me. And why? Because, you know, something was wrong with me, and my own dad knew it.”

“Nah, you were just a kid,” he says. “And it’s not as if he didn’t take care of you. He lavished all sorts of things on you.”

“He gave me enough to survive,” I say. “But not enough to thrive. Anyway, I just... I didn’t think I should bother with myself. If he didn’t want to bother with me, why should I? If no one had ever loved me, why should anyone? I definitely wasn’t going to put myself out there with women, right? I just paid people. I just ordered people around. I felt like it was a foregone conclusion, if I let anyone in, that she’d abandon me. So, I wasn’t going to let her in.”

“What about that, uh, Francesca? She was sitting at your bedside—”

“Right, well, when she didn’t abandon me, I just assumed something was wrong with her, and I no longer wanted her.” I laugh softly. “It’s twisted, right? I hate myself so much that if someone else likes me, I lose all respect for them.”

“No respect for me, kid?”

I shake my head. “No, I got why you did it. It wasn’t about me, it was about you. If you didn’t have me, you didn’t have anyone.”

He draws in a long breath and lets it out. “Well, you’re getting all deep on me. I think you’re going to make my brain hurt.”

“Sorry. We don’t have to go into anything else. You can do it, though, right? Let’s move forward on the inheritance business, getting all of it distributed where it needs to go.”

“You’re sure about this? You don’t think you’ll regret it?”

“Oh, probably,” I say. “I mean, all that money... but the thing is, with all the money, everything’s... It means I can’t earn anything. It means no one sees me for myself, they just see me as the money. The money makes everything meaningless. I don’t want it anymore. I want things to matter. If that means risk, bring it on. I could stand a little risk, actually.”

“I think I know what you mean,” he says thoughtfully. There’s another pause. “That means all the properties will need to be liquidated. Is that how you want to do it?”

“Is there an alternative?”

“Well, you could donate the properties to individuals or organizations.”

“Huh,” I say. “Well, let me think about that.”

“And Briarfeld?”

Oh. I lick my lips. “I want to give that to Rhiannon. Can we do that? I mean, I know technically, if I’m not keeping this

money due to the inheritance, I shouldn't give her anything, but she... I mean, she could sell that and it would give her... I just feel like if anyone deserves it..."

"We can do that," says Marcus, and I can tell he's grinning.

RHIANNON

THIRTY-FIVE

HE'S DIFFERENT THESE days when I talk to him.

At first, I didn't want to talk to him at all, and I told him that. I sent back an identical text every time he texted me, which said that I wasn't ready to interact with him at this point.

I kept thinking this would eventually sink in with him, but, well, I guess I don't know why I thought that, because he's always been kind of stubborn when it comes to me. So, he does not stop and keeps texting me.

These texts are mostly variations on, *We need to talk*. He's willing to talk on the phone. He's willing to meet me in a public place. He's willing to just send texts or emails.

I ignore them all.

And I don't even know that Mitchell is meeting with him. Mitchell doesn't tell me this, and when I do find out, he says it's because he didn't want to influence me at all. He says he can't help it. Easton's his flesh and blood, he says. Blood means something, even if we don't want it to, he says. He says it's not possible for him to never care about his own son. He says that Audra doesn't understand either.

Audra is lovely.

She and I are great friends. She has taken me under her wing and treated me like a living doll. She's taken me to far too many luncheons and brunches and dinners and dances, all over the city, and no matter how hard I try to resist the two of them—Audra and Mitchell—and their charity, I just, well, can't.

I don't know why I trust them.

It doesn't make any sense.

After all, there hasn't been one person on this earth who's been good to me for no reason at all, just because they are good. Even River, he wanted something in return.

And perhaps the Thorns want something in return, too, maybe. They don't want me to replace their daughter, but... well, maybe they do.

I see why, I suppose, and it soothes me, and it helps me accept it.

Besides, *I* would be good to someone for no reason at all. I suppose that part of me, that good part of me, can't help but assume that other people are good too. I don't want that part of me trounced. So, I let them help me, and I try to give them whatever a daughter would have given them. I let us help each other, and it's nice. I let it just be nice, and I try not to overthink it.

Months pass of Easton's insistent messages, of being paraded around by Audra in an array of designer dresses, of going to a therapist in an office that is high up in a tall building. As I talk to the therapist, I look out at the city, spread out below, and we talk about Madison Nevely and my childhood and about Easton, too.

I learn that it's not unheard of, the sorts of things I experienced, that there are women who isolate and imprison their children, that it's often senseless, like most abuse, a strange and sad way of enforcing something twisted on those less powerful than they are. No one knows why some people do things like that. We can only speculate.

And Easton, the therapist says that men like him are sadly very common, too. She says that men like that manipulate their victims, that they use various tools, and that being drawn to your abuser is common. "There's a reason women don't leave," she says. "It's called a trauma bond."

I sit there, in my therapist's office, looking out the window, several floors up, down at the street and the trees

growing in the little boxed areas of the sidewalk. I ask questions like, “What do we do with those people? The abusive ones? Do we just throw them away?”

“Well, that’s the wrong question to ask,” she says. “They are throwing themselves away, that’s the sad truth of it. Until they can let go of that sad, sad need to dominate, they can’t ever interact with people in a way that means that they’ll ever find real love.”

“I don’t think he wanted to dominate me,” I say.

“No?” says my therapist. And she’s very good, because I don’t get that sense from her that she thinks I’m wrong, just that she’s really curious. “What did he want, then?”

“I mean, he wanted... the sex stuff... I mean, I guess some of that was domination, but people do that, right? I mean, that’s a common enough sexual fantasy. That doesn’t have to be pathological.”

“The key is always choice and communication,” says my therapist.

“Which he denied me,” I say. “But I think he just didn’t want me to leave.”

“He was definitely controlling, then.”

“Right, but not because...” I lick my lips. “Not because he really thought he was dominant or whatever. I don’t think he thought very highly of himself at all. I think he did it because he thought that if he didn’t trap me, I would leave him. He didn’t think someone like me would ever choose to be with someone like him.” I furrow my brow. “The thing is, I would have. If he’d let me choose, I think I would have. He just... he wouldn’t let me. He had to force me.”

“Is he still sending you texts? What do you think about what we discussed before, about blocking his number?”

“What if he changed?” I say. “That’s a dumb thing, right? Like, women just lie to themselves about men like him. It’s the trauma bond. It’s not... it’s not real.”

She regards me. “I don’t like it when women who’ve been through difficult relationships are called ‘dumb,’ and you know it.”

“I know,” I say. “Yeah, it’s not dumb at all. It’s the way that people react psychologically to a certain kind of coercive behavior and all of that. I know. And I know that it’s natural to miss him and miss the intensity of whatever we had together. And I know that he’s probably just thinking of me like a possession, and he only wants to control me. It’s just that... that...” There’s a long pause, and she looks at me expectantly. “I’m not ready to block him yet.”

I start college in the middle of the year, at the beginning of the spring semester. Audra and Mitchell are insisting on paying for it. I don’t know what I want to study, and I have so many gaps in my education that I’m having to take a bunch of remedial classes—especially in things like math and science and recent history. The only thing where it seems like I am up on things is literature. I read a lot, and a lot of it were difficult-to-read books from the nineteenth century.

In the end, maybe, that’s what breaks me.

The thing about therapy, the thing that it’s missing, is *sin*.

It’s a beautiful idea to think that we are all simply blameless, that we come into the world as blank slates, and that our experiences write on us, but that if we go and talk things out in a room with a nice therapist, we can simply unravel all these experiences and come out fresh and new and clean.

I know, though.

Easton didn’t manipulate me into wanting him.

I just *did*.

And now, after some time to reflect, I don’t want to call that sin, not really. It’s not wrong to want sex, or to be attracted to a beautiful man. It’s not wrong, true, but it is, well, a thing that is out of my control, and giving into that thing, it has all these strange and tangled consequences.

So, maybe the Victorians had it right in some ways, in the end.

Maybe we do all have some darker nature, some shadow self, some bestial identity, something within us that—unchecked—will destroy us.

And if so, what is the antidote to such things?

I think, when I see Audra and Mitchell holding hands together or when he kisses her head or when she turns over her shoulder to make sure she knows where he is in the room... I think, then, it's love.

Love and that darkness should entwine, perhaps.

Maybe, when I'm with Easton, I can't stop myself from doing ridiculous and self-destructive things. Maybe the way I want that man, it makes me a little unhinged.

If he had loved me, though, he would have protected me from myself, and protected me from him. And if I had loved him, I would have protected him from himself and from me. Love would have sanded down those edges. It would have provided a safe container for that sort of passion. If there had been love...

But *was* there love?

Talk, I text him one day. *Talk. Tell me whatever it is you want to say.*

Can I call you?

My fingers hover over the keyboard. I should tell him no. I don't owe him anything. But I let him call.

"Tell me about the thing that happened," he says right away. "The thing that made you decide you couldn't have an abortion."

"This is why you called me?"

"You don't want to tell me?"

"You're just still obsessed with the idea of getting me pregnant, aren't you? My therapist was right about you."

“I’m in therapy, too.”

“You want a prize?”

He laughs. “Maybe. What kind of prize?”

I sigh heavily. “I don’t know, okay? It was just a feeling. I had a feeling, this painful feeling, of the loss of our baby, that’s all. And I wished I hadn’t lost the baby. I wished for a baby. And I knew, if I got the chance again, that wish would flare to life in me, and I’d want it and I would move heaven and earth to have the baby, that’s all.”

“Oh,” he says.

“Not what you were expecting?”

“I don’t know. I should have asked what the miscarriage was like. I should have asked what it was like with that River person? I should have asked how you felt when you realized that I was using you and lying to you. I should have—”

“Why?”

“I mean, because I’m sorry,” he says.

“I know,” I say. “You said you were sorry before.”

“I wasn’t,” he says. “Not sorry enough. Here’s the thing, Rhiannon, this is going to sound like a stupid excuse, but I wasn’t very nice to myself back then? And it made it easier to justify being shitty to other people.”

I’m quiet.

“I was shitty to you,” he says.

I still don’t say anything.

“You, uh, you...” His voice is scratchy. “You had a shitty fucking life, and I sailed into it and I had the chance to, like, rescue you. I could have taken you right out of that tower—”

“I didn’t want to leave,” I say.

“Right, but, uh, Mitchell has this thing he says about a dog ___”

“You talk to Mitchell?”

“He didn’t tell you that?”

I sigh heavily.

“Anyway, the point is, you wanted to stay in that tower, but I didn’t have to let you. If I wanted to do the right thing, I knew what it was. I had the chance to be that for you, to be a hero to you, to save you. That’s not what I did.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Uh, well, this is fucked, but I guess I want us to still—ultimately, I’m still seriously obsessed with you, and when I said that thing about us getting married and—”

“You’re joking. You give me this apology, which isn’t even that *good* of an apology, for fuck’s sake, and then you’re proposing marriage?”

“I mean, you feel it, too, though, don’t you?”

I hang up on him.

Then I text him, *I feel it, too. Leave me alone.*

And somehow, through that, we end up talking again.

And he’s different these days, when I talk to him.

He’s working full-time and he’s applying to take classes part-time in the fall. He’s busy. He has a cat, and the cat is named Patches, and he’s always getting distracted from talking to me because of this cat, who has apparently become, like, the center of his universe.

Oh, I’d find that up for you, but Patches is sitting on me and purring, so I’m stuck right here on the couch.

Hey, sorry, going to be about ten minutes late because I stopped to check out some kitty treats for Patches that I heard about at this store in midtown.

My therapist says that Patches is a good test relationship for me. If I can care about a cat, it’s a good sign.

I meet Patches one day, when I stop off at his apartment to pick up something for Mitchell. The cat is entirely black, coal

black, not a patch on her. But, I mean, Easton is blind. Maybe it's a blind-guy joke that I just don't get.

Patches winds her way around my ankles, purring loudly. She jumps up onto the counter next to me and arches into my body. She nuzzles her head under my hand and forces me to pet her.

"I like your cat," I tell him.

"I like your pussy," he says.

I pick up whatever is handy on the countertop—happens to be a leftover Chinese container—and hurl it at his face.

"Ouch!" He fends that off. "It's no fair throwing shit at a blind man."

His apartment is small—so much smaller than the place where we lived together. It's cozy in some way that other place wasn't.

"You just can't stop yourself from saying things, can you?"

"Do you shave your legs now?"

I roll my eyes.

"I'm just saying, you know, it seems to me that you're never going to find another man out there who *wants* you to be hairy."

"And this intense persistence is a form of harassment."

"Mmm, no," he says. "You have to say no and that you don't want me to do it anymore and then I have to *continue* before it's harassment."

I open my mouth to say that I don't want him to do it anymore. Instead, I say, "Well, I do shave my legs, but there is one place I'm still pretty hairy."

A slow grin wreathes his features.

"I'm leaving," I say.

But then we end up hooking up.

It's two weeks later. I'm out with friends from college at this hole-in-the-wall bar where there's barely room for more than ten people inside, and somehow, there are three times that many people all jammed into the place.

He shows up and buys my drinks and my friend thinks he's cute and flirts with him shamelessly. Well, I mean, more than flirting. My friend Janae, she's forward. She practically propositions him.

He says, "My therapist says I'm not cleared for romantic interactions yet." He eyes me. "Besides, I think that would be weird with Rhiannon."

Janae is all, "You have history with this guy? You didn't tell me?"

And I did not.

Honestly, when I tell the story of the tower, I tend to leave him out. I don't know how to *talk* about him.

He walks me home.

But then, his apartment is on the way to where I'm staying, which is with the Thorns, still. They've offered to pay for a place for me to live, but that's too much for me. And besides, I think we all like it too much, my being there. They're not ready to let me go yet, any more than I'm ready to be let go.

So, I go up to his apartment.

Patches greets us at the door.

We both say hi to the cat, and then go sit next to each other on his couch as if we don't know what's going to happen.

We make small talk, and I'm wearing a skirt, and I talk about my classes and the weather and ease my underwear down to my ankles and reach down and pull them off along with my shoes. Then I hand him my underwear.

He fingers them, his expression going molten. He's entirely quiet.

I take his hand and guide it between my legs, pushing him further and further up my thighs until he's brushing against the hair on my pussy, which is tidily trimmed, but still there.

"I want to lick you here," he tells me in a gravelly voice.

"On your knees," I tell him.

He's still good at licking my pussy.

He uses his finger inside me at the same time, just the way I like it, and he makes me come in that *way* he can make me come. For some reason, whenever he makes me come, it's different than when I make me come.

I want him to fuck me; he won't do it.

He says that his therapist is going to be pissed off when she finds out that this happened with us. "She doesn't think I should be pursuing this relationship with you. She doesn't think there's, you know, a healthy thing there to pursue."

"Well, your therapist and my therapist would agree with each other," I say. "Can I make you come anyway?"

"No," he says, and he takes his pretty cock out and strokes it. "Just watch, baby, just watch."

But I still latch my mouth onto the tip of him when he's close and swallow every drop of him down while he croons out praises for me.

He swipes his thumb over my lower lip and stands me up, handing me my shoes. "You gotta go, Rhiannon."

"Where's my underwear?"

He just grins.

THIRTY-SIX

IT'S LIKE THAT for three years.

On and off like that, little hookups, here and there. Sometimes, they last for days, me holed up in his apartment for an entire weekend, neither of us getting dressed, just ordering food from his bed. Once, a whole week.

That week, it ends with an argument, me half dressed, yelling things at him like, "You said you were obsessed with me. You said you wanted to marry me. So, now you're kicking me out?"

Him yelling back that he doesn't know how this works with us, and that I'm still practically a child, and that I should go out and live, and that everything about him is not good for me.

"You never used to care whether or not you were bad for me," I say.

"I do now," he says. "Get the fuck out, Rhiannon."

After that, we don't talk for probably four months.

Sometimes, in between these little interludes, we date other people. He has this girlfriend at one point, and he brings her to a dinner that Mitchell organizes. The girl is nice enough, I guess. He works with her at his job, and I guess they have shit in common or something. She has what I think is a really unpleasant laugh. Maybe that's not fair of me, to make fun of something she can't help, but...

Whatever.

I hate her.

When they break up, I am not even a little bit sad.

But I have boyfriends, too. I worry at first that my scar will be a deterrent, because it's ugly, and maybe it is, who knows? Maybe it just helps me weed out super shallow guys, I don't know. One guy I date for a whopping six months. The other two relationships are much shorter, ending after a month and three weeks respectively.

I hook up, too.

The sex with these guys, though, it's bad. Maybe I wouldn't know how bad it was if I hadn't been with Easton. I'm not sure. But they're clumsy and stupid. They don't take control of me in the way he does. They sure as hell don't say sexy things to me the way he does.

I have to spend endless amounts of time teaching them how to touch me—and I feel like Easton just knew. Maybe he watched me masturbate, now that I think about it.

Still, he cared enough to figure it out.

These guys, every time I'm with them, it's just like, "No, lighter, please" and "No, here, it's here" and "No, what you were doing, do that, keep doing that, don't stop doing..."

The guy that I date for six months is really nice, though, awful sex notwithstanding. He's a keeper because he's just fine with sex toys, and he buys me a little vibrator that attaches to my finger and that I can easily worm around in nearly any sexual position.

He wants to use it on me, too, but... he's sort of hopeless with that, also. ("No, don't push the vibrator down so *hard*.")

Anyway, it's a fine workaround.

Me and the boyfriend, we're happy.

I think we are, anyway, but when he breaks up with me, he says that he feels like I'm holding something back from him. He says he's just not sure if he can commit to me, if he knows for sure that I'm the "one." He says if I was, he'd be sure.

The day after that, I get hit with the news that Madison has somehow been granted parole. She was convicted—only two

years ago—of first degree attempted murder and given a sentence of ten years. Truthfully, she should have gotten life in prison. That kind of conviction typically carries a life sentence. I don't know how she got out of that, and I don't think she should be up for parole yet. It's insane.

Certainly, someone should have informed us? We should have gone down there and addressed the parole board or written a letter or something?

But.

It's done now.

And in the wake of all that, that's when I decide I'm going to Briarfeld.

“THAT'S LITERALLY THE stupidest idea you've ever had,” Easton says over the phone. “What if she's there?”

“Good,” I say. “Maybe I want to see her. Maybe I want to give her a piece of my mind. Maybe—”

“Rhiannon, you can't go to Briarfeld.”

“Funny, because when you gave it to me, I was pretty sure that meant I could do whatever I wanted with it.” I got the deed a long time ago, back before Easton and I were speaking or friends or occasional fuck-buddies or whatever the hell we are anymore. It was transferred to me through Easton's lawyers.

I haven't done a damned thing with it.

I know I could have sold it, but that seems wrong in some way.

In some way, it's home.

“You should drive my car,” he says.

“Seriously?” I say.

“Well, you still don't have a car, right? How were you planning on getting there?”

“Bus, I guess,” I say. “Why do you have a car if you're blind?”

“So that people can drive me places in it,” he says.
“Which you should do now. Drive my car. You drive. I’ll sit shotgun.”

“You want to come?”

“Drive my car.”

“Okay,” I say. It seems weird to me that he’d agree to being alone with me like that, for a big, long road trip, especially when we’re going back to the scene of the crime, or whatever.

Crimes, plural, really.

Lots of bad things happened at Briarfeld.

On the drive down, we don’t talk about Madison or Briarfeld or anything else, but we do talk about the guy who just dumped me.

“I mean,” I say, “I wasn’t sure he was the ‘one,’ either, but I wasn’t sure that he wasn’t. I was willing to wait and see if I got sure, I guess. I’m pretty sure that ‘sure’ part of me is broken, anyway.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because you’re the only person I’ve ever felt sure about,” I mutter. “And you don’t feel sure about me, so it’s a moot point.”

He doesn’t say anything.

I look away from the windshield, clutching the steering wheel, to sneak a peak at his expression and then I go right back to looking out at the road. “Sorry, it’s fine, actually. The thing is, once I had this thought process about you and me, about how—if we really loved each other—we would have stopped the other person from making self-destructive decisions, and I guess, honestly, you do that now, so—”

“It’s not that I don’t feel sure about you. I feel all kinds of fucking things about you. The feeling part is very overwhelming. But when I *think* about it, when I apply logic, that’s when... there’s no *sense* in us together. It’s obviously *bad*.”

“Why not?” I say.

“I don’t know, maybe because I raped you and you never even seem to have gotten properly angry about it, let alone, like, pressed charges, which you would be well within your rights to—”

“Rape? How do you figure that? I mean, it was coerced, maybe. You tricked me, but I consented—”

“You consented but without all the information necessary to allow you to consent, so you—”

“I would have consented regardless. I mean, you’re fucking gorgeous, Easton, and that first time, when you showed me your fucking cock, and I’ve never been so turned on in my life—”

“But that was fucked up!”

“I know, but I liked it!” I’m roaring this over the steering wheel.

Now, it’s quiet.

“You shouldn’t have liked it,” he mutters.

“Oh, you did not just say that! Did you just slut-shame me?”

He groans, leaning into the window, pressing his eyebrow into the glass.

“You going to tell me the proper way to react sexually now? You and all men everywhere want to put women in boxes, except you just can’t decide which boxes and where the boundaries should be and—”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“How else could you have meant it?”

“I think I meant, like, just... I don’t understand that. Why did you like it?”

“That’s not what you said.”

“Well, why, though, Rhiannon?”

“Because I like your cock, what kind of question is that? Why do *you* get turned on when you see a woman naked?”

“That’s it? That’s why?”

“Why else?”

He’s quiet.

“You know, with my therapist, I once told her that I had this theory that I had some attraction to being abused or something because of what Madison did to me, and she said that was just bullshit, that what I reacted to was not the shitty things you did, but the good things you did. Which, I wanted to believe.”

“Wait, wait a minute—”

“What I had wrong was thinking it was because of Madison,” I say. “Or thinking that there was something deviant about enjoying all of the very normal and well-within-the-boundaries-of-normal-human-sexual-function things we did.”

“Were they normal?”

“They make porn about every single one of those things. And they make porn about shit we didn’t even do, crazy things we would never do, that are too far out of the bounds of propriety for us, so, yeah, normal.”

He lets out a little laugh.

“What? Don’t like that? You wanted to be big, bad Easton who corrupted me?”

“I mean, wasn’t I?” He’s grinning.

I’m grinning, too. “I mean, yeah,” I say softly.

“Which you liked.”

“I mean, yeah,” I say, even more softly.

“Which I liked, too,” he says.

“What I had wrong was sin,” I say.

“Okay, now I’m really confused,” he says.

“That’s what they’d call it in *Oliver Twist* or something,” I say. “But it’s just the capacity within people to pursue pleasure far beyond sense. To want to intensify pleasure even if it becomes uncomfortable. To want pleasure even if it’s inconvenient or upsetting or even dangerous. Sin.”

“Not everyone is that way,” he says. “Some people wouldn’t do that.”

“Only the wicked,” I say, with a little smile that he can’t even see.

He lets out a breath. “Pull over.”

“What?”

“Somewhere safe, somewhere out of the way, but I don’t know if I care if people will be able to see us from the road.”

“Easton, what are you—”

“Do it,” he says. “You know you want to.”

“What happens after I pull over?” I say.

“Uh, you know, we get in the back seat. I lift up your shirt and bra so that you’re flashing those pretty tits of yours at everyone driving by. You sit right down on my big, thick erection and ride it while I play with your clit. I come inside you.”

I let out a breath.

“If you don’t want to, I can’t force you to do it,” he says.

“You don’t want to force me to do it,” I say. “You want me to want it, too.”

“I do,” he says. “I want you to want it. And if you pull over, it’ll mean you want to. But if you want to protest a little, that wouldn’t bother me.”

I laugh. “Protest, huh? I see,” I say knowingly.

“I mean, it would be a very bad thing to do, having sex on the side of the road, showing off your naked tits to all the cars driving by, letting them watch me make you come and all.”

“Yeah, how dare you suggest such a thing?” I say.

“Wait, you’re pulling over now,” he says.

“No, I’m not,” I say, as the car comes to a stop.

THIRTY-SEVEN

“WE GOING INTO the tower?” Easton’s voice is breathless as he clutches my hand and I lead him through the house.

“I think we have to,” I say, my voice barely more than a whisper. His cum is leaking out of me, dampening my underwear, and I like the way it feels. It makes me feel possessed and claimed and it’s good, heady in its way.

“We definitely don’t have to,” he says.

“Why else did we come here?”

“I don’t *know* why we’re here,” he says.

When we get into the tower, I let go of his hand to walk around and look at everything. It’s all the same, but it’s covered in dust. No one’s been in here. I just left it all, and it’s like my life, like I walked out of this life and left it, encased in this tower.

I touch the blanket on my bed—the bed isn’t even made. I touch my guitar. “I never played for you,” I say.

“Played?” He’s leaning against the wall. “Oh, yeah, you had a guitar. Actually, one time, I did hear you up here, playing. I was eavesdropping. I liked it. Don’t you play anymore?”

“It reminded me of being here,” I say, picking up the guitar. I fret a chord, and strum.

“Geez,” he says.

“Yeah, it’s out of tune,” I say, and start winding a string. Of course, it breaks. “Okay, never mind that. No guitar.”

“Someday,” he says.

“Someday,” I agree. I go to him, press into him.

He kisses me.

I wrap my arms around his waist.

“So, if we’re just wicked together, Rhiannon, does that mean...?” He brushes my hair away from my face. “I guess when I kicked you out that time, you were annoyed with me because I wouldn’t commit, right?”

“If you want someone like that girl you work with, I get it,” I say, even though I don’t.

“No, I want you,” he says. “It’s just, you know, wrong to want you.”

“Let’s be wrong, then,” I say.

He chuckles against my temple. He kisses my scar, gentle. “Hey, you have one of those ring things as your birth control, don’t you?”

“I kept forgetting to take the pills,” I say.

“And if I just take it out of you, like, uh, you could just put another one in before you even really got fertile again.”

I shove him. “You’re still trying to get me pregnant.”

“I’m trying to lock you down, Rhiannon.”

“You could ask me, for fuck’s sake. You could take me at my *word*.”

“I’m just saying, if I take it out—”

“I’m going to kill you, Easton Wicker. I don’t want to have a baby for like ten years.”

“Ten?” He sighs. “Yeah, okay, I’ll be, uh, thirty-seven? That’s good. We can wait that long. But you’ll marry me really fast, right, be my child bride?”

“I’m not a child,” I say witheringly.

“Could we sort of dress you up in little flowers and things, though, make you look really young and—”

“You need to work so hard on your proposal skills. Every time you bring up marriage, I swear to God, you come this close to having me squeeze off your *balls*.”

He laughs. “Okay, okay, okay.”

“Think of some other way to be wicked, all right?” I say.

“Like making you crawl around on all fours and beg to suck my cock?”

My whole pussy squeezes.

He kisses my cheekbone. “Good girl.”

“Well, just because—”

He stops me, fingers on my lips. He’s gone still, holding onto me.

And then I hear it, too.

Someone’s downstairs.

I sag into him.

We just listen, as whoever it is begins to ascend the stairs.

“Madison?” I whisper.

Her voice is ragged and used. “I couldn’t have gotten into the property without you, you know. You unlocked the gate and the door and the tunnel. I thought you wanted me to come.”

Yeah, maybe so.

She appears in the doorway. She looks older.

“How did they let you out?” I demand.

“I can be charming when I need to be,” she says. “Look at the two of you. You can’t help yourselves, can you? I know how that is, actually. I got the idea to keep a girl in a tower, and I couldn’t stop myself from wanting to see if I could do it. It was all I thought about. I just couldn’t help—”

“No,” I say. “No, it’s not the same.”

“Rhiannon,” he says, “you did say it was sin.”

“I said it was pleasure,” I say.

“This was the most fun I ever had, keeping you here,” she breathes.

“Why?” I say. “Why was it fun to hurt me?”

She just laughs.

I charge across the room and seize her by the neck. We go backwards into the hallway and then, somehow, we’re teetering over the spiral staircase.

She looks down and she manages a laugh. She claws at my hands. “You see,” she rasps. “You see just how it is, don’t you, Rhiannon? You are the child of my loins, after all, my own blood. You see.”

“I don’t see anything,” I say, shaking her.

“How does this feel, right now, my darling?” she whispers. “Don’t lie to me. I see it in your eyes. You’re having fun.”

“No,” I growl. “I’m not.” And then, I shove her. It’s over before I can think, and she’s tumbling down the spiral staircase—feet over head, and her neck makes this awful crack, and when she comes to rest, it’s like she’s a broken toy of a woman, all wrong-angles, all still, all—

“Rhiannon.”

“I killed her,” I say.

“She had an accident,” Easton counters.

“You didn’t even see. You’re blind.”

“So,” he says. “All right, then. You killed her.” He pulls me in and kisses me hard on the mouth.

I meld into him, clutching him close.

EASTON

THIRTY-EIGHT

RHIANNON DOESN'T WANT to call the police, but I tell her we have to.

She owns this property, and there's an avalanche of evidence in gas receipts and texts and all sorts of things attesting that we were coming here.

If we run, we will look guilty.

I tell her to let me do the talking.

We tell the police we found Madison there when we came into the tower, and they don't seem to ever question that we're lying.

When we go back to the city, I expect some static from Mitchell about whatever is going on with us. But I don't get it. He seems to have interpreted Rhiannon and me as inevitable.

Maybe I should have done so as well.

It's hard to explain, I suppose, how certain I am that a woman like her would never choose me of her own free will. I suppose it's even harder to explain, because my behavior says the opposite. It says that I'm sure of her, that I'm convinced I deserve her, and that I won't give any weight to her protests to the contrary.

It's a pretty little illusion I've concocted, one that I can even believe myself sometimes.

But it's only an illusion.

Deep down, I question my worth on every level.

Maybe everyone does?

I thought that being on my own, jettisoning Baum Wicker's money, making my own way would give me confidence. And to some degree, it has.

But there is some wound inside me, something made so long ago, when I was still so barely formed as a being, that I don't think it ever heals.

So, that's why.

Why I didn't pursue her for so long after she left.

Why I—no less than three times—threw away her birth control pills over the ensuing years. The last time is just only a few months ago, in fact. It's like a siren song I can't resist. I can't stop doing it, even though we're married, even though she's mine, even though I can't have any reason to doubt her. Because I just want something bigger than us to bind us together, I suppose.

She, luckily, thinks it's mostly funny. She also has backup birth control stashed all over the house.

We get married only four months after Madison's death, in a small ceremony with only a few close friends. Mitchell and Audra are there, so is Uncle Marcus, and also some of my work friends and her friends from school.

We honeymoon over the summer, and I use all the leave I've accumulated at my job, and we fund it with the sale of Briarfeld, because she decides to sell it, just like that, and it's gone.

From what I understand, they are tearing the whole thing down and turning it into eighteen thousand teensy plots of land with identical houses on them. I exaggerate, of course. She and I got into an argument about selling to a developer, and I said that suburban sprawl was killing nature and she said that we needed money for our honeymoon and...

Anyway, we go on the honeymoon, and we come home.

She starts working as a teacher—because it's obviously what one does with an extensive knowledge of Charles Dickens and a deeply empathetic history of trauma. She wants to help kids. She's good at it.

We settle into a life together.

It's a good life. From the outside, it might look boring, but it's not.

This might be because we're a little off in some way, both of us. We like to play games, and the tossing out of her birth control is only one of them. Once, I lock her away in a bathroom in our house for an entire weekend, for instance. She doesn't try to get away, not at all, and we just have sex on every surface in the bathroom and order in all our food...

And it's not just me. She does things, too.

She's fond of games of hide and seek, disappearing for a weekend and I have to find her. I think she knows this triggers my fear of abandonment. I think she knows it is both the most agonizing and the most exciting thing that ever happens to me.

I think... we are wicked, she and I.

I think we are broken, too.

I think we're made for each other.

I get her pregnant when she's twenty-eight and I'm thirty-two, and it's earlier than she wanted, but just the right time, in the end, I think.

It's twins.

She gets huge, and I love it. I wish I could see it, but I can only explore the topography of her rounded belly with fingers and lips while she ruffles her fingers through my hair.

In those moments, all of us together, her, me, and our babies...

In those moments, I feel entirely whole.

* * *

Thanks so much for reading!

I'm one of those people who gets stuck on strange bits of accuracy. If I'm retelling Rapunzel, I want to preserve the details, and things like the fact that the Grimm brothers

**tale includes pregnancy with twins and a blinded hero
seemed important to me.**

**Unfortunately, I'm also an author who feels a slavish kind
of devotion to an accuracy of character, and it became
clear that it would be out-of-character for Rhiannon to
want to get pregnant. I kept trying. I was like, "Rhiannon,
you are supposed to be pregnant with twins. This is how
the story goes." She resisted until the very end.**

**So, anyway, I'm certain I got the details right. As for the
big picture? Did they live happily ever after? Yes, I think
they did.**

**This is my first C. J. Verge book, but it's not my first book.
I write under a variety of pen names. My steamiest is my
very out-there scifi and monster romance name, Jove
Chambers.**

If you're curious about centaur sex, try [Hoofbeats](#).

Or, try my recommender page, [here](#).

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