

# RUINED

A still life composition featuring a human skull, various flowers (white, pink, purple), a black snake, and several butterflies on a dark green background with gold leaf confetti.

E. BISHOP

# **Ruined**

**A Dark Reverse Harem College Bully Romance**

E. Bishop

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Book Cover by Melissa at [To.All.The.Books.I.Love](https://www.to.all.the.books.i.love.com)

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# Content Note

Ruined is a VERY DARK college bully romance (meaning that our main character falls in love with her bullies). The love interests in this story aren't morally gray, they're morally black. They do awful things to the main character that we'd all find horrifying in real life. If that's not your vibe, this book isn't for you.

I recommend reading through this content list to make sure there's nothing that could trigger you or cause harm to your mental health. If you find something you're unsure of, Google is your friend.

Dubious consent and non-consensual sex between the main characters, somnophilia, marking, slapping, bondage, knife play, use of gags, face fucking, sexual asphyxiation, drugging the main character (roofie), CNC, erotic humiliation/degradation, sadomasochism, boot kissing, biting, use of sex toys, and spitting.

Bullying, panic attacks, abuse of power/authority, rape (fade to black), domestic violence, suicidal thoughts, attempted suicide, death of a parent (backstory), financial abuse between parental figure and adult child, sexual blackmail, child abuse (physical and emotional, backstory), a spider, and grotesque murder.

This book is also not a guide to kink or BDSM. There are, in fact, many kinky things that are not done safely in these pages. Do your proper research before trying any of this. Remember, in real life, always put safety and consent first!



# Playlist

Holy Smokes – Bohnes

Toxic – Omido, Rick Jansen

Snake – NEVR KNØW, BLVKES, Kaphy

DARKSIDE – Neoni

Talking Body (The Young Professionals Remix) – Tove Lo

silly putty – phem

Wish I Could Forget – SLANDER, blackbear, Bring Me The  
Horizon

F\*CK YOU, GOODBYE – The Kid LAROI, Machine Gun  
Kelly

i hope ur miserable until ur dead – Nessa Barrett

Someone Like You – Adele

ALWAYS BEEN YOU – Chris Grey

Slayer – Bryce Savage

Him & I – Halsey, G-Eazy

**[Listen to Ruined's playlist on Spotify.](#)**

*To all the ones who just want to get dicked down by three  
masked men.*

# Chapter One

## Athelia

### *Freshman year*

Empty and bright. Those are the first thoughts that pop into my head as I step into my dorm at Pemberton University for the very first time.

Whoever my roommate is, they aren't here yet, and the room itself... yeah, way too bright.

Overall, the place is much nicer than I expected. I suppose that's what I get for scrolling through dorm decor ideas on Pinterest for hours on end. Most of the rooms were tiny, which is probably normal for the average college.

Pemberton University, however, is far from normal. The student population may be small, but that's because they only accept the best of the best—and the richest of the richest.

So of course it makes sense that the dorms are nicer than average. Honestly, I should've expected it. My parents probably could've clued me in considering they both graduated from here, but I didn't ask them many questions.

I could tell they wanted to prepare me as much as possible, but I didn't let them. They've been doing everything short of

keeping me rolled up in bubble wrap for my entire life. I love them for it, but I need to do some things myself.

You know, like make the four-hour drive to Pemberton on my own and move into my third-floor dorm without any help. Maybe not my best plan.

During the early parts of my drive, the homesickness settled in fast. I distracted myself with my pop punk playlist, but now, that lonely, hollow feeling is coming back.

I whirl around and make my way downstairs. Distraction—that’s what I need. And to prove to myself that I can do this.

The halls are crowded with students and parents helping their kids move in. I seem to be one of the only people here without family.

*That’s okay. Everyone takes their own path.*

At my car, I grab a box with the word “dresses” written on top. My mom insisted I label everything. The packing process was the last thing I let her and Dad be involved in, and she definitely fussed more than she needed to. It was endearing, but it only proved how right I am.

Space—lots and lots of space. That’s what I need. I can do this by myself.

Those are the last words that go through my head before I slam straight into someone, box and all. I stumble backward, right into someone else—a very tall, warm, and hard someone else.

“Sorry,” I blurt as my box crashes to the ground. I don’t, half because of my excellent balancing skills and half because of the large hands grasping my hips.

“You looked a little lost in your thoughts, there.” The first guy I ran into shoots me an amused grin as he scoops my box into his arms. “You good?”

“I...” My throat instantly goes dry as I meet his dark brown eyes. There’s something hidden behind their charming sparkle that I can’t quite put a finger on.

He raises an eyebrow. His dark hair is messy, like he runs his fingers through it a lot or something. Paired with the rest of his look, I'm sure every girl walking past is staring.

He's tall and lean, and the sleeves of his black T-shirt are cut off to showcase his muscular arms. A couple tattoos spread across his pale skin, and it makes me want to reach out and touch him.

"I'm great," I manage after a second, tucking some of my dark green hair behind my ear. I squirm out of the hold of the guy behind me and turn to look at him.

He grins, his hands falling from my waist. "That's good. Can't have you sad on the first day of the rest of your life."

I try to hide my grimace. It's exactly what I've been telling myself all day, but god. It's such a cheesy thing to say.

"Yeah." He runs a hand through his dirty blond hair, and his light cheeks turn pink with a bashful smile. "I really went for the most cliché thing I possibly could've said, huh?"

"Not the worst I've heard today," I lie.

The blond one sticks out his hand, and we shake. "I'm Calidore, although just about everyone calls me Cal." He nods to the dark-haired one. "That's Wesley. And Kellan..." He looks around before frowning. "Who knows where he fucked off to?"

"I'm Athelia. Are you guys moving into this building, too?"

"Nah, we're commuting," Cal says. "We all grew up in the area. Take it you're not from around here?"

"Nope." I reach for the box Wesley is holding, but he dodges.

"We can help you. Got nothing better to do. Cal, grab another box from her car."

My first instinct is to protest, but I stop myself just as the words are about to spill from my mouth.

Heading to a different state and leaving my parents behind is exactly what I need, but of course I feel a little unsteady. I'm

used to having a safety net—and two pairs of helping hands whenever I ask for them.

Maybe this is the universe reminding me that I've got this. Things may be different now, but I'm not truly on my own.

"Thanks," I say.

Cal and I both grab more of my stuff, and I lead the way up to my dorm. They help me until my car is empty and my dorm looks slightly less intimidating.

I'm still worried about who my roommate is. I was told she was a last-minute admission, and I'm hoping that's not a reflection of who she is as a person. I'd prefer to not have to live with someone who's irresponsible.

"Do you want help unpacking?" Wesley asks me. I've caught him staring at me multiple times over the past half hour.

"I don't think so," I say. "It's gonna take me a while to figure out how I'm gonna organize everything, and I need to coordinate some of that with my roommate."

Disappointment flickers across Wesley's face before he shrugs. "Cool. Well, Kellan is hosting a party at his parents' house tonight. They're traveling for the month. If you wanna come, I can give you the address."

"That could be fun," I say, my mind reeling.

Could I make that work? I'm no stranger to parties, but I *am* a stranger to these two—and everyone else here. What if I go and end up hating it?

At my hesitation, Cal smiles. "Nothing too wild. Mostly just a bonfire. Oh, and swimming. Their pool is the best around, so bring your suit."

Wes practically shoves his phone into my hand. "Go ahead and add your number so I can send you the address. Come or don't come—no hard feelings either way. Oh, and your roommate can come, whenever she shows up."

"Um—thanks." I type my name and number quickly before handing it back to him. "When?"

“Any time after seven.” Wes follows Cal to the door, but he stops and turns. “And feel free to text us if your roommate needs help moving in. We’re happy to help.”

“Thanks. I will.”

I close the door behind them before turning to face my room. Once I have some of my decorations and stuff up, it’ll feel more like home.

*Home.* An ache expands in my chest. Before I even realize I’ve done it, my phone is in my hands, and I’m typing a quick message to my parents.

*Athelia: Here and moved in. Drive was a breeze!*

It was the opposite of a breeze—summer construction and traffic were a hellish nightmare. I’m not sure how I managed to keep the impending panic attacks at bay.

Just thinking about it has my breaths quickening. Both my parents see and reply to my message immediately, telling me how proud and excited they are for me. It serves as a tiny distraction, but it also makes me wish I was still at home. Even if it’s suffocating, at least it’s safe.

Another message pops up. It’s an address and a reminder to bring my swimsuit. I add the number to my contacts and send a quick, non-committal reply. It’s not until I’ve tucked my phone into the back pocket of my shorts that I realize I’m smiling.

*Really, Athelia? First two guys you meet on campus, and you’ve already got a crush?*

With a sigh, I move to the window and look out. Families move in packs as they carry things from their cars to the building. My gaze snags on Wesley and Cal as they head down the sidewalk. They’re joking with each other and laughing while they dodge everyone around them.

It strikes me as odd. They were so insistent with helping me, but they’re ignoring everyone who’s passing by with their arms full of stuff.



That smile returns, and a warm feeling replaces the ache in my chest. I'm not stupid enough to think it really means anything, but it makes me feel special.

*See? I tell myself. It really was the universe looking out for you. You're gonna be fine.*

...

I end up going to the party, and it turns out to be a blast. There aren't a ton of people there, and from talking to some of them, I get the impression that the guys didn't hand out a lot of invites.

By the time things are winding down, I've barely even talked to Wesley or Cal. Every time one of them would try to make their way toward me, someone else would rope them into a conversation or game.

Even though I have on a bikini underneath my sundress, I haven't gone swimming yet. The water was too choppy with everyone in it, and while I can swim, I'm not great at it. Especially since it got dark fast—not being able to see the bottom of the pool freaks me out.

By the time most people have left, I realize I probably should, too. It's been fun, and while I was hoping to get to know Wesley and Cal more—and maybe Kellan, too—I don't want to be annoying.

Besides, by now, my roommate has probably shown up. I should get back to the dorm to say hi and maybe help her settle in.

“Hey—Athelia! Wait!”

I'm halfway across the front lawn when I hear Cal calling to me. I turn to see his dark figure jogging toward me.

He slows to a stop in front of me, not even out of breath. “Hey. Don't leave yet. None of us got to enjoy any pool time, and it looks like the same is true for you. Come join us.”

“Oh—um, who exactly is *us*?”

“Just me, Wes, and Kellan.” Cal grabs my arm and tugs, not even giving me a chance to say no. “It'll be a good time.

Kellan is excited to meet you.”

He leads me around the back of the house again. It’s empty now except for two shadowed figures who’re standing near the pool. One I vaguely recognize as Wesley’s silhouette, so I’m sure the other is Kellan.

“Got her,” Cal calls to the guys. “Now let’s get in the pool.”

The way he says *got her* sends a shiver up my spine. It’s silly to feel special, I know. But now that I’m thinking about it, the guys practically ignored every girl who came up to them or tried to talk to them. They barely even looked, even though some of them looked mouth-wateringly good in their swimsuits.

“Fuck, Cal,” a deep voice—Kellan, I’m assuming—says. “You didn’t tell me she was fucking gorgeous.”

My cheeks heat, and I’m grateful for the semi-darkness that hides it. The only light out here is from the lights on inside and the glowsticks scattered around the pool.

“You think we’d pick someone who wasn’t?” Wesley asks.

“Pick?” I say. “What do you mean?”

“What do you think we mean?” Kellan asks. He steps closer, hands in the pockets of his swim trunks. “You’re the only one we asked to stay. I think it’s pretty obvious.”

All of a sudden, Cal’s body is pressing into me from behind. His hands settle on my waist, and his lips skirt across my hairline. “We’re pretty picky—Kellan especially. But you check all our boxes, baby.”

My entire body goes stiff. Of course I’m attracted to Wesley and Cal. They’re hotter than hell itself. As for Kellan, I haven’t seen him in the light, but I can only imagine he’s as gorgeous as the other two.

Still, I didn’t think they invited me to their party for sex. Maybe I should’ve—they’re teenage boys, after all. And a part of me hoped this would happen, but I didn’t expect it to happen so quickly—or with all three of them.

“I…”

Kellan chuckles. “Scared?”

“I didn’t think... I mean, I thought... just not...”

“Hey.” Cal squeezes my waist. “You don’t have to do anything you’re uncomfortable with.”

Kellan clicks his tongue. “You’re always spoiling my fun.”

“You have plenty of fun,” Cal shoots back. “Let’s just get in the pool and see where the night takes us.”

Kellan steps back, and all of a sudden, I can breathe ten times easier. It’s not like I’m a virgin or something, but I wasn’t expecting to start freshman year like this. I’m not sure I *want* to. Pemberton University is small, and I don’t want a reputation of being easy from day one.

“Yeah. Let’s just swim.” I pull my dress over my head and slip out of my sandals. All their eyes are on me—I can feel it—and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like the attention. “How deep is the water?”

“Four feet in the shallow end, ten in the deep end. It slopes downward.”

“And which side is the shallow—” I let out a screech as someone shoves me into the water. Panic fills me as the cold water envelops me.

I hear someone shout, and then the sound of someone jumping in after me. Just as I break the surface, an arm wraps around my waist and pulls me to the side of the pool.

“What the hell, Kellan?” Cal snaps. He guides my hands to the edge of the pool so I can hold myself up. “You didn’t even know if she could swim.”

“I can,” I say. “For the most part.”

“Fucking Christ,” Wesley mutters. I’m just able to make out him shoving Kellan into the water. “Sorry about him. He’s an ass sometimes.”

“It’s okay.” I lean into Cal. The water is freezing, but he’s so warm. “I’m sure I’ll get used to—”

I scream as something grabs my leg and yanks me under the water. It's only for a second before Cal hauls me back up again. This time, I grab onto him and throw an arm around his neck.

"I've got you," Cal says reassuringly. "If he does that again, he's a dead man."

When Kellan surfaces, he's laughing. "I could hear your scream underwater. Damn, girl. You probably woke the neighbors."

"What the hell?" I splash at him, but it only makes him laugh harder. "You scared the shit out of me!"

"That's the point." He swims closer and grabs onto my wrist when I try to splash him again. His grip is strong, but he's careful not to hurt me.

Wesley sighs before lowering himself into the water. "Ignore him. He likes scaring girls. Gets him off."

I glance at Kellan. "That's true?"

He moves closer, and the light from the house hits his face, revealing a wicked grin and short brown hair. "You looked so pretty when you were staring at the water, trying to figure out where you'd be safest. God, I could practically feel how scared you were. I wanted to hear you scream." Kellan is so close now that we're touching. His lips brush against my ear, and he whispers, "It made me hard."

"Bro, you're gonna scare her *too* much," Cal says. He shoves Kellan away. "She's already shaking."

"That's when things are just starting to get good."

"Motherfucker," Cal growls. He shoves me into Wesley before diving into the water after Kellan.

I grab onto the first solid thing I can find, which happens to be Wesley. He's holding onto the wall with one hand, and he loops his free arm around me, tugging me closer.

"You good?" he asks.

"Maybe I—maybe I should go."

“No.” Wesley’s grip on me tightens. “I mean, please don’t. Cal will get Kellan to knock it off.”

“I don’t—it’s just... It’s really dark.” My voice falters on the last word, and I realize my breaths are already coming in short and quick.

*Shit.* I’ve managed to avoid having a panic attack all day. Am I really going to have one now?

“Whoa—hey.” Wesley lifts me out of the water with almost no effort. Then he climbs out next to me. “He’s an ass, but Kellan wouldn’t actually hurt you.”

I try to pull in a full breath. “The water is just dark, that’s all. I’m not the best swimmer, and getting pulled under, it was just scary, and—”

“Hey. Hey, it’s okay.” Wesley strokes a hand down my back. “You don’t have to explain yourself. Just focus on breathing.”

As Kellan and Cal splash around in the pool, I try to calm down. I don’t think either of them realize that we’ve gotten out yet.

The pool was freezing, and now that I’m soaked, the night air is only serving to chill me to the bone. I can’t stop shivering as I try to focus on the warmth of Wesley’s touch.

“How does the hot tub sound?” he asks. “It’s better lit, it’s not nearly as deep, and it’ll get you warm.”

“S-sure.”

Wesley pulls me to my feet and leads me onto a slightly raised patio. While he gets the hot tub ready to go, I watch Cal chase Kellan in the pool. They’re hurling insults at each other while Cal repeatedly dives into the water. Kellan manages to out-swim him every time.

“Hey.” Wesley tugs gently on my hand. He climbs into the hot tub and then helps me into it.

The water is so hot it stings, but my body adjusts quickly. I’m about to sit down when Wesley pulls me directly into his lap.

“Better?” he asks.

I nod. My heart rate has slowed, and the tears that were threatening to flood my eyes are gone. Another panic attack avoided. “Thanks.”

“Yeah.” He cups my face gently. With me on his lap, we’re basically at eye-level, and he peers at me with furrowed brows. “I’m sorry he scared you so badly. Normally he’s better behaved. I think he just likes you.”

“He has an odd way of showing it.”

My gaze gravitates toward the pool. Kellan and Cal have finally realized that we’ve moved and are making their way toward us. Kellan catches my gaze, and instead of fear, a spark of excitement lights inside me.

I may have been longing for the safety of home mere hours ago, but I also want something new. Safety only gets you so far, and as Wesley pointed out, Kellan wouldn’t cause me any harm. All he did was pull me underwater for a few seconds.

Yes, it scared the shit out of me, but there was also a thrill that went along with it. It’s like your stomach dropping on a roller coaster.

*You’re being reckless*, the reasonable side of my brain says—the side my parents trained so well to always be in the lead.

But the rest of me is tired of always choosing the safe option. I can’t start college the same way I’ve lived the rest of my life. *Something* has to change. I need to prove to myself that I can get past some of my fears so I can actually enjoy my life.

Cal and Kellan both get in the hot tub. Cal sits on the bench across from us while Kellan stands in the middle of the tub.

Now that I can see him better, butterflies erupt in my stomach. He’s the tallest of the three with brown hair, bright blue eyes, and a slim build.

How on *earth* did I end up in a hot tub with three of the hottest guys on campus?

“Apologize,” Cal growls as he glares at Kellan.

Kellan takes my chin in between two of his fingers and smiles down at me. It's not a kind smile—it's sadistic and delighted. "Never."

"Kellan Ambrose, you apologize right now, or I'll—"

"It's okay," I say, grateful for the strength that comes across in my voice. "He didn't hurt me."

Kellan's eyes flash with surprise before his smile widens. "You liked it, didn't you? I fucking knew it."

"I wouldn't go that far," I tell him. My fingers trail up his body until my hand is wrapped around the back of his neck. "But it was definitely... interesting."

*Don't do it. Don't you fucking do it, Athelia.*

*Oh, shut up. Live a little.*

"I'll take it," Kellan says, his gaze zeroing in on my lips.

I'm not sure who closes the space between us, which makes me think it's probably both of us together. But one second, we're staring at each other, and the next, his mouth is on mine. Within seconds, my tongue is in his mouth, and then his in mine.

Kellan pins me against Wesley's body. Someone groans, and it takes me a second to realize it's Cal.

I'm not sure why they picked me, but in this moment, I don't particularly care. I've never done something this hot before, nor have I ever felt this desired in my life.

There's three of them. *Three*. I know I'm pretty, but I've never had three guys come onto me at once. It's nerve-racking and overwhelming, but at the same time, I can't get enough.

*Fuck my reputation*, I decide as Kellan's hand tightens in my hair. *It's time to stop playing it safe.*

Kellan sweeps his tongue over mine as Wesley's hands travel up my body. They stop just below my breasts, so I grab his wrists and pull them up higher. His hands slide under my

bikini top, and I gasp into Kellan's mouth as Wesley's fingers slide over my nipples.

"Fuck," Wesley groans. I can feel his erection against my ass, and he grinds into me as he gently pinches my nipples.

Kellan wraps a hand around my throat before pulling away. His eyes track every movement of my body before he tightens his grip. It's not enough to cut off my ability to breathe. I think it's more a reminder that he can.

"So tiny," he murmurs before nipping at my bottom lip. His eyes light up at my whimper of pain. "So *breakable*."

"Kellan," I groan.

I've always wanted something like this—probably because I got into reading kinky erotica at way too young of an age. But I *want* someone to break me. To have all the power, to force me to bend to their will.

Should I do that tonight, with three boys I barely even know? Absolutely not. But I don't know if I can stop myself. I definitely don't *want* to stop.

Cal stands and moves closer. Without releasing my throat, Kellan moves back just enough that Cal can frame my face with his hands and kiss me. The way he moves his lips against mine is in direct contrast with how Kellan did. Cal kisses me sweetly, almost hesitantly, until I run my fingers through his dirty blond hair and hold him to me.

With a groan, Cal deepens the kiss. Wesley keeps rolling my nipples between his fingers, and something deep inside me tightens. I've read about women coming from nipple play alone, but I've never been able to do it to myself.

I suck on Cal's tongue as he sinks an arm into the water. Within seconds, his hand is cupping my pussy. I grind against his fingers, wishing the fabric between us would disappear.

"It's my turn," Wesley says roughly. He pinches my nipples hard enough that it hurts, making me cry out.

"Again," I moan, unsure of why I do.



“Fuck,” Wesley mutters. He pinches them even harder this time.

I squirm, unsure of what to do with the rush of pleasure that mingles with the pain.

“Turn around and face him,” Kellan commands. When I don’t react quickly enough, he picks me up and flips me around so I’m straddling Wesley. Next, he rips my top over my head, and my nipples get harder when exposed to the cool night air.

I miss Cal’s hand against me, but it’s immediately replaced by Wesley’s long, hard cock. Our swimsuits are still in between us, but I can still feel just how much he wants me.

“Jesus,” Wesley moans. He grabs onto my hips, forcing me to rub myself against his dick. “Keep going just like that.”

There’s absolutely no reason I wouldn’t. I grab onto his shoulders, watching him watch me with a lustful, hooded stare. His eyes move down my body to focus on my breasts. Water is beaded over the skin, and with a grunt, he moves his hands from my hips.

First, he squeezes my breasts gently. Then he does it again harder, and a sick grin twists his face as I gasp in pain.

It should probably be a red flag that he seems to like hurting me, but for some reason, I want it. I’ve never realized that before—I always shy away from pain. But right now, I want him to go harder.

Leaning down, Wesley flicks one of my nipples with his tongue. I roll my hips into him desperately, wishing he was inside me—wishing they were *all* inside me.

As Wesley licks and sucks at my nipples, Kellan wraps his hand around my throat from behind. Cal is seated again, leaning back and watching. Seeing him like this, with his gaze locked on my body, sends a new wave of arousal over me.

And then Wesley bites down on one of my nipples.

“Wesley,” I gasp.

“It’s Wes,” he says against my skin. He squeezes my breasts before going back to sucking on my nipples.

Kellan yanks my head back so I’m gazing upward at the star-filled sky. He leans over me and licks his way down the side of my face before kissing me. If you could call it a kiss, that is. He slides his tongue as far into my mouth as he can, holding my jaw open with a strong grip. It’s an act of dominance—one that I’ve craved for years.

When Kellan pulls away, he spits into my open mouth. I let out a shocked sound as he stares down at me, smiling.

“Swallow it.”

I do—don’t even think about it.

*Is this real life? No girl gets this lucky.*

“Please,” I gasp, unsure of what I’m even asking for.

Kellan smirks before glancing at Cal. “I like it when she begs.”

Cal stands and moves closer. “Tell us what you want, Athelia.”

“I—*ohhh*, god.”

Wes’s hands are back on my hips, guiding me as I grind into him. He presses me into his dick, which feels harder than before.

“You gonna come just like this?” Kellan says. “It doesn’t take much for you, huh?”

“Just look at her,” Wes says. He reaches in between us and shoves my bikini bottoms to the side so now there’s only one piece of fabric in between us. “Grinding on the first dick she has access to. Is this how you imagined today going, Athelia? Hmm? Was this your plan?”

Their words are taunting and cruel. It should turn me off, but I only want more.

“I think it was,” Cal says. “I think she’s the type of slut who’s so desperate for cock, she doesn’t even care who she’s fucking.”

*Oh my god.*

The whimper that leaves my lips is breathless and weak.

“Fuck, she’s gonna come.”

All of a sudden, Wes is shoving his swim trunks down just enough to pull his cock free. Everything they said to me has only made me more wet, and the water hasn’t had a chance to wash it away yet. Wes yanks my bikini to the side and slams into me with little resistance, and it’s just what I need to shove me over the edge.

Kellan covers my mouth with his just as I cry out. Someone’s hands are on my breasts, squeezing and tweaking my nipples as Wes thrusts into me. My mind goes blank, but Wes’s breathless groan pulls me back to reality.

“That’s it,” Kellan says as he releases my head so I can straighten. “Fill her up.”

I whimper again as Wes catches my gaze. As he comes, his thrusts slow. His grip on my hips is so hard that I’m pretty sure I’ll have bruises tomorrow. Even if I wanted to, there’s no way I could escape this—and it’s exactly what I want.

“Wes,” I whisper.

“You’re ours now, Athelia,” he says, his low tone making me shiver. “*Ours.*”

# Chapter Two

## Athelia

*Two weeks later*

*I can't do this anymore.*

That's the only thought in my head as I walk toward class. My skin can't stop crawling, and I've shed so many tears that I could've filled a pool by this point.

I was so naive, thinking I could do all this on my own. I can't—not by a long shot. But now, I don't know how to get out of the corner I've somehow been backed into.

*Why did he have to single me out? It could've been any girl in his class.*

My throat and jaw are still sore from what he forced me to do yesterday. When I woke up, I thought maybe I was coming down with something, but then I remembered. The shower I took after was so hot my skin was bright red when I finished.

*Maybe I should go home.*

But deep down, I know it's not an option. Not a good one, anyway. I have dreams—a future I've been working toward since I was a kid. There's no way I can let that slip through my fingers because of this.

I tighten my grip on the strap of my bag. Two weeks ago, the world looked so shiny and bright. Now, I just want to crawl into my bed, fall asleep, and never wake up.

My roommate—Haven—is beginning to get concerned. It doesn't help that she'd never heard the phrase "mental health" before I told her I was having a bad day.

It's not Haven's fault that she grew up sheltered, but she has a lot of questions, and I don't know how to explain everything to her without telling her what actually happened. I can't do that—it'd only blow everything up. If that happened, I'd be the one with a ruined life, not *him*.

So I'm stuck until I can find a way out of this.

As I walk to my class, I keep my gaze downward. My eyes are bloodshot from crying too much, and I don't want anyone to ask questions. At this point, a well-meaning, "Hey, is everything okay?" is going to tip me over the edge again.

I'm just walking past the fountain in the center of campus when I run straight into Wes. His arms are crossed, and he has Cal and Kellan standing on either side of him.

Relief fills me at the sight of them. There's no way I can tell them what happened, but we've gotten closer over the past two weeks. They've become a safe haven for me since getting here. I can be myself around them, and I can let go in ways I've never been able to before.

It's the exact type of freedom I was hoping to find.

"Hey." I wrap my arms around Wes's waist, letting the scent of pine and leather wash over me. It's become one of my favorite things over the past couple weeks.

Wes shoves me off him. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

I stumble backward but catch myself before I fall. "Um, giving you a hug?"

Kellan scoffs. "Typical. I told you, Wes. Just another manipulative bitch."

"W-what?" I ask. "Why would you say that?"

“Don’t play stupid with us,” Wes snaps. His gaze is razor-sharp, but underneath the anger, there’s hurt.

Problem is, I don’t know why.

“I’m not,” I say slowly, “but I’ve got no clue why you’re upset.”

“Really?” Wes drawls. “I don’t like being used, Harper. You played us real good for a couple weeks, but that ends now.”

*The fuck?*

I glance between the three of them, but the same stone-cold look is on all of their faces. Finally, I say, “I didn’t use you. I don’t know—”

“Save it for someone who cares.” Wes pushes past me, knocking his shoulder with mine.

I grab his arm. “Wait! Wes, I don’t—”

“I don’t want to hear another word from that lying mouth of yours. And it’s Wesley to you.” He yanks his arm free and walks off.

Cal and Kellan brush past me, but then Kellan stops and turns back to me. The venom in his voice causes goosebumps to cover my skin.

“No one hurts him and gets away with it. *No one.*” He places a hand on the center of my chest and shoves backward.

It’s then that I realize I’m too close to the fountain. Kellan pushes me hard enough that I fall over the edge and into the water. It’s freezing, and I’m instantly soaked.

When I look up, Kellan is watching me with that twisted grin of his. Except this time, the care for me that’s usually in his blue eyes is gone. All that’s left is cruel pleasure.

“Kellan,” Wes barks. “Let’s go.”

“Watch your back,” Kellan tells me. “You’ll pay for this.”

I don’t move, not until he and the boys are out of sight. A few people ask me if I’m okay, but I ignore them. My whole world feels like it’s collapsing, and all I can do is watch.

First *him*.

Now them.

Maybe I was wrong in thinking that Wes and Cal offering to help me move in was a sign that the universe was watching out from me. Maybe I should've trusted my gut and told them no. Because this—the lump in my throat, the ache in my chest, and the sting in my eyes—isn't how you're supposed to feel two weeks into college.

I'm almost back to where I started. Other than Haven, I'm completely alone, and this time, I'm not stupid enough to think the universe has my back.

With a shuddering breath, I pull myself together and slowly stand.

I don't know what made the boys hate me all of a sudden. At this point, I'm not sure if I care. They don't deserve my friendship if they're going to call me a manipulative, lying bitch and then push me into a fucking fountain.

"You'll be fine," I mutter to myself as the last people who were watching me disperse. "You can make new friends, and you still have Haven."

I do my best to wring the water out of my clothes and bag before I make my way back to my dorm. For the first time, I think I fully understand why my parents have always been so protective of me. The real world sucks.

But I'm stronger than they ever gave me credit for—stronger than I know. And no one—be it teenage boy or a grown-ass man—is going to make me give up when I've barely had a chance to start my new life.

# Chapter Three

## Kellan

*Sophomore year*

“There she is.”

Cal and I both follow Wes’s gaze to the library entrance. Athelia is just now leaving, even though it’s a quarter past eleven.

We stay hidden in the shadows as she walks past us. She has earbuds in, her brown hair tucked behind her ears. Her head is ducked down like she’s doing her best to become invisible.

Silly, silly girl. She can never hide from us.

Once she’s past the main buildings and on her way back to her dorm, we start to follow. It’s not until we’re sure no one is around that we make our move.

“Hey, Athelia!” I call. The three of us jog to catch up with her.

She must be listening to her music loudly because she doesn’t hear us. I grab her arm, and Cal claps a hand over her mouth just as she screams. When she sees it’s us, she rolls her eyes. She knows we won’t hurt her—at least not too much.



“Please just leave me alone,” she groans when Cal removes his hand.

“I heard you got a C minus on your paper for Johnson’s class,” I say. “What happened there? I thought you loved writing.”

Athelia narrows her eyes. “No one knows about that.”

“Huh. Well, I guess someone let it slip.”

Realization strikes her, and she scoffs. “It was you three, wasn’t it? Of course it was.”

We laughs. “You think it was anyone other than us? No one gives enough of a shit about you to pay you that much attention.”

Her face hardens, and her hands clench into fists. “Don’t fuck with my grades again.”

“We’ll do whatever we want to you,” Wes says as he circles around her. “Whenever we want to.”

Athelia shoves me, but I barely even budge. “You’re going to ruin my career, guys. My *life*. Knock it off already.”

“Awww, you’ll be fine. I’m sure you can figure out a way to make up for it.” I close in on Athelia, forcing her to back up into Wes. “A pretty girl like you, I’m sure all you have to do is ask nicely, and Johnson will give you a second chance.”

“That’s not how this works,” she seethes.

“Oh, but isn’t it? I hear Johnson is into younger women. Just offer to suck his dick in exchange for a better grade.”

Athelia pales, and I’m not sure because the lighting is shitty at night, but I think she’s actually turning *green*.

“Stop,” she whispers. “Don’t—don’t say things like that.”

“Hits a little too close to home?” Wes asks with mock pity. He shoves her into Cal.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Athelia snaps. She looks between the three of us before trying to break free of Cal’s

hold. When he doesn't let go, she beats her fists into his chest. "Stop it!"

I step closer, watching with delight as she tries to cower away. Her fear is just as palpable, just as beautiful as it was the first night I scared her.

"I hate you," she cries.

Wes snorts out a laugh. "Like that changes anything."

"Please don't touch my work again," she begs. "I don't know how you did it, or why, just please don't. I need to keep my grades up."

"We all do, Athelia," Cal says on a bored sigh. "You're not special."

"Then just leave me alone!"

Finally, Cal releases her and pushes her back toward Wes.

Athelia doesn't hesitate. Wes has his hands in his pockets and is watching her with a cruel smile and dead eyes. She slaps him hard across the face before darting out of my reach. She runs down the sidewalk, too terrified to even look back.

Pity.

I wouldn't have minded seeing the terror in her eyes one last time tonight.

# Chapter Four

## Cal

*Junior year*

“Are you sure this will work?” Kellan asks impatiently. “She should be here by now.”

“She’ll show,” Wes says.

Kellan crosses his arms and taps his fingers against his elbow. We’re all standing on the dock that juts out into a secluded pond. It’s just off campus near the forest—the perfect place to lure Athelia out to.

“It’s ten past midnight,” I say. “If she’s not here in five minutes, I say we throw her laptop into the pond and leave.”

Earlier today, we broke into Athelia’s dorm and stole her laptop. I found her in the cafeteria around dinner and told her to meet us here at midnight if she wants it back.

I didn’t think she’d be stupid enough to show up late.

After what she did to Wes, she deserves everything we have coming for her. Our pranks have been fairly mild so far.

The worst we’ve done was swapping out one of her papers last year with one that was obviously AI-generated. It had so many holes and grammatical errors that you couldn’t even

read it. She was able to convince Professor Johnson to let her try again.

Wonder if the manipulative bitch took our advice.

Stealing her laptop is a whole new level for us. I can't find it in me to feel bad for her, though. She hurt all of us, but using Wes the way she did? Fuck her.

Finally, Athelia emerges at the top of the hill. She's running down the path as fast as she can. She skids to a halt at the beginning of the dock, eyeing us warily.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she blurts breathlessly. "But I really don't have time for this. Please just give me my laptop."

"Don't have time?" Wes taunts. He stalks down the dock, grabs her arm, and drags her closer to me and Kellan. "We should be your only priority right now if you ever want to touch your laptop again."

"I have a test in the morning," Athelia says. "Please just stop all this bullshit. Whatever you think I did, I—"

"Shut up," Wes snaps. "I'm sick of you pretending that you're an innocent, sweet girl. You're the fucking opposite."

"Wesley, just listen to me. Whatever I did—"

"Enough." Kellan steps into her, forcing her back. "When he tells you to shut up, you shut your fucking trap."

Athelia withers under Kellan's glare. She glances at me, probably hoping for some type of protection. I've given it to her before, but those days are over.

"You want your laptop back?" I ask.

She nods, keeping her lips pressed together.

"Then get on your knees and beg for it."

The resentment that flashes in her eyes has me hiding a smile. She's always been headstrong, even if she's an anxious mess on the inside.

When she doesn't move, I hold her laptop out over the water. Her eyes widen, and she drops to her knees in front of

us.

*Fuck.* I've imagined this scenario countless times before, but tonight will have a much different ending than my fantasies.

"Why should we give it back to you?" Wes asks coldly.

"Because it's the right thing to do?" she tries.

Kellan laughs, and the sharp sound echoes off the trees.

"Because I need it," she says. She clasps her hands together. "I'm begging you, please give it back to me. All my assignments are on there, and I don't have them backed up."

We exchange glances before Wes shakes his head.

"Not good enough."

Athelia blows out an angry breath. "What do you want, then?"

"Kiss my boots."

"W-what?"

"Kiss. my. boots."

This time, I can't hide my smile, nor do I even want to. Seeing the horror on Athelia's face as she realizes that Wes isn't joking is the highlight of my fucking year.

"I... Wesley, that's..."

"Crawl to me," Wes says, "and then kiss my boots. Or you can kiss your laptop goodbye."

Even in the darkness, I can see her face turn beet red. But she fucking does it. Slowly at first, and with her head tipped downward in shame.

"Look at him," Kellan tells her. "Let him see how humiliated you are."

Athelia lifts her head high and glares at Wes as she finishes crawling toward us. When she's in front of him, she sits back on her heels.

"You look good on your knees," he says softly.

"I hate you."

“Careful,” I chide. I lift her laptop again, not even having to move it out over the pond for her eyes to blow wide.

“Don’t,” she blurts. “I’ll do it.”

“Then stop wasting time,” Wes snaps. “I thought you had a test in the morning you need to get sleep for.”

With a grimace, Athelia bends down. I watch as she presses the lightest kiss possible to the toe of his left boot, and then his right.

“Oh, you’ll have to do better than that, Harper,” Wes says with a dark chuckle. “I wanna see you use some tongue.”

“You can’t be serious,” she groans.

“Now, Athelia.”

Her eyes harden as she mentally braces herself. Wes hums with satisfaction as she leans down and kisses his left boot again. Except this time, she doesn’t make it quick. She does just as he asked and uses tongue, treating it more like a blow job than a kiss.

It’s disgusting, and I don’t think any of us were actually expecting her to do it. But now that she is... *fuck*.

Kellan uses his foot to nudge Athelia’s head to Wes’s other boot. “Now this one.” He keeps his shoe on top of her head, pressing her down and making sure she doesn’t skimp out.

When he finally lets Athelia pull back, there are tears in her eyes. She spits on the dock with a wince before wiping at her mouth.

“You three are disgusting.”

Wes shrugs. “You’re the one who did it with little to no protest.”

“Because you have my laptop,” she exclaims.

With a smirk, Wes glances in my direction. “Should we give it back to her now?”

“I dunno. What do you think, Kellan?”

Kellan crouches in front of Athelia. He traces a finger down the side of her face before hooking it under her chin. Her eyes are hard, her face set with anger as he forces her to look up at him.

“I don’t think she deserves it,” Kellan says.

Athelia’s expression turns desperate. “*Please*. I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Whatever?” Kellan asks. His finger trails down her body to in between her breasts. “I shouldn’t be surprised you’re willing to whore yourself out for this. It’s what you do, isn’t it? It’s who you are.”

“No,” she whispers, and her tears finally spill over. She shakes her head. “I don’t. That time with the three of you, it was the first time—”

Kellan’s laugh is sharp and cold. “Don’t pretend you were a virgin. It was obvious you weren’t.”

“That’s not what I mean,” she shouts desperately. “But that was my first time with a stranger. With more than one person.”

“Until a week later,” Wes mutters under his breath.

Athelia’s gaze snaps to his. “What?”

“Nothing.” Wes turns to me. “Let’s just get this over with. I’m done with her bullshit.”

Kellan sighs. His head is tilted, and as he watches Athelia, his expression softens for a second. We all hoped for more with her. A friendship—a *relationship*—not just sex. But then she went and fucked us over.

“Please,” Athelia whispers.

Kellan shakes his head remorsefully. By the time he’s stood and backed up so he’s beside Wes again, any care for her is gone from his face. “You made your choice.”

With that, I toss the laptop into the water.

“No,” Athelia shrieks. She’s on her feet in a split second, but it’s too late. “Cal, what the hell?” She does her best to shove me, but she’s not big enough to even make me sway.

I grab her by the throat and back her up to the edge of the dock. She gasps and grabs onto my arms. I'm not squeezing, but my grip is strong enough that she can't get out of it.

"Cal—Cal, stop!"

At this point, only her toes are still on the dock. I'm the only thing keeping her from falling backward into the water.

Wes steps up on my right side, and Kellan follows suit on my left. They both watch her as she squirms and begs me not to let her fall.

"You look so pretty when you're scared," Kellan tells her with a cruel smile.

"Let her fall," Wes says. "I want to hear her scream."

"No—no!" Athelia tightens her grip on me. "Cal, don't. You already ruined my laptop. You don't need to make this worse."

"Maybe I want to," I say with a playful shrug.

"Cal," she whispers. "Please just let me go."

Wes chuckles.

I smirk, and her eyes widen as she realizes her mistake. "You should be more careful with your word choice, baby."

Athelia shrieks as I let go of her. The dark water engulfs her as she falls in with a splash. I stand there for a second, watching the ripples on the surface.

*All you had to do was apologize, and I wouldn't have done any of this.*

"Come on," Kellan says. He and Wes are already halfway up the dock. "No need to stand here all night."

I wait until Athelia surfaces. She's not the best swimmer, and I want her to suffer, not die. So when she starts making her way back to the shore, I watch until she's close enough that she'll be fine.

"Cal," Wes snaps.

I give Athelia one last glance before the three of us jog off into the night.



# Chapter Five

## Wes

*Halloween senior year*

I twist my skull ring around my left index finger impatiently. *Where the hell is Kellan?* My plan—*our* plan—won't work without him, and he said he'd be here.

"Is everything ready?" I ask Cal as he walks past with a couple liquor bottles.

He grins, although his eyes flash with darkness, not amusement. "Looks like it. The house is gonna be packed."

"And she'll be here?"

"Kellan overheard her rather loudly saying she wouldn't come. *Too* loudly."

Satisfaction slithers through my veins. "Perfect."

Three months ago, this house was for sale, yet it was sitting untouched in a competitive market. I bought it up quietly when I realized how well it suited my short- and long-term plans.

We did some of the renovations ourselves and hired out the more complicated shit. The house needed some work, but not enough to deter people from buying it. No, that's because of its

history, which only attracted me to it. Now we have a place to stay... and a place to set our trap.

*As long as Kellan gets his ass over here.*

I'm just about to call him when he bursts through the door. He's got his arm looped through a couple shopping bags, and he's out of breath.

"Where've you been?" I demand.

"Had to get some supplies. I'm practically early." He doesn't elaborate beyond that, instead heading for the staircase and taking the steps two at a time.

I glance at my phone. People will start showing up in an hour, so we'll need to get dressed soon. No one can see our faces here—not for this to work.

"Hey," Cal yells from the kitchen. "Where are the cups?"

"Cabinet under the sink," I call back.

"Uhhh. No, they're not."

With a groan, I head into the kitchen, and we search the place until we find the bag full of cups. He shoots me a couple worried glances, and after a minute, I lose my patience.

"*What?*" I snap.

"You're just really fucking tense, man."

"I need this to go well."

"It will. She'll be here, and then you can do whatever you want to her. Or... I guess me and Kellan will."

"Good." I stand there, unconsciously twisting my ring around my finger again.

"You sure a good fuck won't get her out of your system?" Kellan asks as he enters the kitchen from behind me. He's asked me that so many times over the years that I've lost count.

"That never works," I growl. *And he'll find out somehow. She'd tell him, I'm sure. I just need to wait a little longer.*

Kellan shrugs. “Hey, whatever. I like how scared she gets whenever she sees one of us.”

At that, I smirk. So do I—it’s one of the only pleasures I’m able to have until I manage to get out from underneath my stepfather’s thumb. Fucking tyrant. He’s the reason we’re even in this position.

*Not true*, a voice in the back of my mind says. *She had something to do with it, too.*

Athelia’s face flashes in my thoughts, and it sends a wave of desire and hatred through me.

*She chose him.* She chose him even though she looked at me with such sincerity in those big brown eyes of hers. When I kissed her, I know she felt the same energy I did. It’s been over three years, and I can still feel it now.

Yet she used me to get to him, just like before.

*Doesn’t matter*; I remind myself. *Focus on the goddamn plan.*

“Let’s get ready,” I say tightly. “I don’t want her to know what hit her until it’s far, far too late.”

# Chapter Six

## Athelia

“You’re *sure* they won’t be there?” I ask Haven as she hurries me along the sidewalk.

“What did they tell you again?” she says.

I shudder at the reminder of Cal’s threat. His eyes sparkled with sick amusement as he towered over me, so close I could smell his juniper and cedarwood cologne. “He promised me I wouldn’t make it through Halloween weekend without wishing I’d never been born.”

That was two weeks ago, and I’ve had at least eight panic attacks because of it since. *Why can’t they just leave me alone?*

“And you’re *sure* you were loud enough in class the other day?”

“Positive,” I reply.

Kellan and I share a couple classes—in fact, I share classes with all three of the menaces who’ve made my college experience hell. I made sure to say in a conversation that I wouldn’t be attending this specific Halloween party, and I was definitely loud enough for Kellan to hear.

“Then you’re safe,” Haven says. “If their plan is to torment you this weekend, then they’ll be out looking for you. The last

place they'll be is where you said you *wouldn't* be."

"I hope so," I mutter.

"We'll be fine." Haven squeezes my hand as a gust of cool, autumn air rustles the leaves scattering the sidewalk. "Besides, I'm pretty sure Colton and his friends will be here tonight. There's no way Wes and him will be able to exist in the same space for long."

That stops me in my tracks. Haven tries to keep going, but I yank her to a halt before giving her a desperate look.

"What do you mean?" I ask slowly.

"I mean *you're safe*, babe. Let yourself relax."

"But if Colton is there, *you* won't be able to relax!"

"I'll be fine." She pushes her dark brown hair over her shoulder as she attempts a reassuring smile, although a deep purple strand falls back over her face. "Forget about me, just for one night."

I groan. Haven and I have been friends since freshman year of college. We've stuck together through thick and thin. Senior year has already proven to be mind-meltingly awful, but that won't tear us apart.

We always look out for each other. *Always.*

"We're not going." Keeping a firm hold on Haven's hand, I start pulling her back toward campus. "Fuck this. No one even knows who's hosting the damn thing!"

"Oh, that's part of the fun, and you know it." Haven tugs on me until I stop. "The mystery, the intrigue, the *spookiness.*"

"There's nothing spooky about predators taking advantage of stupid college students," I grumble.

"Come on," she groans. "I promise we'll have fun. And if it looks sketchy when we get there, we can leave."

*Dammit.* I want to go—really, I do. It's my best chance of attending a college party and letting loose without my stupid bullies ruining it for me. But...

“You’re sure you’re okay with this?” I ask. “I don’t want you to have to be around them just so I can have a little fun.”

“I promise.” She pulls me into a reassuring hug, and her lilac perfume fills my senses. I’ve always found it calming, and it’s exactly what I need right now, so I breathe deeply while I hug her back. “Now let’s go,” she says impatiently. “We’re already late.”

We both rush along the sidewalk. Posters and invites for this party have been all over campus—and social media—for at least two weeks. There was no indication of who the host is, just an address that’s about a half mile from campus.

At first, I thought it was stupid, but it piqued everyone’s interest. Allegedly, a woman brutally murdered her husband inside the house on Halloween. Tonight is the fiftieth anniversary of the event, and considering the time of year, everyone is hoping to see a ghost or something.

The thought kinda creeps me out, but I’m also intrigued. I tried to look into why she murdered her husband, but I couldn’t find any good information online. If I cared, I could’ve gone to the town’s local library, but with school, I haven’t had time.

“We’re gonna have so much fun,” Haven promises me. “And then we can sleep in until noon tomorrow if we want to.”

I groan. “I can’t. I have an advisory meeting with Professor Kammes in the morning.”

Haven shoots me a concerned look. “Seriously? On a Sunday morning? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“He’s just a little busy,” I say with a shrug. “I’m trying not to be a bother, and tomorrow morning is when he had the time.”

*I wish it was that simple.* The last thing I want to do is attend another one of our *meetings*. But I don’t have a choice unless I want to face the consequences.

I shiver at the thought.

“Cold?” Haven asks.

Neither of us are dressed appropriately for the weather. We both opted for fishnets and black boots, and I chose a short black dress paired with a deep red corset. It matches my eyeshadow, which pops against my pale skin.

As for Haven, she's in a black skater skirt that has white, upside-down crosses stitched across the bottom. Her tight-fitting black crop top shows off a sliver of her stomach, and it's low enough that the tattoo splaying across her chest is fully visible. It's a crescent moon surrounded by flowers and vines, and it's sexy as hell.

"Not cold," I tell her. "Just thinking."

She clicks her tongue. "Stop that. Tonight is for fun, not worrying."

"I'm trying," I mumble.

We turn the corner, and the house we're heading to comes into view. I've walked past it a couple times, but I haven't ventured this way in months.

"It looks... *wow*," Haven breathes.

I have a similar reaction. The old Victorian house used to have faded paint, crooked shutters, and boarded up windows. Now, it's nothing short of a Gothic masterpiece.

The whole house is black, a deep contrast to the whites and grays of the surrounding houses. Some of the decorative accents have been painted gold, but not enough that it's overwhelming. In fact, it's quite tasteful.

Candles glow in most of the windows, some of which have diamond-patterned grilles. That's definitely new. The curtains in the turret are all drawn shut, but that doesn't take from its glory. It stands tall and proud, and I wonder what's hiding behind the dark red curtains.

"Holy fuck," Haven mutters.

I don't realize until she speaks that we've both stopped to stare at the house. It's gorgeous, and it's the exact opposite of what I thought it would be—haunted house, watch-out-part-of-the-ceiling-might-fall-down-on-you kind of vibes.

People are milling about the property and hanging out on the front porch. There are a couple familiar faces, and thankfully, I don't see any of the people we'd like to avoid tonight.

A wrought iron fence has been installed around the property, with a gate opening up to a path lined with glowing jack-o-lanterns. The yard has been turned into a makeshift cemetery, full of tombstones and skeleton hands reaching out from their graves.

"Whoever is hosting this put a lot of effort in," I say.

Haven nods silently, still surveying the party from afar. Then she shakes her head as if she's breaking herself from a trance. "You ready?"

I smile. "Yeah."

We grab each other's hands again and head for the party. A couple people wave at us, and we wave back. Music is coming from somewhere in the house, and it sounds like a Korn song is currently playing.

"Hey," Angie calls from the porch as we make our way up the path. She jumps from where she was perched on the railing and sprints toward us. Her red Solo cup is empty, and based on how she sways, I don't think it was her first drink.

"Hey, Ange." Haven grins and throws her arms around our friend.

"I didn't think you guys were coming," Angie says, "but I'm so pumped you made it. Wanna get some drinks? They've got everything inside."

Haven and I exchange a glance. I'm still a little wary considering we don't know who's putting this all on, but fuck it.

"Let's go," I say.

There are more people inside, which makes sense since it's warmer in here. It takes a while to maneuver through the crowd, but I don't mind. It gives me more time to take in the place.



The house is as gorgeous on the inside as it is on the outside. What makes it better is that it's *exactly* my style. Oddities line the shelves and cabinets, and the walls are almost completely covered.

As we make our way toward the kitchen, I fall behind, distracted by all the art. Some of it's blood- and gore-filled, some of it's erotic, and some is just plain cool. Pentagrams, crows, framed poetry, moths, the phases of the moon—I could go on.

*Whoever owns this place is my type of person.*

I bump into Haven right outside the kitchen. She's staring at a large framed painting that's hanging by itself, and Angie is giving her a concerned look.

"You good?" I ask when I realize how stiff she is.

Haven blinks once, twice, before twirling her hair around her finger. "Yeah," she says softly. "I was just... thinking."

I take a closer look at the painting. It's of a small white church that's burning to the ground. Dark plumes of smoke fill the air, tainting the blue sky.

"Retribution," Haven murmurs, tracing the bottom of the painting where the title is written out. "How fitting."

"Hey." I nudge her gently. "Don't let your mind go there. Tonight is about having fun, remember?"

She swallows before turning to face me. "Right. Yeah, let's just... forget, okay?"

"Sounds good to me," Angie says before pulling us both into the kitchen.

About half the people are dressed in costumes, whereas the other half just opted to dress up in some kind of Halloween-themed outfit. We pass by a group of guys in weird neon masks before grabbing ourselves some drinks.

"Has anyone figured out who put this on?" I ask over the music.

Angie shakes her head, and some of her bright pink hair falls from her messy bun. “I’m just rolling with it. This is a blast—I hope they do it again next year.”

After that, Angie quickly gets distracted by a couple friends, and Haven and I are left alone again. She’s gulped down half her drink in under a minute, and her light cheeks are tinged pink.

“Are you—” I cut myself off when I realize what—or *who*—she’s staring at.

Colton fucking Heverly.

Haven is frozen with her cup halfway to her lips. She’s not even blinking.

When I glance back, Colton is making his way toward us, his mouth curved upward in a predatory smile.

“We’re getting the hell out of here.” Grabbing Haven’s arm, I drag her out of the kitchen and back down the hallway we came through.

I only risk one glance back, and it’s to see one of those guys—the one with the neon mask that glows red—stepping in front of Colton and knocking him off balance. His expression turns lethal, and I pull Haven through the crowd faster.

“I don’t want to leave,” she says once we get outside.

I stop and turn to face her. “You’re not going to be able to enjoy yourself.”

“I can.” She takes a deep, shuddering breath. “He’s not ruining this for me. I’m so tired of men controlling my life, Thelia.”

*Dammit.* I get where she’s coming from, but being in such close proximity to Colton and his buddies isn’t something she can usually handle. Fuck, and that painting already threw her off.

“I’ll be fine. I promise.” She finishes her drink before grabbing mine and downing it in a few large sips.

“Hey—that’s mine! Jesus Christ, Haven, slow down.”

She shakes her head and wipes at her mouth. Her black lipstick doesn't even smudge. "I need the courage." Squaring her shoulders, she gives me a half-convincing grin. "Okay, let's go. I have a plan."

Before I can stop her, she darts back into the house. I have to run to keep up with her as she heads back to the kitchen where Colton is glaring at the three masked guys. Xander and Lucas are behind him now, eyes crossed.

That doesn't stop Haven, though. She marches right up to Colton and slaps him across the face. He was so focused on the other guys that he didn't even see it coming.

Unfortunately, he has quick reflexes. Haven tries to run away, but he grabs her hair and yanks her back. As she stumbles into him, she cries out. She's only stunned for a second before she tries to claw at his face. Xander grabs her hands and pins them behind her back.

Colton leans down and whispers something in her ear that makes her fight harder.

It takes me a moment to realize the masked guys aren't planning on helping her. *Motherfuckers*. I lunge forward, kicking Xander as hard as I can in the shins. It shocks him enough that Haven is able to break free from his loosened grip, and she slaps Colton again.

He just grins and yanks her closer to him—so close their lips are almost touching.

"Fuck you," Haven seethes. "You vile, disgusting, *worthless* piece of shit. Let go of me."

Colton's smile widens, and his eyes glint with something dark. "That's the best you got?"

I hit his arm. "Let go, Colton." When he ignores me, I hit him again. "Let. her. go."

Colton glances at Lucas. "Deal with her."

Before Lucas even moves, all three masked men step in front of me. I try to break through to get to Haven, but they push me back.

“Hey!” I try to squeeze through two of them. “If you’re not going to help her, then at least let me.”

“Enough.” The voice comes from one of the masked guys—the same one who stepped in front of Colton the first time. His voice sounds distorted, like he has some sort of filter on it.

*Who the fuck does he think he is, Batman?*

“Oh, fuck off.” Colton rolls his eyes before tightening his grip on Haven’s hair, making her whimper in pain. His face lights up when he looks down at her. “There are those tears I love.”

“I just want...” Haven heaves in a breath. “I just want to forget.”

Colton shakes his head. “You’ll never forget me. That’s a promise.”

“Enough,” the masked man repeats. He steps forward, arms crossed. “Let her go.”

Finally, Colton releases Haven’s hair. The masked men part enough that she can slip behind them and run straight into my arms. I glare at Colton over their shoulders.

“Can you make them leave?” I ask. They already listened to one of my requests, so maybe I can get lucky.

One of the masked men looks back at me. He doesn’t answer—just stares. Or at least, I think he’s staring. I’m so lost in the neon pink X’s for eyes that I forget to look past the mask and into his *actual* eyes. He turns back around to face Colton before I snap out of it.

“This is stupid,” I grumble. “We’re leaving.”

# Chapter Seven

## Kellan

“We’re leaving.”

At Athelia’s words, Wes’s shoulders tighten. She can’t leave—that’d ruin the whole night.

Stiffly, he turns to face her. “Clear the hallway.”

Both girls scramble to obey, and the fear in Athelia’s eyes at his harsh voice makes my dick stir. Fuck, it looks good on her.

We don’t give Colton and his friends a second to prepare. Wes grabs him, I grab Xander, and Cal grabs Lucas. They put up one hell of a fight, but we manage to throw them off the property pretty easily.

“Touch Athelia again, and you’re a dead man,” Wes growls.

Lucas raises his hands. “I didn’t!”

“You were going to,” Wes barks. “Now get lost, and don’t even think of showing your faces here again tonight.”

Colton looks ready to fight, but he must think better of it, because he backs off. “Trust me,” he says with a devious grin. “We won’t.”

I don’t like the sound of that, but we’ll deal with him later if he tries something stupid. For now, there are other things on

my mind.

“I wanna fuck her,” I tell the guys as we head back up the path.

“That’s not in the plan,” Wes bites out. “Not until later.”

“It’d be a good idea to change it,” I say. “Think about it—think about the look on her face when she realizes what she’s done. That she played a part in it instead of it being forced on her.”

At that, Cal makes a delighted sound that comes out distorted and weird. “Fuck, I bet she’ll cry. I bet she’ll yell at us and beg us not to tell anyone.” He laughs. “Maybe she’ll finally throw that punch she’s always trying to hold back.”

Wes nods, which is enough of an answer for me.

A perverted smile forms behind my mask. Our girl has no clue what’s about to hit her.

Inside, we find the girls in the living room. Haven is halfway through her drink, whereas Athelia looks like she’s barely taken a couple sips. They’re both swaying to the music, although neither of them look at ease.

Wes and Cal disappear into the crowd while I approach them alone. I lean in close to Athelia, placing a hand on her shoulder and making her jump. For a split second, that fear is back in her eyes, and it sends a rush of desire through me.

“Are you all right?” I ask, my voice distorted so no one can recognize it.

“I’m not the one who got hurt,” Athelia snaps before turning to her friend.

*Fine.* I can be nice to Haven if it means getting what I want. “Are you okay?” I ask her gently, although it doesn’t sound too gentle through my voice changer.

Haven nods without looking at me. The mask seems to be putting a lot of people off, and I like it. Or, I suppose, I like the power that comes with everyone fearing me.

“They won’t be coming back,” I tell the girls. “And if they do, they’ll regret it.”

“Thank you,” Athelia says. She peers at me, like she’ll be able to see behind my mask if she stares long enough. “Do I know you?”

“Don’t think so.”

At first, that unease comes back, and I wish I could capture it. Feed off it. But after a second, she turns her attention back to Haven.

“What do you want to do? Dance?”

Haven squares her shoulders as a hard determination sets in her eyes. “I want to find someone hotter than Colton and fuck him all night. And I want to take pictures or record it or some shit, and then I’m going to send it to him.”

“That’s gonna piss him off,” Athelia warns.

I chuckle, placing a hand on her waist. I half expect her to shy away from me, but if anything, she slightly leans into it. “I’m pretty sure that’s what she wants, *ma belle*.”

Haven and Athelia steal a confused glance before Haven leans in and loudly whispers, “I think he just called you pretty.”

“I did,” I say. Growing up, I spent my summers in France with my parents and learned the language with ease. Call me pretentious, but I prefer it over English. It’s much more beautiful.

Athelia doesn’t seem to know what to do with the compliment. Her pale cheeks turn bright pink, and she drops her head so her dark brown hair hides her face.

*How cute.*

“What about that guy?” Haven asks, nodding toward some kid across the room. He’s tall, and I suppose he’s good looking, but I’ve seen better.

“Nah,” I say, even though I know she wasn’t asking me. “I think I know someone who’s just the type of man you’re

looking for.”

Athelia raises a doubtful eyebrow, but Haven latches onto me.

“Who?” she demands. “Tell me.”

“His name is Aaron. He’ll be totally down with you filming it, and you’re just his type.”

Not only that, but the guys and I know him fairly well. He’s safe, and that’s what I need if I’m going to pull Athelia up to my room alone.

“Let’s go find him,” Haven says. She’s swaying—I doubt that’s her first drink—but I’m not gonna stop her.

If she wants revenge, then that’s what she’s gonna get.

I have to remove my arm from Athelia’s waist, which isn’t ideal, but it won’t be for long. As she follows me through the house, her hand slips into Haven’s.

Aaron is out back, bobbing for apples with a small group of others. He’s one of the few people who knows Wes, me, and Cal are behind tonight. We let a few people in on parts of our plans, mostly so they can help us watch out for Colton and his crew.

I wave him over. As he excuses himself from his conversation and heads our way, his eyes barely leave Haven. *Perfect.*

“Aaron, meet...” I turn to Haven. “Sorry. I didn’t catch your name.” *And you can’t know I know who you are.*

“Haven,” she says with a smile in Aaron’s direction.

“She wants to fuck you, film it, and send it to Colton.”

Both Haven’s and Athelia’s faces turn beet red. They exchange a shocked glance before Haven lets out a nervous laugh.

“You—um, you don’t have to. I don’t want to... I mean, I wasn’t planning on starting with that.”

“Best to get everything out in the open,” I say.



Aaron chuckles. “Hey, I’m happy to knock Colton down a peg. Is he your ex or something?”

“Something like that,” Haven says. “You’re okay with this? You don’t want to, like, hang out a bit first?”

Aaron shrugs. “We can do that. You seem cool. A couple of us were gonna head to the basement. There’s a pool table and some other games down there. Wanna join?”

Haven brightens at the idea. Makes sense—she’s never struck me as the type of person who fucks random strangers often, even if her plans tonight say otherwise.

“That sounds great.” Haven turns to Athelia. “You wanna join?”

“Yeah, sur—”

“Actually,” I say, “I have something I think you’ll wanna see. It’s upstairs. Off limits to most, but we can make an exception.”

Athelia narrows her eyes. “Where upstairs?”

“The turret. It’s my room.”

“So you *are* the hosts,” she says quietly, almost like she doesn’t mean for anyone to hear.

I smile behind my mask. After we threw Colton and his friends out, it only makes sense that she’d at least suspect that we’re the masterminds behind the party.

Athelia turns to Aaron and asks, “You know him?”

Aaron nods. “Yeah. He’s not gonna kill you, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

My hand returns to Athelia’s waist, sliding around her until it rests on the small of her back. Her eyes flutter closed at the simple touch, and I take it as the go-ahead to tug her closer to me.

“Just to... look at things?” Athelia asks.

“Yeah. Like Aaron said, I’m not gonna kill you.”

*I’ll just make you wish I would.*

“Okay,” she says. I don’t think she even realizes that she’s leaning into me again. “But Haven, you’re still dr—”

“I know what I’m doing,” Haven says. “Colton fucking deserves it, and so do I.”

Athelia looks worried, but Aaron is already tugging her back toward the house. She watches Haven until she’s out of sight before turning to me. “You wanted to show me something?”

Sliding my hand in hers, I say, “Follow my lead.”

Athelia’s steps are hesitant as I pull her into the house again. As we walk through the hallway to the stairs, she ducks her head so no one can see her face. That sends a wave of giddiness through me. What does she think we’re going to do that she needs to hide?

*At least she’s got the right idea.*

Athelia grips the dark banister as we head upstairs. At the top of the steps, Barrett steps to the side to let us through. It sounds stupid to guard up here, but we like our privacy, and people get curious.

“Text the others,” I tell him as we pass by, satisfied by his silent nod.

Now that we’re away from the party, Athelia lifts her head. She hasn’t said a word since we entered the house, but now she lets out an appreciative sound. Her gaze travels across the ornate wallpaper and the art we’ve hung up.

“Oh, what’s this?” She tugs me to a stop in front of a tall, black bookshelf. Most of it’s full of what you’d expect—books. But there are oddities and trinkets scattered across the shelves.

“What does it look like, *ma belle*?”

Athelia traces her delicate fingers over the spines of the books. “Wait. Is that a *real* human skull?”

“Yep.”

“And...” Her hand drops to her side. “That’s...”

“A real scorpion.”

Athelia's eyes widen, and I drink it in. Of course, the scorpion is dead—that's why it's framed and on the shelf.

"I've never seen a real scorpion before," she says.

"Well, now you have." Gently, I tug her toward my bedroom.

We keep our pace slow so Athelia can look at the rest of the decorations. She seems into it all, which I expected. She has similar tastes to us.

Once we reach my room, I push open the door. It's lit up red at the moment, and I have to say, it looks good on Athelia.

"Wow," she mutters as she takes in the room.

Down here, I've put together a mini lounge and work area. A leather couch that follows the curve of the wall sits under one of the windows, framed on either side by end tables. Beside the spiral staircase is my desk, which is currently covered in textbooks.

"That's it," I say, nodding to the middle of the room.

"That's... what?"

"Where the cops found his body."

Athelia raises an eyebrow. "You know why she killed him?"

"There've been plenty of rumors over the years. He raped her, he cheated, he was abusive, etc. But no one actually knows the truth."

That seems to disappoint her. Frowning, she turns toward the staircase and rests her fingers on the railing. "Where does this go to?"

"My bed is up there."

"Can I..." She hesitates, likely aware of what it'll sound like. "Can I see?"

"I brought you up here to show you around, didn't I?"

She smiles at me, and it's almost as satisfying as seeing her eyes full of fear. As we ascend, I watch her ass sway,

wondering if she'd freak out if I squeezed it right now. Or smacked it.

*Probably a little too soon. Gotta ease her into this.*

At the top of the stairs, she stops, barely giving me enough room to join her. I bump into her, but when she tries to give me more space, I grab her and keep her against me.

Athelia gasps but doesn't fight me. I could leave it at that, but this can't take all night—we have other plans. So I keep one hand planted on her hip and trace the other up her side. My fingers graze the side of her breast, and she shudders.

“You're acting like you've never been touched by a man before, *ma belle*.”

“I haven't...” She sighs and shakes her head. “I have, but not like this. Except...”

“Except what?”

“I don't want to talk about that right now,” she says softly.

*I bet you don't.*

“We don't have to talk at all.” My lips ghost down her neck.

Her shoulders sag, and her voice is heavy with disappointment. “I can't.”

I trace her jawbone with a knuckle. “Are you committed to someone else?”

“N-no.”

*Liar.*

“Then what's the problem?”

She chews on the inside of her cheek as she looks anywhere but me.

“Talk to me,” I say coaxingly.

“Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to give you the wrong idea, but I really can't do this.” She turns, and I lock my arms around her. “I should go find Haven.”

The blue light from my mask reflects off her face, mixing with the red lighting of the room. And there—that unease is back as she peers at my mask, but all she can see is my eyes, and she has to pay close attention to see past the neon lights.

“I don’t want to make you do anything you don’t want to.” Loosening my hold on her, I step to the side so she has access to the stairs. “But just a reminder, Haven is about to be pretty damn busy.”

Athelia winces at the reminder. “I’ll just wait downstairs for her.”

Disappointment floods my system, but I don’t show it. It’s not that big of a deal—I’ll have her however I want her later. This was just a bonus idea. Our plan can still go on. “Whatever you want.”

She laughs. “I wish.”

As she moves for the steps, I grab her wrist. “Wait. What do you mean?”

“I don’t get what I want. There are too many people bent on ruining me.”

I have a feeling she’s talking about us, but I say, “Yeah? Well, fuck them.”

For some reason, that makes Athelia pause. Her gaze moves over my body until she’s focusing on my mask again. I tilt my head, watching as the same determination I saw in Haven’s eyes outside appears in Athelia’s.

“Maybe you’re right,” she says thoughtfully. “But if we do this...”

“What?” I ask when she doesn’t continue.

“No one can know,” she whispers, and just like that, her determination is replaced with fear. But this time, it’s not because of me—it’s because of something else.

*Worried your professor will find out, ma belle?*

“It’ll be our little secret.” I tug her into me until her body is flush with mine. “You don’t have anything to worry about with

me.”

Athelia hesitates, but then she nods. “Tonight is for having fun.”

“That’s right.” I run both my hands through her thick, dark hair. “Just let the night take you where it pleases.”

The corners of her mouth tip up, and she reaches for my mask. “I want to kiss you.”

I catch her wrists before she can reveal my face. “Later, *ma belle*. For now, get on your knees.”

Her eyes light up at my command. Slowly, she lowers herself to the floor, her hands finding their way to my thighs. She licks her lips, and I can’t help myself—I reach out and brush my thumb over her bottom lip. Her mouth falls open, and I slip my thumb inside, pinning down her tongue.

Athelia lets out a surprised sound as her eyes widen. If it wasn’t for this mask, I’d bend down and spit into that little mouth of hers.

*Later, I remind myself. When she’s tied down and can’t deny how much she wants us.*

Athelia sucks on my thumb, and the moment I release her tongue, she strokes it over my skin. I groan at the idea of her doing that to my cock instead, but I don’t move to undo my pants. No, I want her to do that. I want *her* to seal the fate of her own damnation.

Thankfully, she’s as impatient as I am. With my thumb still in her mouth, she reaches for my belt and undoes it. Her fingers work swiftly, unbuttoning my jeans and lowering the zipper. Only when she’s pushed down my pants and briefs enough that my dick springs free do I pull back my thumb.

“Look at how hard you made me,” I say lowly, stroking a hand down Athelia’s cheek.

Her eyes are full of greed as she wraps her right hand around my dick. She moves it up and down slowly, almost teasingly, as she stares up at me.

That look—god, it sends my mind to so many dark places. Ripped fishnets, reddened skin, tangled sheets. The only sounds would be her moans. Her *screams*.

“That’s it. Take your time with it. I want you to enjoy this.”

*Because then you’ll only be more horrified when you find out the truth.*

Athelia gifts me with another one of her smiles. Her eyes sparkle as she finally flicks out her tongue to taste the bead of precum that’s formed at the tip of my cock. She moans, swirling her tongue around the head. Then she licks my cock from base to tip before taking as much into her mouth as she can.

When I hit the back of her throat, she gags, and her eyes water. I resist the urge to grab her head and fuck her face until her makeup is ruined and she’s clawing at my legs. Not yet—we have all night. Besides, I want this to be all her. The further she runs into our trap of her own will, the more satisfying this will be for Wes. For all of us.

Athelia sucks as she moves up and down, her tongue cradling my dick and stroking as she goes.

“God, you’re so good at this.” My hand tangles in her hair, and she moans. “Oh? You like that?”

She grips the back of my legs to pull me into her. My cock slides all the way into her mouth until I hit the back of her throat again. She adjusts, her fingers digging into me through my pants as she tries to relax her throat.

*Oh, fuck yes. You’re going to regret this, and I can’t wait to see the look in your eyes.*

I apply pressure to the back of her head and thrust forward until my dick slides into her throat. The noise Athelia makes is one of discomfort, but instead of moving off my dick, she takes it all until her nose is pressed to my stomach.

“Oh, such a good girl, *ma belle*. Your throat was made for this.” I pull out and thrust in again. “So fucking tight.”

Athelia gags, and this time, she turns her head to the side. I release her, pulling back so she can breathe. She gasps in air as she looks up at me with tear-filled eyes.

With a smile she can't see, I stroke a hand down Athelia's cheek before taking hold of her chin. I pull her back toward my dick, and she enthusiastically starts sucking it again. At first, she concentrates on the head of my cock, sucking gently and teasing it with her tongue.

The whole time, I keep a fist clenched behind my back. It's either that or I'll lose my self-control and use her throat like a fleshlight until I come. It's all I can think about, but I don't want her to stop sucking my dick, either.

As Athelia works her way down my cock, she moans. I thought for years maybe she was only into older men and what happened with us was a fluke, but considering how much she's enjoying this, that can't be the case.

*So why did she choose him over us?*

I'm barely able to finish my thought before Athelia grabs my hands and places them on her head. Then she grips my legs again, pushing forward and trying not to gag.

"Oh, you like it rough, hmm?" Leaning forward, I wrap my arms around her head, trapping her against me. Then I thrust my hips forward repeatedly, fucking her face like I've dreamed of doing for years.

After a minute, she gags hard, and I pull back.

"No," she moans. Her tears have ruined her makeup, and she has drool dripping from her chin. "Don't stop. *Please*. I want you to go as hard as you can."

"You still need to be able to breathe," I say teasingly.

But she shakes her head. "Use me. It's what I've always wanted."

I groan. *Is she fucking serious?* "You're every man's wet dream, you know that?"

At that, she opens her mouth and sticks out her tongue. Her eyes lock on mine, full of mischief and lust.



*God yes.*

“Don’t move,” I tell her as I turn to my bed. I rummage around in one of the drawers underneath it before I pull out what I’m looking for.

Athelia’s eyes flash with delight as I fasten the cuffs to her wrists behind her back. When I step in front of her again, she still has her tongue out.

“I might just keep you up here forever,” I murmur. “Lock you in a cage and only pull you out as I please. I can think of dozens of ways to use this little body of yours.”

Before she can respond, I shove my cock into her mouth. She tries to get in one last breath, but I cut it short when I hit the back of her throat. She moans, rubbing her thighs together, and I wonder how wet she is.

*You could’ve had this all along if you’d just chosen us.*

The reminder that she *didn’t* do that fills my mind like a dark storm cloud. My thrusts turn menacing, and I grip her hair to keep her head in place.

“Suck,” I grunt as I yank her head forward in time with me driving into her.

Athelia does her best—tries to use her tongue, too—but I’m not giving her much to work with. I’m going too fast, too hard, and she can’t keep up. She’s barely even able to breathe.

Eventually, I push into her throat again. I love the way she feels as she gags around my dick, so I hold her there again. She whimpers around my cock, and more tears stream down her cheeks, leaving behind streaks of mascara and eyeliner.

“You said you wanted it as hard as I could give, *ma belle*. You don’t get a break.” I push deeper into her throat, holding her head when she tries to pull back.

Athelia’s whole body tries to rebel against my cock lodged in her throat, but I don’t give her a second of mercy. She can’t breathe like this, and I watch as the panic sets in. I’m sure I know exactly what she’s thinking right now—

*What if I throw up?*

*Am I going to pass out?*

*Is he going to kill me?*

And god, her fear is delectable. I feed on it, somehow managing not to come even though she has me right on the edge.

“You can take it,” I tell her when she chokes violently. “Be a good toy for me, *ma belle*. This is what you wanted.”

But she’s heaving now, and I have no desire for her to puke all over my dick, so I yank her back. She gasps and blinks rapidly, her vision unfocused.

“God, you’re a mess.” Reaching down, I squeeze her breast, not caring that she’s still coughing and heaving in air. Her dress and corset are soaked with drool, and maybe I should find it disgusting, but I don’t.

Hell, I love it. I want to make her *more* of a mess.

“That...” She coughs. “That was *amazing*.”

“Oh, I’m not done with you.”

I slide the straps of her dress off her shoulders before yanking the whole thing down below her breasts. Her corset keeps me from pulling it down farther, but this gives me what I want. Her nipples are hard, and I pinch them, not bothering to be gentle.

Athelia cries out, but she still arches into my touch.

“You’re a little masochist, aren’t you?” I pinch harder, watching her wince, but she doesn’t tell me to stop. “God, and you take the pain so well.” Gripping the hair at the base of her neck with one hand, I pull down hard, forcing her to look up at me. “Open wide.”

She hasn’t caught her breath yet, so she does so fearfully. I’m not planning on fucking her face again, though. I’m too close to coming, and we’re just getting started. Instead, I shove my fingers into her mouth. She grunts in shock, but the sound is muffled. I push back farther, triggering her gag reflex, and her eyes bug out.

“Fuck yes,” I growl. “I love making you gag.”

I shove my fingers into her mouth repeatedly, watching as she has no choice but to take it. The tears, the ruined makeup, the drool—it might be my new favorite sight.

When I finally pull my fingers out, she inhales sharply, doubling over. I pull her up and shove her face-first onto the bed. Her feet are still on the floor, and I kick them apart before smacking her ass.

Athelia moans and arches her back.

“You’re nothing but a desperate fucking slut, aren’t you?”

“I am,” she groans into my comforter. “Please—please fuck me like I’m a whore.”

“Oh, I’ll do *much* more than that.” After shoving the skirt of her dress up, I grab her fishnets with both hands and yank. The sound of them ripping is almost as satisfying as her horrified gasp.

“What—you could’ve just pulled them down!”

“Trust me, the view is better this way.” I squeeze her ass, which makes her moan again. It’s just the reaction I need to get away with my next move.

“Hey,” Athelia cries as I rip off her panties. They’re flimsy and thin, so they tear easily, but I’m sure it still hurts.

“Shh,” I soothe. “What happened to me fucking you like a whore?”

At that, she groans and slumps into the mattress.

“That’s what I thought.”

I start off by fingering her. She’s so wet you’d think I squirted lube all over her pussy, but I didn’t. This is all her own desire for one of the men she hates and fears most in the world.

Two fingers inside of her and my thumb on her clit, and she’s writhing on the bed and begging like the desperate slut she is. I wish Wes and Cal were already in here to see how pathetic she is. They’d get a kick out of seeing her like this.

“You could’ve had this years ago, you know,” I murmur in her ear.

“W-what?” she gasps, raising her head from the mattress.

I chuckle. “I’ll explain later.”

That satisfies her enough for the moment—or maybe it’s because I thrust my fingers into her at an angle that makes her groan.

“So wet,” I chide. “You really are the perfect toy, you know that? I bet I could fuck you right now, and I’d slide in with no resistance.”

“W-what?” She sounds panicked. “No, wait. You’re too big.”

“You can handle it, *ma belle*. Don’t tell me no now.” I slide my fingers out of her and climb onto the bed next to her. Yanking her head up, I shove my fingers into her mouth. “Clean up the mess you made, slut.”

Athelia sucks my fingers clean, stroking her devilish tongue over them the way she did with my dick. I push in deeper, making her gag again because I’ve given up on stopping myself. Whatever reaction I want from her, I’m getting.

“Good girl,” I say once she’s done. I pat her cheek patronizingly before sliding off the bed again.

“Go slow,” she whispers as I step in between her legs.

I don’t. I slide the tip of my cock through her desire before plunging into her in one hard, deep thrust. Athelia screams, tensing around me, but I don’t care. Her pussy is ten times better than her throat, which I didn’t even think was possible mere seconds ago.

“Take it,” I growl as I plow into her. “That’s all you’re good for. Just a set of warm holes to be used.”

“Yes,” she groans, even though there’s pain in her voice.

That only turns me on more. I slap her ass, watching it jiggle. It’s hard to tell with the red lights, but I’m pretty sure a hand print forms on her pretty skin.

“I love seeing my mark on you,” I tell her, slapping the same spot again.

Athelia screams into the mattress. I grab onto her hips, pulling her into me every time I thrust forward. She’s completely helpless. Her hands are still cuffed, and even if they weren’t, the pain has obviously turned into pleasure. She doesn’t *want* me to stop.

“You love getting fucked like this, don’t you, *ma belle*? Tell me what that makes you.”

“I’m your whore,” she moans.

I freeze. I was expecting her to say she was *a* whore, not for her to tell me she’s *my* whore. But shit, you know what? This is better.

“That’s right,” I say lowly. “You’re mine to fuck whenever I want.” Leaning forward, I place my head as close to her ear as I can with my mask in the way. “And I’m *never* letting you go.”

Athelia chokes on air as I thrust into her hard. She really is taking my cock well. I was expecting more pain, maybe even some tears, but she’s so fucking turned on that it didn’t take much to get her ready for me.

Movement in my peripheral vision snags my attention. Thankfully, Athelia’s head is turned away from the stairs, so she doesn’t see Wes and Cal as they creep up the steps.

Instantly, I pull out and grab a bandana from the dresser. “I’m going to blindfold you.”

She’s already nodding by the time I turn toward her. “Then you’ll kiss me?”

I smile even though she can’t see it. “In more places than one, *ma belle*.”

Her small gasp of surprise has me rolling my eyes. I know she’s had her pussy eaten before—I’ve done it. And fuck, I know she’s done just about everything under the sun with *him*. Wes told me so, and I may have spied through Professor

Kammes's windows while Athelia let him fuck her senseless a couple times.

I tie the bandana around her head without letting her see the guys. Then I flip her onto her back, grinning when she squirms uncomfortably with her arms pinned underneath her.

Cal has already slipped off his mask, and he lowers himself to his knees in between Athelia's legs. He inhales deeply before slowly licking her pussy from entrance to clit. Athelia gasps, arching her back involuntarily.

Wes leans against the wall, his jaw clenched. His mask is on my dresser next to Cal's. When Athelia whimpers, the vein next to his temple pulses.

Out of all three of us, he's the one she hurt the most. I think that's part of the reason he doesn't want to touch her. He may be obsessed with Athelia, but a part of him hates her, too.

I still stand by my idea of killing his stepdad. It'd solve quite a few of our problems. Unfortunately, when I brought it up years ago, Wes shut me down before I could even get a full sentence out.

"I'm gonna come," Athelia whimpers.

Cal pulls away, grinning at Athelia's moans of protest.

"Not yet," I tell her. "You're gonna come on my cock."

Cal backs away as I set my mask next to his. I'll have to be careful with how much I talk, but I'm pretty sure Athelia is far gone enough that she won't recognize my voice at this point. She thinks she's safe up here.

Carefully, I crawl over her. When my lips meet hers, she lets out a startled noise before relaxing into the kiss. It's been so long since we've done this, and it feels fresh and new, like it's our first time. I plunge my tongue into her mouth, tasting the lingering alcohol before pulling away.

With Athelia blindfolded and cuffed and me trying not to talk, getting into position is way harder than it needs to be. But after a minute, I'm lying on my back with her straddling me.

She's facing away from me—and fully on display for Wes and Cal.

*If only she knew.*

I thrust up into her, grabbing onto her hips, and Athelia moans. Her pussy is fucking heaven, and when she starts working herself up and down my cock, I choke on a groan.

This just keeps getting better.

Cal climbs onto the bed, causing the mattress to sag.

Athelia freezes. "Wait—what? What's going on?" Her voice is high and sharp with fear.

"Don't worry," I tell her, not slowing my thrusts. "My friends want you, too. It's okay, they'll keep our secret."

"Oh—*ohhhhhh*," she moans.

Cal is sucking on one of her nipples, and it must cause all the worry to drain right out of her, because she tilts her chin up and arches her back.

"Ride me, *ma belle*. Come on."

She matches my movements, groaning as Cal keeps playing with her nipples. Figures that she loves having all our focus on her. She doesn't even know who we are—didn't even know she was gonna get more than me—and she's just going with it.

Wes is still watching from his spot on the wall, his eyes dark with jealousy. If he'd just get over himself, he could be getting in on this, but his pride has always been his biggest downfall. For years, he had good reason not to touch her, but that's all changing. Yet here he is, still keeping his distance.

*His loss.*

"Play with her clit," I tell Cal. "Make her come."

He reaches between Athelia's legs, and when his finger slides against her clit, she cries out.

"Yes, oh my god yes," she cries.

"Get ready," I say.

She's close—she has to be. We'll push her as high as she can possibly go, and when she falls, we won't catch her. We'll let her crash all the way into a deep, dark, miserable pit of despair.

"I'm gonna come," Athelia gasps. "Godddddd, I'm coming."

Just then, Wes pushes off the wall. He's on the bed next to Cal in a split second.

*This is it.*

Wes yanks the blindfold off Athelia's eyes as she cries out, her pussy clenching around my cock. It takes her a second to register his and Cal's faces. Mid-orgasm, her pleasure-filled moans and cries transform into a guttural, horrified scream.

Wes watches her, soaking it in as she realizes just who's fucking her. His smile is pure evil, and I love it.

"No," she sobs, her voice laced with a near-tangible fear. She starts struggling against us. "No, no, *no!*"

"Fuck," I groan, keeping a firm grip on her hips. I don't stop fucking her, not even for a split second. "Just like that, *ma belle.*"

"Don't call me that," she shouts. "How—how *could* you?" That's all she's able to get out before Wes claps a hand over her mouth to shut her up.

"You didn't think someone would actually want you, did you?" Wes asks. His voice is cruel and judgmental, the perfect blend that he's found gets the harshest reaction from her.

She tries to lunge off the bed—off me—but the guys grab her so she can't move. "Please don't," she begs. "Please—god, Kellan, *stop.*"

I think it's the quiver in her voice that does me in. She sounds so helpless, so *pathetic*, and it's enough to finally push me over the edge. With a groan, I slow my pace, emptying inside of her.

"No," she shouts, but it's muffled by Wes slapping his hand over her mouth again. But then he pulls away with a hiss, and I



wonder if she bit him.

“Little bitch,” he growls.

“You’ll pay for this,” she snaps, still fighting even though all three of us are holding her down.

“No, we won’t. You’re ours, Athelia,” Wes snarls, “Ours to torment, ours to fuck with, and now, ours to play with. And everyone’s known it since the moment we marked you as our prey.”

# Chapter Eight

## Athelia

“No,” I sob. “I’m not yours. I’m *not*.”

“You certainly don’t belong to *him*,” Wes snaps. “Not anymore. I’ve fought tooth and nail to get to where I am, and I’m done with his shit. He’s not ruling my life anymore.”

I blink. “Him?”

*He’s not talking about Professor Kammes, is he?*

*No—no, that’s fucking stupid. No one knows about that.*

“I’m done with your games,” Wes snarls.

“I’m not playing games,” I say, “and I don’t want anything to do with you.” I meant for the statement to come out strong, but the words sound whiny as they leave my lips.

“Doesn’t look like you have much of a choice in the matter.” Wes is looking at me like he hates me, but also like he truly believes I’m his.

“No,” I whisper. By now, I know my resistance is futile, but I have to try. *I have to.*

Wes’s grin sends a shiver down my spine. His gaze rests on my mouth, and my stomach drops in horror right before he slams his lips to mine.

I do the only thing I can do—I bite his bottom lip *hard*. The taste of copper floods my mouth, and when Wes jerks back, blood is dripping from his mouth.

“Fuck you,” I bite out.

“Keeping fighting,” Kellan says from behind me. His softening cock is still inside me, reminding me just how fucked I am. “We like it.”

“*You* like it,” Cal corrects. He’s been quiet, which is odd. Normally he’s full of witty quips and jokes. “I’d much prefer her to be restrained enough that she can barely move, let alone fight. But for now...”

For a fleeting moment, hope springs inside me. Cal grabs a key from Kellan’s nightstand and undoes my handcuffs. But before I can try anything, Wes grabs my wrists and holds them with one hand.

If it wasn’t so frustrating—and if he didn’t repulse me—I’d find it hot.

Kellan works his way out from underneath me. Once he’s standing, he pulls his pants up and zips them with a grin.

Finally, the guys get off the bed, pulling me with them. I’m surrounded, so there’s no chance of escape. It should scare me, but all it does is piss me off. When I yank my arms free from Wes’s grasp, he lets me, shoving his hands in his pockets instead.

*God, I hate that smile.*

“You’re so pretty when you’re angry,” Kellan tells me.

“I trusted you,” I yell.

Kellan laughs. “Your mistake, *ma belle*. Next time, actually use your brain.”

More tears spill over, and his eyes flare with delight.

“You can’t do this,” I say, yanking my dress back up to cover myself. “You can’t get away with this. I never—I never would’ve done this if I’d known it was you.”

“And what are you gonna do about it?” Wes steps up to me, gripping my throat and squeezing the sides to cut off the blood flow to my brain.

“Wes,” I gasp, grabbing his arms and trying to pull them off.

He leans in, towering over me with that twisted smile of his. “You brought this on yourself, Athelia. All you had to do was not choose him.”

“Him?” I sputter. *This again?* “I don’t even know who you’re talking about! I’ve never chosen anyone!”

His chuckle is anything but amused. “You still think you can hide it from us, huh? That we’ll believe you? You can’t lie to us.”

“I—I’m not lying!” My thoughts are fuzzy, and my vision is fading. Panic kicks in, and I claw at his arms.

“There it is,” Kellan murmurs, leering over me next to Wes. “There’s nothing hotter than seeing you all scared like this.”

“Wes,” I choke.

His grin only grows. He *likes* this. Wesley Carver, the monster who haunts my every living second, feeds on my pain and misery.

“Hey.” Cal places a hand on Wes’s shoulder. “Let up.”

For a split second, Wes only tightens his grip on my throat. Then, with a disgusted look, he lets go. My knees give out, but I don’t hit the floor. No, I crumple right into Cal’s arms as blood rushes back to my head.

“Jesus,” Cal mutters as he scoops me up and walks to the bed. He sits on the edge, keeping me in his lap as I regain my senses.

Wes looks between Kellan and Cal. “The night goes as planned from here.”

I cringe, trying to free myself from Cal’s arms, but he’s too strong. “What do you mean? This was enough. You don’t need to torment me more.”

“Oh, Harper,” Wes says, his gaze moving back to me. “Tormenting you is my *favorite* pastime.”

“N-no,” I protest, my voice thick. “No, Wes, *please*. You know I don’t deserve this. I don’t know why you chose me, but you can just leave me alone. I’m begging you—”

“This again?” He rolls his eyes. “Where’s her gag?”

“What?” I screech.

“Maybe give her a break,” Cal says.

“You’re not backing out now,” Wes snaps. “This part was your fucking idea.”

Kellan grabs something from one of the drawers underneath his bed. I try to turn away as he approaches, but Wes and Cal hold my head still.

“What the fuck, guys?” I exclaim. “A *gag*? This is too far. *Way* too—”

Kellan shoves the ball gag into my mouth and quickly fastens the straps behind my head. It keeps my mouth open with the ball stuffed behind my teeth. The taste of silicone fills my mouth, and I scream in frustration. The sound is muffled, which only pisses me off more.

“Finally.” Wes pats my cheek, his voice dripping with smug satisfaction. “I won’t tell you again, Harper. I’m done with your fucking games. You lie to us, I’ll take away your ability to speak.” He pinches my nostrils shut. “And breathe.”

I try to knock his arm away, but he catches my wrist with his free hand. The gag is big enough that I can barely get any air in through my mouth.

“Look at her, Kellan,” Wes says. “Look how scared she is.”

I whimper, humiliated and angry at how pitiful I sound. Wes keeps me there until my body is screaming for oxygen. I begin to slump into Cal, and finally, Wes lets go.

All three of them watch me as I take in the deepest breath I can. I can’t stand it, so I turn and bury my face in Cal’s chest, still trying to get in more air. He makes a worried sound and

rubs my back. It's strangely comforting, but I don't have the brain space to think about how worrying that is right now.

Wes snorts. "Careful, Cal. Don't let her get under your skin. You can't go soft on us now."

"I won't," he says lowly.

Wes grabs my chin, yanking it up so I'm forced to look at him. Like this, he's terrifying. His eyes are void of any emotion except a sick, twisted satisfaction at seeing me like this.

*Why me? What did I do to you to make you hate me?*

"Kellan, come downstairs with me for a minute," Wes says when he lets me go.

"Sure thing."

They grab their masks and disappear down the stairs. I'm left alone in Cal's lap, too tired and humiliated to fight now that I actually have a chance at escape.

He's still rubbing my back, and when he realizes I'm shivering, he wraps a blanket around my shoulders. All I can do is blink back tears. If I cry, my nose might get clogged up, and then I won't be able to breathe at all.

With a pleading noise, I look to Cal. He sighs and shakes his head. The red light reflects off his blond hair and light skin, making him look more attractive than he has any right to at the moment.

"Please," I try to say, grabbing one of his hands with both of mine. I bring it to the gag's buckle, and when he doesn't move to undo it, I try to figure it out myself.

"Ah ah, Athelia. It stays on." Gently, he takes my hands and places them in my lap.

My scream is desperate, and I fist his shirt, trying to beg him with my eyes.

All Cal does is give me a pitying frown. "I can't, baby. This is part of our plan. And dammit, I knew I'd like how you looked with this on." He strokes his knuckles across my tear-

stained cheeks. “You’re so fucking sexy like this. Even if I could take it off, I wouldn’t.”

With a scoff, I look away from him. I hold my chin high, but saliva pools at the back of my throat. No matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to swallow. At this rate, I’m going to die by choking on my own spit.

“Tip your head forward,” Cal says when I let out a panicked sob. “It’ll drain out of your mouth.”

I shake my head. Absolutely not. If it was someone else—someone I fucking *trusted*, then it’d be a different story. But I’m not drooling all over myself in front of my bullies. They’ll enjoy it too much.

“Trust me,” Cal says assuringly, applying pressure to the back of my head until I look down at my lap.

*I hate you. I hate all of you, and I’m going to find a way to make you pay for this.*

Drool drips from my mouth, leaking from around the ball gag. It’s humiliating—degrading—but that’s how they want this to feel.

Cal keeps rubbing my back as saliva coats my chin and falls onto my body. “I know you’re wondering why,” he says after a minute. “It’s too large a punishment for what you did. But Wes can’t stop thinking about you. And... well, I like it when you cry.”

*I can’t take this.*

I’m not sure what exactly makes the thought pop into my head. Probably the idea that they’re doing all this shit to me because of something *I* did. I haven’t done a single thing to hurt them.

Before Cal continues, I elbow him in the stomach. I put all my strength into it, and he grunts, doubling over.

Springing from his lap, I bolt for the stairs. But he grabs my hair and yanks me back, making me scream with pain. Tears flood my eyes and fall onto my cheeks.

“Nice try,” he says roughly, “but you’ll have to do much better than that if you want to get away from the three of us.”

With a groan, I massage my scalp, glancing back at the stairs. I almost made it, but Cal’s right—it wouldn’t have mattered. Wes and Kellan’s footsteps sound on the metal, and soon we can see them ascending.

When Wes sees us, he raises an eyebrow. “Maybe I was wrong.”

“Told you,” Kellan says.

Cal still has a firm grip on my hair. “Are we ready? This next part is my favorite.”

My stomach turns with dread. That can only mean one thing—tonight is about to get much, much worse.



# Chapter Nine

## Cal

Once we pull Athelia's dress back up, we all put our masks on. Wes leaves us without a single glance at Athelia, and she glares after him.

"What the fuck was he talking to you about?" I ask once he's gone.

"Wanted to make sure you wouldn't go too easy on her." Kellan nods to Athelia before grinning at her. "You're going to hate this next part, *ma belle*."

She refuses to look at either of us, staring at the floor instead. It's cute, honestly, that she thinks we care.

Well—maybe we care a *little*, but it's more amusing than anything.

"I'm not gonna go easy on her," I grit out. "But Wes was about to fucking kill her."

Kellan rolls his eyes. "He wouldn't have gone that far, and you know it. Now let's get moving."

When Kellan grabs the cuffs again, Athelia tries to hide behind me. I really don't know why she thinks I'll save her. Plenty of people have labeled me as the nicest of our trio, and I suppose that's true, but only by a very thin margin.

With my help, Kellan manages to cuff Athelia's wrists in front of her. Her breaths are short and quick as we guide her down the spiral staircase and out into the hallway.

It's still empty up here, exactly as it should be. We can't take Athelia through the main parts of the house like this, but we already built that into our plan. There's a second staircase that leads to a small mudroom, and that'll take us out into the side yard.

Wes said there were some renovations done to the house in the nineties, and the plan was to turn the house into a hotel of sorts. Some guy wanted to attract the types who're into creepy, haunted houses. Considering the history of this one, it would've been a perfect tourist trap, but he fell off a ladder and broke his back before he could finish.

I go down the stairs first because I'm pretty sure that if Athelia falls, Kellan won't bother catching her. We keep the light off to avoid attracting attention from anyone who's gathered around the fire in the backyard.

"If you start making noise once we're outside, I'll spank your ass until it bleeds, you hear me?" Kellan tells Athelia.

I can just barely make out her nod as she steps off the staircase and into the mudroom. Kellan peers out the window before slowly opening the door that leads outside. We pull Athelia through.

Obviously, we're both half-expecting her to run. She's terrified, and she knows it's only going to get worse from here.

"Don't," Kellan growls when she glances at the fire.

No one has noticed us. It's completely dark out, and everyone is absorbed in their own conversations, just as we expected.

Athelia tenses, but she doesn't try anything as we drag her through the yard. The property borders on a large forest, and we have a way to go before we get to where we're headed.

Once we're in the woods, I pull out my phone and turn on the flashlight. Athelia has already stumbled and almost fallen

twice, and it's pissing Kellan off. I have no desire to deal with his grumpy ass, so if I have to light the way, so be it.

The farther into the forest we go, the more jumpy Athelia gets. Still, I don't think she knows just how scared she should be. No one will find her out here.

"You gonna fuck her?" Kellan asks me.

Athelia makes a terrified noise.

"I can wait. I'd prefer to get back to the party."

"Whatever."

We walk in silence for a little longer until we find the tree we marked earlier. Kellan drops his backpack onto the ground, unzips it, and pulls out some rope. I shove Athelia against the tree, careful that she doesn't hit her head too hard.

*Maybe I am going too easy on her.*

"Keep her just like that," Kellan tells me.

It's not that hard to keep her still. She's small, and we're slowly draining the will out of her. It doesn't help that as Kellan starts wrapping the rope around both her and the tree, she begins sobbing uncontrollably.

*Fuck.* Crying can come with a lot of snot, which means her nose is gonna get all clogged up. We love watching her suffer, but I don't want to kill her.

Once Kellan has looped around the tree a couple times, securing her to it and trapping her arms against her body, I reach behind her head. The relieved sound that leaves her throat tugs at my heartstrings—or what's left of them, I suppose.

When this all started freshman year, I didn't think it'd last this long or get so intense. But with every prank, every cruel word, every rumor, our obsession with Athelia grew. It's especially true for Wes, but I can't deny the way I feel about her. Same with Kellan.

Athelia Harper may have hurt us, but we still can't get enough of her.

When I get the buckle undone, I let the ball gag fall from her mouth. She tries to breathe at the same time she tries to cough, dropping her head as tears fall from her cheeks.

“What the hell are you doing?” Kellan snaps.

“We were gonna take it off in a couple minutes anyway,” I say.

“Yeah, but *not yet.*”

“Come on, man. She’s crying.”

Kellan stops, and I can just make out his hard look in the dark.

“I’m just trying to make sure we don’t kill her,” I insist.

“Oh, shut up,” Athelia seethes. “Stop acting like you care.”

Kellan mutters something under his breath before he continues tying her to the tree. I step back to let him work.

*So much for keeping him from getting grumpy.*

“Why are you doing this?” Athelia demands. “I didn’t do anything! You three have ruined my reputation on campus, you constantly harass me, and sometimes I think you *do* want to kill me. Fucking why, Cal?”

“Do you really not know?” I ask, my voice softer than I mean for it to be.

“Shut up,” Kellan snaps. “Wes warned you about this. She’s getting under your skin. Don’t let her manipulate you.”

“I’m not,” Athelia whispers.

“What did I say?” he shouts.

Athelia cringes into the tree, and more tears spring to her eyes. I have to stop myself from moving toward her and wiping them from her cheeks.

*Fuck. Shit, shit, shit.*

Turning away, I push my mask off my head and rub my face. If I keep looking at her, I’m not sure I can stay away, and that’s not part of the plan.

Once Kellan is done, he comes to my side. “She’s not going anywhere. Let’s go.”

“You’re leaving me here?” Athelia’s voice is small and scared.

Kellan gives me that warning look again. I have to get it together—I have to find a way to prove to Kellan that I’m not wimping out. Otherwise, Wes will be pissed.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. “We are,” I tell her, forcing any warmth and sympathy out of my voice. “But not quite yet.”

Kellan looks at me suspiciously, but he doesn’t stop me as I turn and move closer to Athelia. The color drains from her face as she realizes I’m not lying.

“Cal,” she whispers. “Please don’t. It’s cold and dark, and there are animals.”

I ignore her, wiping at her mouth with the sleeve of my hoodie. Her brows furrow in confusion until I lower my head and kiss her. When she tries to turn away, I grab her chin to keep her in place.

Athelia doesn’t bite me the way she bit Wes. Hell, she even lets me slide my tongue into her mouth, and she moans so quietly I almost miss it.

“I loved eating your pussy earlier,” I say against her mouth, “but I didn’t get to do nearly enough of it.”

She shakes her head.

“I won’t right now,” I tell her. “That’ll come later. For now...” I slip the straps of her dress down her shoulders, letting the material fall until her breasts are fully exposed. “I want a good view of these while you come all over my fingers like the naughty slut you are.”

As I slide my hand under her skirt, Kellan comes up beside me. He gives me an approving nod—not that I need his fucking approval—as Athelia snuffles.

“Just wait until you fuck her,” he says. “Her pussy is magic. Better than I remember.”

“I hate you,” Athelia whispers as I coat my fingers in her desire. “Both of you.”

“Those words are music to our ears, *ma belle*,” Kellan says.

When I find Athelia’s clit, she tries to stifle a whimper, but she fails. As I circle it with my finger, she squirms against the ropes.

“I’m pretty sure you’re wetter than before,” I whisper in her ear. “Does part of you enjoy getting finger-fucked by the men you hate? The men you’re terrified of?”

Athelia moans when I slide two fingers inside of her. She clenches around them, making me smirk.

“You do, don’t you?” I chide. “Are you that desperate, baby?”

“Stop,” she whispers.

Now that I’ve started, stopping is the last thing I want to do. She’s squirming on my hand, caught between what she knows is right and what she wants. Her mouth is saying one thing, but her body is saying another.

It’s time to get them both on the same page.

Keeping two fingers inside her, I press small circles into her clit with my thumb.

“Cal,” she groans. Her eyes roll into the back of her head, and all of a sudden, I’m not just doing this to punish her.

I want to pull that reaction from her again.

I want to be the one who gives her pleasure.

Who *owns* it.

I curl my fingers inside her, hitting her g-spot over and over again. Athelia gasps, and tears fill her eyes. I can see it all over her face—she’s trying to convince herself she doesn’t want this. Hell, there’s a part of her that truly doesn’t want my hands on her. But she’s never been able to help the way her body reacts to us.

It makes this whole thing way better. I stood by while Kellan pushed her into the fountain. I helped spread the nasty rumors that she's a cheater. I came up with the idea of Kellan hacking into her university account and replacing her well-thought-out paper with a shitty one. And then, of course, there's the pond incident.

She knows I did all that shit.

Yet here she is, about to come from a few minutes of work.

"You're pathetic," I whisper, just loud enough for Kellan to hear.

Never in a million years did I expect *that* to be the thing that pushes her over the edge. But one second I'm saying it, and the next she's coming and crying out my name while she does.

And fuck, I don't think I've ever liked my name more than when she says it like this.

"That's it, baby," I groan. "Give it all to me. You're a filthy little whore, aren't you?"

"Cal," she sobs. She's shaking her head, but she's too far gone to say anything else.

"What was that about hating me?" I murmur as I pull my fingers out of her. They're covered in a mixture of her desire and Kellan's cum, and I smear it all over her bare chest. "Because—and Kellan, correct me if I'm wrong—I don't think women usually come that hard for men they can't stand."

Kellan hums lowly, his eyes bright with sadistic delight. "You're very, very right. Tell us, *ma belle*. Have you ever come for a man you hated? And remember—don't lie."

She clamps her mouth shut.

"It looks like you're right on two counts tonight, Cal," Kellan says. He pinches one of Athelia's nipples lightly, making her jerk. "She really is pathetic."

With that, we back away. Athelia doesn't even beg us to let her go—she knows it's useless. I grab my mask from where I dropped it on the ground, and we turn to go.

“I really thought we’d lost you there for a few minutes,” Kellan says. “But that was a good save.”

A rock forms in the pit of my stomach. He’s not actually saying it, but I know what he means. Kellan is fully aware that I forced myself to do that. Well, that I forced myself to *start* doing it.

I swallow down the lump of regret in my throat. “It won’t happen again.”



# Chapter Ten

## Kellan

“Fuck—I forgot my backpack.”

Cal sighs. “Do you want me to go back with you?”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I’ll catch up with you at the party. Remember, put your mask back on.”

He makes a surprised noise before staring at the mask in his hand. Our whole walk back to the party, he’s been quiet. It’s the only thing that makes sense, I guess.

Cal didn’t really care about what Athelia did to us freshman year, but he definitely had a thing with her. Wes is the one who was wounded the deepest. She wronged him the most.

Still, it took some coaxing to get Cal on board with our overall plan for her. Deep down, he’s a sadist, but he still cares about people more than he should. We had to help him unleash the darker parts of himself, and Athelia has been the perfect catalyst.

Cal looks like he wants to say something to me, but then he shakes his head. “See you in a few.”

“I won’t tell him,” I call after watching him walk off for a couple seconds. “You did good. That’s the only thing that matters.”

He nods, not turning back to look at me before continuing on.

Not wanting to waste any time, I jog back to where Athelia is tied up. I hope Cal knows I meant what I said. I'd never break Wes's trust in him unless there was actual reason to. All I plan on telling Wes is that he was wrong—that Cal took great pleasure in making Athelia cry and beg.

It's not even a lie.

I hear Athelia's sobs before I can see her. She sounds terrified, and even though I just came an hour ago, it makes my dick hard. Her fear is addictive.

"Not even trying to free yourself?" I ask, shining the flashlight from my phone on her. Part of me is disappointed she's not struggling against the ropes. It'd only make her feel more hopeless—there's no way she's getting free.

"Kellan?" The word is nothing more than a whimper. "Kellan, there's something—there's something on me."

"Yeah, you're covered in drool and cum. Looks good on you."

"No." Her voice breaks, and I almost feel guilty, but then I remember what she did.

Works every time. *No one* hurts Wes and gets away with it. Not on my watch.

"What?" I snap.

"It's on my shoulder. I felt it crawl onto me."

I step closer. Athelia winces when I shine my flashlight in her eyes, but I couldn't care less. I focus on her shoulder, and the moment I see it, a sick plan forms in my mind. Wes will be proud.

"It's a spider," I tell her. *Truth.*

"What?" she screeches. "Kellan! Get it off me!"

"Yeah, no, I'm not touching it. I've heard about this kind—they're venomous." *Lie.*

“What?” The distress in her voice has me smiling.

“I’d stop freaking out if I were you. Agitate it, and it’ll bite you.”

“Kellan, please,” she whispers.

“Absolutely the fuck not. I don’t want to die. Don’t much care about you, though.”

“P-please. I’m not trying to manipulate you. Or Cal, or Wes. All I want is to live a normal life. One without all of you making me wish I was dead. That’s what you wanted from this weekend, right? You wanted to make me wish I’d never been born. You did it, Kellan. Congrats. Now please just let me go and leave me alone.”

*Never.*

“You know,” I say thoughtfully, tracing a finger down her body and gathering some leftover cum onto it. “The past three years could’ve been so different. All of this because you made one wrong choice.” I click my tongue. “Too bad for you, huh?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she whispers, and I realize she’s trembling. Maybe from the fear, maybe from the cold. Probably both. “What decision?”

“Think, Athelia. Think *really* hard.”

“I...”

For a second, I think she’s got it, but the only thing she gives me is more disappointment. Typical.

“I don’t know, Kellan. Just tell me.”

“Open your mouth.”

She winces, but she does as I say. I spread the cum from my finger all over her tongue before shoving deeper, making her gag.

“Suck it off.”

She does.

Stepping back, I shine my light over her body. It's tempting enough to drive a man mad. And her breasts... I've never seen a more perfect pair.

The spider has barely moved, not that I care. It's not venomous. I'll never tell her that, though.

With a sigh, I reach out and pinch one of her nipples. She gasps, unmoving, too terrified of the spider.

"Your tits were made in heaven," I murmur before leaning down and sucking on one of her nipples.

"Kellan!"

"If I was truly cruel, I'd finger you right here like this and make you come with that spider ready to bite you at a second's notice. Then I'd watch you die with a grin on my face."

She snuffles, and another tear falls. I wipe it away gently before sucking the salty liquid off my finger.

"But I'll just leave you here," I say. "Give you some time to think and remember."

"You don't have to do this," she whispers.

"Oh, I know." I smile. "I *want* to." With that, I turn on my heel and walk off into the woods. I barely hear her as she tries to appeal to the hollow cavity in my chest where my heart should be.

"Kellan, please. I'm cold."

I stop, not even bothering to turn around as I say over my shoulder, "I don't know what ever gave you the impression that I care."

...

Back at the party, I find Wes and Cal around the fire with a small group of people. Most everyone is inside at this point, either playing games in the basement, hanging out, or dancing.

I grab a drink, sipping it as I make my way to Wes's side. He doesn't ask about Athelia—not with this many people around. But my nod is enough to satisfy him. His and Cal's

masks glow in the darkness, and I catch a few people staring at us.

“Everything’s going fine,” he tells me. “Barrett said Colton, Xander, and Lucas haven’t bothered showing up again.”

“It’d better stay that way,” I growl. My mood has significantly soured over the course of the night, and I’d love nothing more than to give someone a good beating.

“Hey, you.” Someone tugs on the sleeve of my hoodie.

Turning, I look down to find Haven still grabbing onto my sleeve. She’s frowning, and her phone is clutched in her other hand. Looks like Aaron fucked her good and hard, though. Her hair is a mess, and her crop top is on a little crooked.

“Have you seen my friend?” she asks. “Her name is Athelia.”

“No, sorry,” I say with a shrug. “I showed her something upstairs, but then she headed off on her own. Said something about getting some food from the kitchen, I think.”

Haven chews on her bottom lip for a moment before glancing at her phone. “I’ve texted and called her, like, a million times. It’s not like her to not answer.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for her,” I say.

She nods, turning to go. But then she whips around again, her eyes wide. “Hey, um. Do you know the name Wesley Carver?”

Wes goes stiff beside me, but I don’t think Haven notices.

“Yeah, I’ve talked to him a few times. Why?”

“Have you seen him around here tonight? Or either of his friends? Kellan Ambrose or Calidore Graham.”

“No, don’t think so. Why? They trouble or something?”

Haven grimaces. “That’s one way to put it. Well, thanks. I’m gonna look through the house for her again.”

“Hope you find her,” I call, but she’s already sprinting off.

Wes is tense as hell, so I rest a hand on his shoulder and lean in close. "I'll take care of it."

He relaxes. After I slap him on the back, I head into the house.

Haven is a snag in our plan we didn't account for, but it's only a minor one. It only took me two seconds to figure out just how to deal with it.

Inside, it looks like some new people have shown up. Some guys in masks, a few classmates I was hoping would make it, and some faces I don't recognize. At this point, our party has served its purpose, but I'm still glad it turned out so well.

Thanks to my mask, no one recognizes me, so no one stops me on my way upstairs. I nod to Barrett, who's still faithfully keeping everyone away from our rooms. It helps that he has a direct view of the front door, too.

"No issues?" I ask.

"None."

"Good." *Now let's keep it that way.*

Haven doesn't seem too worried about Athelia yet, but that could change at any second. If she does something rash like call the cops, we're all fucked. No doubt, someone saw Athelia head upstairs with me, and it wouldn't take the police much to find that out.

Haven believed me when I said Athelia left me after a few minutes. The cops, however, probably wouldn't.

In my room, I tear off my mask and dash up the stairs. Athelia's phone is still on my nightstand, right where she left it.

It only takes me three tries to guess her passcode, and then I head into her messages. I read through them to get an idea of how Athelia texts. Grammatically correct, always uses punctuation, very few emojis.

I shouldn't even be surprised.

*Athelia: Hey, sorry I worried you. I ended up leaving with a guy and couldn't find you to let you know. It's my bad, I should've texted you.*

Haven's reply is almost immediate.

*Haven: OH THANK GOD*

*Haven: I was SO worried*

*Haven: Tell me about it tomorrow?*

*Athelia: Sounds great!*

Blowing out a breath, I set her phone on my nightstand and slump onto my bed. That should placate Haven until at least tomorrow morning. As for what to do then... we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

Pulling my own phone from my pocket, I text mine, Wes's, and Cal's group chat.

*Kellan: Handled.*

*Wes: Thank you.*

I close my eyes for a few minutes, soaking in everything that's happened tonight. So far, things have gone *more* than according to plan. We were originally going to start with tying Athelia to the tree. Having her practically initiate sex with me was an added bonus.

And fuck, what a bonus it was.

Opening my eyes, I look to my floor. Her torn panties are still where I threw them to the ground. Bending down, I scoop them into my hand and bring them to my nose. I inhale and groan at her scent.

*Please—please fuck me like I'm a whore.*

My gaze travels to my bed. The blankets are all messed up, and the memory of her bent over the mattress is still so fresh, it's like she's here.

She begged me to fuck her. *Me*—one of the people she really, truly does hate. Because I don't think I meant what I

said earlier in the woods, about her not actually hating us. She does, possibly just as much as Wes hates her.

Problem is, none of us can stop thinking about her. We went from punishing her for choosing Professor Kammes over us, to torturing her for plaguing our minds.

She's the first thing I think about most mornings. I can't even come without thinking of Athelia damn Harper. And the worst part is, I like it that way.

"Shit," I grumble. I don't like doing all this thinking—it only pisses me off.

Throwing Athelia's panties to the ground, I stand. I need to take my mind off her for a few hours. And thankfully, the best possible distraction awaits downstairs—friends, music, and alcohol.



# Chapter Eleven

## Athelia

I'm not sure how long it is after Kellan leaves that the spider moves. Ever since he told me it's venomous, I've been frozen, too terrified to even attempt flicking it off.

But now, it's moving across my collarbone, taking its good old time. Slowly, it makes its way down my chest, and for a moment I'm terrified it's going to get stuck in the drying cum and drool coating my skin.

I wonder if it can feel my heartbeat—if it knows how terrified I am of it.

*What if I die out here?*

*What if I'm never able to see Haven again?*

*Or my parents?*

Relief flickers in my chest at the realization of who I'd never have to deal with again, and then surprise when I realize I'm more afraid of Professor Kammes than I am of the boys.

*At least I got orgasms out of tonight. Can't say the same for when I'm with that disgusting excuse of a man.*

Immediately, I'm repulsed by my thoughts. It's not like I enjoyed Cal fingering me. And while I was having the time of

my life with Kellan, that's before I realized it was *him*.

*You've always been attracted to them*, a voice says in the back of my mind. *You used to fantasize about them nightly. Still do sometimes.*

"That's because I'm fucked up," I hiss, fully aware that I'm talking to a voice in my head in the middle of a forest. "Just because I've thought about it doesn't mean I want it."

Still, the unease doesn't completely leave me. A secret, dark part of me was thrilled that Cal kept touching me even when I told him to stop. I wouldn't have felt that way if it had been Wes or Kellan. They're both terrifyingly heartless.

But Cal—he has a softer, caring side that he tries desperately to hide. It came out tonight, and it gave my mind just enough to latch onto. I was able to trust him. It was only a little, but it was enough for me to enjoy it without feeling violated.

Or at least... without feeling *too* violated.

I've always loved the concept of being dominated—of not having a choice in what happens to my body. But I've had that choice taken from me countless times, and it'll happen again. And again, and again, and again. *That*, I hate. But what happened with Cal...

It's also my fault for dreaming up different, much better versions of them in my head. I did it to cope with the bullying, I think. For those first couple weeks of freshman year, we were friends. They looked out for me. When I lost them, I missed the feeling of someone having my back.

So, like a fucking idiot, I made up versions of them who still liked me. Ones who were kind to me and defended me. It was stupid, but it helped me get through the years. On occasion, I even fantasized about them killing Professor Kammes for me.

I didn't see much harm in it until... well, until tonight. Because there's a shameful, dark part of me that enjoyed Cal fingering me while he and Kellan taunted me.

*You're delusional*, a new voice tells me. *You're trying to pretend you were okay with it so you don't have to*

*acknowledge what they did to you.*

“Am I?” I whisper. “Or am I that sick?”

*And stupid?*

Obviously, I get no answer, other than the spider moving farther down my body. It climbs onto the ropes, and I sob in relief, watching as it comes to a standstill again. I’m not out of the woods yet—pun unintended, because it’s possible I never actually *will* make it out—but I can handle this.

I’ve tried to free myself, but it’s impossible. Maybe I could if I had use of my hands, but they’re still cuffed, trapped in between my body and the tight ropes. I’m royally fucked, and the only people who know where I am don’t give a shit about me.

There’s no use in calling for help. We walked for so long, and the forest will absorb my screams before they even get halfway to the house. And then there’s the music, the sounds of everyone having a good time, and the alcohol inhibiting everyone’s minds.

No one’s coming for me.

Staring up through the trees, I glimpse the moon. It’s not full, but it almost is.

*It’s just you and me, moon. And this goddamned spider.*

*Possibly until I die.*

# Chapter Twelve

## Wes

By the time I make it out to the woods, Athelia has been tied up for hours. I keep my mask on minus the voice changer. There's no need for that now.

When I get to the tree we picked out earlier this week, I stay in the shadows of the forest. Most of the leaves have fallen, giving way to the moonlight filtering in through the barren branches. It lights up Athelia's skin, showcasing the dried cum on her chest and her smeared makeup.

She doesn't seem to be crying anymore, which is disappointing, but I can fix that easily. Either way, she's fucking gorgeous. We've made a mess of her—finally started claiming her as ours—and I love how it looks on her.

After a few minutes of watching her, I grow impatient. She's shivering, and she keeps glancing down at the ropes like they'll fall away if she looks at them right.

I move in slowly, like a predator sneaking up on its prey. Except mine stands no chance of survival.

A twig snaps under my boot, and Athelia gasps. I can just make out her lifting her head in the darkness.

“Hello?” she calls. “If there’s someone out there, please help me. I’m tied to a tree, and I can’t get the ropes undone, and I’m so cold.”

“No one’s coming to help you, Harper.”

Athelia’s face falls. “No,” she groans. “No, just go away.”

“You don’t want me to cut you down?”

Silence.

I step closer.

“You mean that?” she asks timidly.

“It’s why I came out here.”

I don’t think she trusts that—smart—but she doesn’t tell me to leave again.

Unzipping my backpack, I pull out a bottle of water. “You thirsty?”

“Yeah.”

“Here.” I take off the cap and hold it to her lips, but she doesn’t open them. “Come on, don’t be stupid. Drink.”

She swallows, narrowing her eyes at me, but then she opens her mouth. I pour the water slowly, letting her gulp it down without any spillage. Once she’s drank half, I pull it away.

“No,” she moans. “More.”

*So naive.*

I give her the rest of the water, smirking behind my mask. Here she is, yet again, sealing her own miserable fate. Stupid girl.

Athelia tries to take the last bit of water too fast and ends up sputtering and coughing everywhere. After she’s caught her breath, I pull a bandana from my back pocket and wipe at her mouth gently, cleaning up the excess liquid. Her hair is a mess, thanks to all we’ve done to her, so I push it back behind her ears.

“Why are you being nice to me all of a sudden?” Athelia asks.

“Who said I am?”

She doesn't seem to know what to do with that, so she frowns. I brush my fingers over the ropes. Kellan tied them tight, although it doesn't look like Athelia is having any blood flow problems.

“Is there—is there a spider on the ropes?”

I smile. Kellan told me and Cal about finding her all freaked out because of a spider on her shoulder.

“I don't see one.”

“Oh, thank god,” she whispers. Her head falls back, hitting the trunk of the tree, and she closes her eyes in relief.

“Scared of them or something? I'll have to keep that in mind.”

Athelia goes stiff. “You wouldn't.”

The quiver in her voice sends satisfaction winding through me. “Not tonight, no.”

That seems to put her at ease, but only slightly. She wiggles in her restraints before looking up at me. “Are you going to let me go? And you don't have to wear the mask anymore. I know who you are.”

I hum. “But I know it unnerves you.”

She looks away, something that looks suspiciously like guilt covering her features. That's new. In all my interactions with her, I don't think I've ever seen her look guilty.

“Hey.” Gently, I place a bent knuckle under her chin and turn her head back until her gaze locks with mine. “What was that look for?”

“Probably because I hate you,” she spits out, but there's not as much force behind it as there usually is.

“No, that's not what that was. Why are you feeling guilty?”

*Does she finally get it now? What she did to us? What she's done to me since?*

I don't think so—I think this has to do with something else entirely—but I can't be sure.

“It doesn't matter.”

“Harper.” I cup her face with one hand, using the other to run my fingers through her tangled hair. The way she grudgingly leans into my touch confirms a suspicion I've had for years.

*There's a part of her that still wants us.*

“Don't,” she whispers. “Don't be nice to me.”

“Why?”

“Because then I'll...” Her gaze flicks over my body before she looks away again. “Never mind.”

*Just as I thought.*

“Fine. If you don't want nice, I'll happily give you the opposite.”

Her eyes flare as she realizes what she just signed herself up for—practically *begged* me for. “No! Wes, that's not what I meant.”

“Too bad.” I pull my knife from my pocket, flipping it open. “You should've picked your words more carefully.”

Athelia shivers when I touch the flat of the blade to her collarbone. I'm careful not to cut her as I move it across her skin. Her fear is palpable, the air between us buzzing with it.

“Please don't hurt me,” she whispers.

My smirk is audible in my voice as I say, “I don't make promises I can't keep.”

Athelia does her best to keep her breaths shallow as I trace the dull side of the knife over her breasts and nipples. She whimpers at the cold of the metal, and I watch as her nipples grow even harder.

“You want me to let you go?”

“God,” she practically sobs. “Yes.”

I lean in close enough that I can smell the remnants of her honeysuckle perfume. I nip at her earlobe before whispering, “Then beg me to.”

She doesn’t even hesitate. She immediately starts babbling and begging me to cut her down. Tears fall from her eyes, and for a second I wonder if she can cry on command or something. But her desperation is too strong, her voice quivering in a way I’ve only heard when I’ve really, truly hurt her.

*Perfect. Have we finally broken her?*

“I think I want something in exchange for cutting you down.” I move the knife back up her body, farther away from the ropes.

“Anything,” she croaks. “Please just cut me down, Wes. I wanna go home.”

That second part isn’t happening, but she doesn’t need to know that yet.

Closing my knife, I slide it back into my right pocket, retrieving something else from my left one. I wasn’t sure if I’d use it on her, but I brought it just in case. You can never be too prepared.

When Athelia sees it, she shakes her head frantically. “No—no, please not another gag. Wes, no.” She turns her head, but I grab her chin and force her to straighten out. When her eyes meet mine, they turn pleading, and she whispers, “*Please.*”

“I really don’t know why you think saying please is going to help you at all. It just pisses me off—there are much better ways to beg. Now open your damn mouth, or I’ll leave you here all night.”

Multiple emotions flicker over her face in quick succession—anger, fear, humiliation, and finally, surrender to her fate. Athelia opens her mouth, shutting her eyes.

“Wider,” I tell her, “and keep your eyes open. You can’t hide from this.”



With a humiliated groan, Athelia opens her mouth wider. I slide the O-ring behind her teeth, fastening the straps behind her head like we did with the ball gag earlier. She's already bit me twice tonight, and I sure as hell am *not* giving her the chance to do that to my dick.

Since nothing is restricting her mouth, it'll be easier for her to breathe with this one. Until I have my cock shoved down her throat, that is.

I watch as Athelia works her throat, trying to swallow. She moans in frustration when she can't, glaring up at me.

"I barely got to enjoy seeing you gagged earlier. You wouldn't want to deprive me of that, would you?"

She can't reply, which I know only frustrates her more. I brush the pads of my thumbs over her pebbled nipples before pinching them hard. When she groans, I push my mask up, lean down, and flick one with my tongue.

Her surprised grunt has my dick hardening in my jeans. I'm sure she wasn't expecting to get any type of pleasure out of this interaction, but her nipples are practically begging to be sucked on.

When I pull away, Athelia is breathing more heavily than before. I smirk at her before lowering my mask again and pulling out my knife. She still shies away from it when I bring it closer to her body, but I don't touch her this time.

"Don't move," I tell her as I start sawing through the ropes. "I don't want to cut you on accident."

She does as I say, watching me with a cautious expression. She's still shivering, and she's been standing in the same position for so long that I'm sure she's stiff as hell.

I cut through the ropes, watching them fall to the ground one by one. Eventually, enough of them are severed that they're no longer holding Athelia up, and she crumples to the ground, barely catching herself with her cuffed hands.

She groans as she brushes the dirt off her hands. I let her finish before grabbing her by her hair and pulling her closer to me.

“Undo my pants.”

With her fists clenched, she narrows her eyes at me, a little bit of her usual fight returning to them.

Guess we haven't fully broken her yet.

“Do you want me to tie you to the tree again? Because that's still on the table if you don't cooperate.”

Whatever Athelia tries to say doesn't come out right thanks to the gag forcing her mouth open, but it sounds suspiciously like *fuck you*.

“Now, Athelia.”

With a huff, she reaches her cuffed hands up and undoes my pants. She pulls them down along with my briefs, just enough to release my dick. It's already rock hard thanks to the pissed off beauty kneeling at my feet.

“Kellan told me your throat feels better than any pussy he's ever had.” I trace a finger down her cheek. “Well, other than *your* pussy, but I'll fuck that later.”

She shifts uncomfortably, and I realize the forest floor is probably painful to kneel on. Hard dirt, pine needles, bugs, the works.

*Good. I hope she hates it.*

This is her ultimate punishment.

It's not supposed to be nice or pleasurable.

No, tonight and tomorrow are meant to be the worst days of her life. And I hope that by the end of it all, she's finally sorry.

# Chapter Thirteen

## Athelia

Dehumanizing.

That's the only word I can think of to describe the way Wes fucks my mouth.

He grabs my chin with one hand and fists the hair at the base of my neck with the other. It holds my head in the position he wants, completely uncaring of my level of discomfort.

When he thrusts into my mouth, I immediately gag. Kellan's cock may be longer, but Wes's is thicker, and he fills my mouth to an uncomfortable point.

"I bet you still like being treated like a whore." Wes drives into my mouth with the force and detachment of someone using a toy. He doesn't care if I can breathe, or that my jaw aches from overuse and being forced open for so much of tonight.

Want stirs in between my legs, causing my cheeks to heat with shame. Wes may be right, but I can't want it like this. *This* is too similar to what I'm forced into multiple times a week.

Except Wes was kind to me. He gave me water, and for a couple seconds, he was so uncharacteristically gentle with me. It was like freshman year before he and the guys decided they hated me.

*Oh. my. god. Shut the fuck up.*

“Relax your throat,” he commands roughly.

As I struggle to do what he says, the two opposing sides of my mind scream at each other.

*You love this, you fucked up slut.*

*No, you don't. You're just doing what you have to do to get back home.*

*Then why are you getting wetter?*

*It's a normal bodily reaction. Not your fault. It's not your fault.*

*Doesn't matter if it's your fault or not. You fucking want him.*

Wes groans as he pushes into my throat. He releases my chin to stroke up and down my jaw. “Oh, that’s it. Such a good girl for me, aren’t you?”

*Fuck.*

*Goddammit, why did he have to say that?*

I adjust my head, trying to find the best angle to take him deeper. Even as I gag and have to fight against my instinct to get him the fuck out of my throat, I want him to pound into me harder.

Wes throws his head back. “Even better than Kellan described. Your throat could be the only thing I fuck for the rest of my life, and I’d die a happy man, Harper.”

My throat rebels against his dick, and I start gagging uncontrollably. If he doesn’t stop, I’m gonna puke all over us both.

At the last second, Wes yanks my head back. I almost heave right onto his boots, but somehow I manage not to throw up.

“You’re a good fucking girl.”

I don't respond. Can't. This stupid gag makes it impossible to speak—or swallow. *Again.*

At least it's easier for all the saliva to drain from my mouth.

"You've deepthroated a lot of cocks, haven't you?" he asks me.

I shake my head. *Only one before tonight.*

"No? Well, *whoever* had you before us trained you well." He says *whoever* like he's in on the secret. Like he knows who spent the better part of the past three years shaping me into his own personal fucktoy.

I'd be worried he knows, but he doesn't. There's no possible way. Wes is just fucking with me the way he normally does. Besides, if he knew about Professor Kammes, Wes would know how much I hate it.

Wes slides back into my mouth. "Use your tongue. Kellan told me just how talented you are with it."

As I fight back the need to gag, I do as he says, licking the underside of his dick the way I did Kellan's.

"And Cal told me how easily you came all over his fingers. How wet you got."

Even if he wasn't relentlessly fucking my mouth and throat, I couldn't respond. I think he likes it—treating me like I'm nothing more than a toy to use as he sees fit. He can say whatever he wants to me, be as cruel as he always is, and for once, I can't talk back.

"You're a fucking slut, you know that?" He shoves into my throat again, groaning when I choke around his cock. "You've never cared about who fucks you, just that you're getting some good dick, huh?"

Tears fill my eyes, and I'm unsure if it's because of the gagging or because he's right. I can feel my desire coating my inner thighs.

*You disgust me, I tell myself. How the fuck are you turned on right now?*

But I know the answer. It's just like it was with Cal. I've wanted them for so long, even when they've been nothing but horrible to me. Maybe it's my fault for creating different versions of them in my mind. Versions who apologized for what they did wrong and begged for a second chance. Versions who protected me instead of hurting me.

That'll never happen in real life. *Never.*

So now I'm cornered, left in this hopeless predicament. Half of me craves them, and the other half would rather die than let them touch me.

Wes grabs my head and pushes me forward until the entirety of his thick, long cock is shoved down my throat. I can't help the embarrassingly wanton moan that escapes me as he does. And as he holds me there, pinching my nostrils shut and forcing me to look up at his red neon mask, electricity shoots to my clit. It's so strong, like he's actually touching me down there.

*Yes, my mind screams. Take away my power. Use me.*

But my heart aches, broken and barely hanging on.

Still, when Wes pulls out of my throat, I find myself sticking my tongue out and begging him for more with my eyes.

"How turned on are you right now, hmm?" He kicks my thighs apart before crouching in front of me. He shoves a hand under my dress, his fingers sliding against my pussy. "Goddamn, Athelia. Cal wasn't lying. You really are fucking pathetic."

All I can do is close my eyes in shame as drool and precum drip from my mouth. Wes shoves two fingers into me, and I choke on my next breath.

"I bet you want to touch yourself and make yourself come with my cock lodged down this perfect throat of yours." Wes sounds so annoyingly smug, but he's right.

He's got me. He's got me so fucking good, and he knows it. My body is aching with need, and when he pulls his fingers away, I groan in frustration. He pushes his mask up and licks his fingers clean, grinning at my horrified reaction.

“Go ahead,” Wes says, standing and pulling his mask down again. Those X’s for eyes will haunt me for life. “Make yourself come. It’s not like you have any dignity left at this point.”

My sob is cut short by him filling my mouth in one harsh, deep thrust. I have to maneuver my hands awkwardly considering they’re still cuffed, but I’m able to rub my clit and finally get some relief.

Wes’s thrusts somehow turn more merciless than before. He’s gripping my hair so tightly that I’m afraid he’ll pull it all out, but I don’t try to stop him. He’ll only go harder if I fight.

*You’re a little masochist, aren’t you?*

Kellan’s words come out of nowhere like a slap to the face. I’ve never considered myself one, but looking back, it makes sense. I’ve always enjoyed a little pain.

“God, Athelia.” Wes’s voice is strained.

I’m gagging and drooling all over his cock, yet he only goes harder. The breaths I’m able to get in are short and not nearly enough, and it only heightens my sensations. My head grows a little fuzzy as I rub my clit harder, faster.

It only takes a couple minutes before I feel my orgasm closing in. Wes’s groans are more consistent and closer together, and it’s driving me higher and higher.

The feeling of being used, of being completely powerless, is one I’ve craved for years. And Wes... he’s using me for his pleasure and only his pleasure. Knowing one of my deepest, darkest fantasies is finally happening in a manner at least somewhat close to what I’ve always wanted sends me barreling over the edge.

My screams are muffled by Wes’s cock, and I lightly stroke my clit, trying to make my orgasm last for as long as I can. Tears fill my eyes, and I stare up at Wes just as a soft grunt leaves his lips.

Cum hits the back of my throat, spilling out of my mouth as Wes pumps deeper into me, emptying straight into my throat. I choke and gag, hitting his leg repeatedly until he pulls out.

When he does, he shoves me away like he's disgusted with me.

He's silent as I fall onto my side, trying to swallow down the cum coating my throat. After a second, he makes a disturbed sound and stoops next to me. His fingers work at the back of my head, undoing the gag, and then he removes it from my mouth.

From there, I'm able to clear my airway enough to breathe. It takes some coughing and some painful swallowing, but I can finally get in a proper amount of oxygen.

Wes grabs the bandana he used to clean me up earlier and tosses it onto the ground. "Clean yourself up."

I grab it, trying to shake off the dirt and leaves before wiping at my face. My breathing is just returning to normal as I look up at him. He's fixed his pants, zipping and buttoning them up so it barely looks like he did anything.

Me, on the other hand... he's destroyed me.

Just like he always does.

"Give me your hands."

I hold them out when I see the key in his hand. When he undoes the cuffs, I immediately rub at my wrists. They weren't too tight, but I ended up putting pressure on my arms in weird ways while I was fingering myself.

"Get up."

Wes's voice is so cold and detached that it sends a shiver through me. Any warmth or care is gone, not that there was ever very much.

"Do I get to go home now?" I start to get up, but my head is spinning, and I fall on my ass.

"Get up, Harper," he snaps.

"I..." This time, I grab onto the tree and use it for balance. Once I'm on my feet, I lean against it, turning to look at Wes.

His head is tilted, that stupid mask glowing red and smiling at me with that stitched-together mouth. He's fucking sick for



doing this. I should be angry. So fucking angry.

Instead, all I feel is tired and maybe a little nauseated.

“I wanna go home,” I say weakly. I’m dizzy—so dizzy. Instead of stepping away from the tree to get the hell out of here, I slump against it. “Please take me home.”

Wes shakes his head, coming to stand in front of me. He takes my chin in between his thumb and forefinger, tilting it up until I’m looking past his mask and into his dark eyes.

“I want to go to bed,” I whine, unsure of why I think he’ll care. But my mind is just so... fuzzy.

“Not yet,” Wes says softly.

“Why am I not angry with you?” I whisper.

“Probably the drugs,” he says. “I’m sure you’ll feel differently in the morning.”

“D... drugs,” I slur.

“That’s right,” he says, and I swear I hear some warmth return to his voice. But what he says next sends chills through my whole body. “You’re coming home with me, and I’m going to let my friends use your helpless, unconscious body for the rest of the night.”

# Chapter Fourteen

## Wes

By the time Athelia realizes she needs to struggle, she's too far gone. She tries to push me away from her, but when I step back, she stumbles forward. I grab her waist, not wanting to deal with picking her up from the ground, and she fists my hoodie in her hands.

“Why me?” she asks, and now her voice is angry. *Distraught*. “What did I do to you to deserve this?”

I caress her face before wrapping an arm around her waist, holding her up as her body sags into mine. I hate how fucking tortured I sound as I reply, “Nothing, really. Yet somehow, everything.”

“No,” she mumbles. She reaches up, clumsily pushing at my mask until it falls to the ground. “Kellan said there was a choice.”

“Everyone makes choices, Athelia. That may have been what started it all, but my feelings for you would've grown anyway.”

“Feel...” Her chin drops, and I think she's out, but then her hands move to my chest again, her fingers curling around the fabric of my hoodie.

I've never told her that before. Hell, the only reason I am right now is because she won't remember this. The drugs are almost in full effect. I doubt she even has a full minute of consciousness left.

"Wes," Athelia whispers, slowly raising her head as if it's taking all her effort. She's trying so hard to stay conscious, but her strength is fading, and her eyelids are drooping. "I miss..."

"I know," I murmur, stroking her hair.

Usually, I'm disgusted with her, despite the fact that I can't get her out of my head. So I don't understand why I lean down and kiss her gently, cradling her head. Nor do I understand her soft, half-conscious moan, or why she tries to kiss me back.

I don't stop until her hands fall from my chest and her lips still against mine. When I pull away, I stare at her. Like this, the fear and hate are gone, replaced by a peaceful look I've seen the few times I snuck into her dorm to watch her sleep.

"You're ours now," I whisper to her, and then I gather her limp body in my arms and carry her home.

...

"Fuck, she's a mess." Kellan opens the side door to the house to let me in.

Cal is waiting in the mudroom, and he takes Athelia from me gently. It's a long walk from the tree, so I don't protest. I'm not sure how much longer I would've been able to hold her for anyway.

"Kellan, go start the bath in my room," I say. "We need to clean her up."

"You got it."

I follow Cal as we head upstairs. Aside from us, the house is deserted. The party ended and we kicked any stragglers out before I left so we wouldn't have to worry about people when I brought Athelia back.

In my room, I strip out of my clothes and shoes and head into the bathroom. We already have the soap, shampoo,

conditioner, and lotion that Athelia uses laid out and ready to go.

It's difficult to get her clothes off, but between the three of us, it only takes a couple minutes. My attention snags on a bruise on her side, and another near her hip. They're so faded I almost miss them, but when Cal brushes his fingers over one, it confirms that I'm not imagining them.

The three of us exchange a silent glance, but neither of them acknowledge her injuries out loud. I'll ask her about them when she's awake. If someone laid a single hand on her, they'll pay with their life. We're the only ones allowed to hurt her—to do *anything* to her.

Once the tub is full, I lower myself into it, and Cal gently places Athelia in the water with me. She slumps forward, but we both grab her and situate her so she's leaning against me, her back to my front. Her head rests on my shoulder, lolling to one side. I have to keep an arm secured around her waist to make sure she doesn't slide into the water and drown.

“Should we start with her body or her hair?” Cal asks. “Girls are particular about these things.”

Kellan makes a confused face. “Fuck if I know.”

“Her hair,” I say. “Get the pitcher.”

Cal grabs it from the counter and dunks it in the water. I push Athelia up a little and tilt her head back, and Cal cautiously pours the water over her hair until it's soaked.

“Shampoo first,” I say.

“I know *that*,” Cal snaps, grabbing the bottle and squirting a bunch into his hand. He rubs it into Athelia's dark hair, massaging her scalp before working his way down the rest of it.

“You gonna help?” Cal asks Kellan.

Kellan shrugs. “Don't see why. You've got it covered.”

Cal rolls his eyes before he starts rinsing the soap from Athelia's hair. We do the same thing with her conditioner, and the whole time, I watch how gentle Cal is with her.

Once Kellan got back from tying Athelia to the tree, he told me what Cal did to her. I was impressed. And after the way I kissed her while she was passing out, I can't judge him for being gentle with her. Three years of hating her, and I think *I'm* the one going soft.

Something happened out in the woods tonight between me and her. Maybe it was seeing her bound and helpless and begging for my help, but I don't think so.

No, I think it was that she showed she wanted me. *Still.*

After years of torment.

After choosing *him* over me.

Somehow, I think it might be possible that Athelia Harper is as obsessed with me as I am with her.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Cal

After we finish bathing Athelia, I'm able to convince the guys to let her body rest for a while before we do anything. We put her to bed in Wes's room before heading downstairs.

The house is a mess, and we spend a couple hours cleaning everything up. By the time we're finished, you can't tell that we even had a party.

"Hey," Kellan calls. "Wasn't there a painting over here?"

"What?" Wes finishes putting the leftover alcohol in the pantry before joining Kellan in the hallway that leads from the kitchen to the front door and staircase.

"The one of the church burning down." Kellan gestures to the empty spot on the wall. "Either of you move it?"

"No." Wes sets his jaw before pulling out his phone and sending a few messages. "I liked that painting, dammit. Is anything else missing?"

"Not that I saw, but maybe we should do a quick look around."

We all split up, looking through everything we can think of, but nothing else is missing.

“Someone left their vape on a windowsill,” I say, “but otherwise, nothing seems different.”

“Yeah.” Kellan runs a hand through his brown hair. “Everything’s in place.”

Wes checks his phone before sighing. “I texted Barrett and Aaron. They’ll get back to me when they’re awake. Either of you have any suspects?”

“None,” we both say.

“We’re finding the fucker who took it,” Wes says, his expression dark. “But for now, we have other things to attend to.”

“Fuck yeah.” Kellan starts for the stairs, but Wes grabs his shoulder.

“Shower first. You smell like sex.”

“Well, I did *have* sex earlier, and I’m about to do it again.”

“Not until you’ve showered. We all should. I don’t want your sweat and grime on my sheets.”

Kellan rolls his eyes, but I get it. I’m the same way.

After making sure all the windows and doors are locked, we head upstairs and to our respective rooms. I clean myself quickly but thoroughly, wondering how Athelia will react when she wakes up.

If Kellan has his way, she’ll wake up to him fucking her. He’s been talking about it for weeks—ever since we came up with the plan for her ultimate punishment.

I think it’s a little stupid that our plan is to make her want to die and then bind her to us permanently. Sounds like a way to make her resent and hate us more. But god, after the way she looked while she came all over my hand, I might be wrong.

Still, I’m a little uneasy about this part of the plan. We’ve already fucked with her a lot today, and we’ve never gone this far before. Sure, we’ve done plenty of things to her that she never consented to, but none of them were ever sexual. And now...

*What am I going to do if the guys go to far?*

*What is too far?*

If you ask me, we've already crossed the line, but I can't tell that to Wes. He needs this. On some level, I think we all do.

I don't like acknowledging the monster inside me. He usually lurks in the corners of my mind, shoving dark thoughts into my consciousness when I least expect them. Any time he sees an opportunity to cause someone pain, he takes it, and I have to wrestle with him to keep him under control.

It's exhausting.

Athelia truly doesn't deserve all we've done to her. Who she dates and sleeps with is her business. But she tangled herself in our web, disturbing us in the process. She's become our target. Our prey. A metaphorical punching bag, almost.

I suppose that's what happens when you shove three sadists in detention repeatedly for most of their senior year of high school. We became fast friends, and we realized pretty quickly that we needed an outlet for the darkest parts of us. When we decided to attend Pemberton University together, we found one.

So far, Athelia's been strong enough to withstand everything we've thrown at her. But what if that changes tonight?

*I can't let that happen.*

On some level, I know Wes wants to break her. This all started due to feelings of betrayal, but we're past that now. Now, he wants to punish her for *being*. For living rent-free in our heads but being untouchable.

I love him—never told him that, but of course I do. He's one of my best friends. Since senior year of high school, we've only gotten closer and closer. Normally, I trust his judgment, but when it comes to Athelia, it's clouded. More than clouded, honestly.

It's like he loses all sense around her.

Hurting Athelia may bring me pleasure, but I never want to go as far as Kellan and Wes do. I know what it's like to be



powerless at the hands of someone who's stronger than you. While I enjoy holding that power, I'll never forget that pain and fear.

As I towel off and throw some clothes on, my resolve hardens.

Parts of our plan are too much. I think I'll be able to convince Kellan easily, and between the two of us, we'll force Wes to think more clearly.

We have to. Otherwise, we'll never reach our end goal.

And that... I don't think he'll ever be able to come back from that.

...

In Wes's room, Athelia is still nestled under his blankets. Wes is leaning against the wall, about as far away as he can possibly get from her, but he can't take his eyes off her.

"I'm gonna make her come in her sleep," Kellan says. He didn't bother putting on any clothes, so the tattoos that cover his chest, shoulders, and upper arms are on full display.

"Is that even possible?" I make my way to the side of the bed and stroke Athelia's still-damp hair. She's not cold anymore, and she looks so peaceful.

The heartless side of me can't wait to disturb her. The part of me that cares, though, wants to take her into my room, lock the guys out, and lay next to her until she wakes up. For the moment, I set aside the latter part. That'll come later.

Much, *much* later.

"I read all about it," Kellan tells me as he pushes back the covers. "It can happen, and I'm not stopping until she comes on my tongue."

Wes and I exchange a glance. He shrugs, his hands deep in his pockets. He's trying so hard to not care—to not touch her. It's visible in how tightly he's clenching his jaw and how rigid his shoulders are.

He's as torn as I am, just for different reasons.

Kellan pulls back the blankets. Athelia is completely naked. Her light skin contrasts against Wes's black sheets, and I have to say, she looks like she belongs here.

The tattoo under her breasts pulls at my focus. In the center is a deer skull with a crown of roses surrounding the base of its antlers. A string of roses extend from either side, following the curve of her breasts.

All I want to do is kiss it and lick it—maybe suck the skin next to it to leave a mark of my own.

Kellan crawls onto the bed and shoves Athelia's legs open. He lowers himself onto his stomach, groaning as he parts her labia with his tongue.

“How long until the drugs wear off?” I ask Wes.

“An hour tops,” he says, “but probably way less. I went on the low end of the dosage considering how small she is.”

With a silent nod, I get on the bed. Her nipples are hard, either from Kellan's ministrations or from the cold air hitting them. I lean down and suck on one, flicking the tight bud with my tongue.

I'm not sure I believe Kellan, but if it's actually possible to make her come in her sleep, there's nothing I'd like more. So I continue sucking and licking her nipples, listening as her breathing pattern changes.

It takes a while, but eventually she moans, and her body jerks. I roll her nipples between my fingers and turn to look at Kellan. He's got two fingers pumping into her while he slowly licks her clit.

“She coming?” I ask.

He pulls his head away, quickly replacing his mouth with his thumb. “I can feel it. Fuck, this is so much better than I ever imagined.”

Athelia moans again, and her eyelids flutter but don't open.

“I think you're waking her up.”

He pulls his hand away. “Not like this, I’m not. She’s gonna wake up to me fucking her. Wes, where are your cuffs?”

Wes grabs them from a drawer and tosses them to me. I loop them around one of the rungs on the headboard before securing them to Athelia’s wrists.

“You want me to restrain her legs?” I ask.

Kellan is already inside her, fucking her slowly and watching her face. “Do it. I want her terrified.”

“Then you should’ve put your damn mask on,” Wes says with a glare.

A *jealous* glare, if I’m reading him correctly.

Kellan groans as he sinks into Athelia, staying upright on his knees. “Grab it for me? She feels too good, I don’t want to stop.”

With an eye roll, Wes disappears from the room. I grab another set of leather cuffs, detaching them from each other before placing them on Athelia’s ankles. Then I grab some of Wes’s rope, tying the cuffs to the posts at the foot of the bed tightly.

She can fight all she wants when she’s lucid enough, but it won’t do much good.

A morsel of guilt and worry slither through me, but I push it aside. This isn’t the part that I’m worried will break Athelia. That’ll come later.

My lips brush against her neck. She smells good, like soap and the lotion we rubbed all over her body. I nip at her soft skin before sucking it into my mouth. She’ll be pissed at the visible hickey, but I can handle her angry. I *like* her angry.

“You sure you don’t want in on this, Wes?” Kellan asks when Wes comes back carrying our masks.

“I’m fine where I am,” he grits out.

Once all three of us are masked, I go back to playing with Athelia’s nipples. They’re so hard, and I need to touch her. Having her here like this... it’s impossible to resist. I don’t

understand how Wes is able to return to his spot against the wall and only watch.

Athelia whimpers again, arching her back slightly. When I look back, Kellan is rubbing her clit fast. His mask glows blue and grins at me as I watch him drive into her.

“Turn off the lights,” Kellan says. “It’ll creep her out.”

With an annoyed huff, Wes pushes off the wall and hits the light switch. The room goes dark except for our masks—Wes’s red, Kellan’s blue, and mine pink.

Kellan grunts. “Cal, you should fuck her tits and come all over her face.”

My dick grows hard at the thought. I palm Athelia’s breasts and squeeze her nipples, smiling when she moans.

“Come on, man,” Kellan says. “Do it before she’s fully awake.”

“Fuck.” I hop off the bed and tear my clothes off.

Wes hands me a bottle of lube, and I squirt some onto Athelia’s breasts. She winces as the cold liquid hits her skin, and her head lolls to one side.

Careful not to put too much weight on her, I straddle Athelia’s limp body. Like this, Kellan won’t be able to see the look of horror on her face when she realizes just who’s fucking her, but that’s fine. I’m sure she’ll scream and cry.

I rub my dick over her chest, spreading the lube over her breasts. Then I push them together, sliding my cock in between them.

“So soft,” I groan.

Athelia stirs, this time slowly blinking her eyes open. She stares up at me with a dazed look, and considering how slack her face is, I don’t think she’s registering what’s happening yet.

I continue fucking her tits while Kellan drives into her behind me. Athelia whimpers, and just as I think she’s about to freak out, her eyes slide shut again.

That's fine with me. Conscious or not, her boobs still feel like heaven. I love watching her struggle and cry, but that can come later. Using her like this, while she's flitting in and out of consciousness, is fucking euphoric.

The second time Athelia's eyes open, she's a little more back to normal. Her brows furrow with confusion, and she blinks a few times. Then her face falls, and her body jerks at she tries to get away but can't. Our restraints hold her down, keeping her exactly where we want her.

"N... *no.*"

God, I love hearing that word from her.

"You can take it, *ma belle*," Kellan says over my shoulder. "I know you like it."

A horrified sound escapes her lips, and I watch her shut her eyes in shame. She's conflicted. I have no idea why. Athelia hates us.

*Or maybe she doesn't.*

"Stop," she whispers. "Cal, please."

"I can't, baby." I thrust harder. "You feel too good. These tits were made to be fucked."

She tries to buck me off her, but it's a waste of her energy. I watch as anger joins the fear painted onto her features. Her skin is tinted pink from the light of my mask, and it only makes her look prettier.

"Good toys don't fight their makers, Athelia," Wes says.

"I'm not a toy." Her voice is weak and quiet, but there's still venom behind her words. "And you didn't make me, you fucking idiot."

Wes climbs onto the bed and leans in close. "You are, and we'll make you into whatever we please, whether that's our toy, our whore, or our girl."

"Your..." She looks between me and him with confusion as Wes leans back. "Your girl?"

"Whatever we want, Harper," Wes says. "You're ours."

Athelia blinks a couple times. It's too soon after she woke up to have this conversation. "W... why?"

Wes scoffs before sliding off the bed. He doesn't respond, instead returning to where he was watching before.

Once he's out of her field of vision, Athelia focuses on me again.

"Cal," she whispers. "Cal, come on. Please stop."

"I can't, baby. I like seeing you like this too much."

With a huff, she turns her face away and glares into the darkness. It spurs me closer to the edge, seeing her pissed and helpless like this.

"I left a hickey on your neck," I tell her as I fuck her tits faster, squeezing them together. "It's a reminder that you belong to us now. We'll put a more permanent one on you soon."

That seems to wake her up. She yanks at the cuffs, but they don't budge. With an angry cry, she tries to kick at Kellan, but there's no slack in the ropes for her to get any momentum.

Her gaze turns pleading as she looks up at me, but I don't stop.

"Please tell me you're joking," she says, her voice laced with fear.

"Not at all, baby. You'll always wear one of our marks on your body so everyone knows just who you belong to."

Athelia squeezes her eyes shut. "I hate you. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you."

"Shut up, Harper," Wes says.

"Fuck you," she cries.

He strides back over to the bed and grabs her throat, leaning down. "Either stop talking, or I'll shut you up myself. Which would you prefer? The ball gag again, or my cock down your throat? You took it so well earlier. Remember? You practically begged me for it."

She shakes her head frantically. “I’ll be quiet.”  
His thumb strokes her pulse point. “Good girl.”

# Chapter Sixteen

## Athelia

*I'm going to die.*

If Cal hadn't left that stupid hickey on me, maybe I would've been okay. But there's no way Professor Kammes won't see it.

*He'll kill me.*

I should be falling apart, but I can barely focus on the fear clawing its way through my mind. It doesn't matter that I've only been awake for a few minutes. My body aches with raw need.

Kellan is pounding into me and rubbing my clit, and Cal is using my breasts to get himself off. I'm tied up and spread wide for them, and I realize Wes is right.

They've been making me into whatever they want me to be all night. Potentially for much longer than that. I've been the object of their anger and frustration. An easy target to take things out on. And now, I'm a warm body for them to exploit and abuse.

Never in a million years would I agree to this, but somehow, they've worked my body up enough that its nearly bursting at



the seams. I *need* to come. My nipples are tight, my clit is pulsing, and my pussy is slick.

*That doesn't mean you want it, I remind myself. It's a biological need. It has nothing to do with desire or attraction.*

But as I stare up at Cal's mask in the darkness, I'm not sure if that's entirely true. Their masks freak me out, yet that's only heightening my pleasure.

Cal's thumbs slide over my nipples as he squeezes my breasts together. I try to hold back my moan, but a noise still sounds in the back of my throat.

"Kellan ate you out while you were unconscious," Cal tells me, his voice tight. "He made you come in your sleep."

Horror fills me at the same time I shiver with delight. They touched me while I was unconscious? Of course they did—they were already using my body for their pleasure when I woke up.

Everything I felt earlier tonight comes rushing back. Want and shame. Need and regret. Desire and revulsion.

*You can't trust them. They only want to cause you pain.*

Yet here they are, bringing me to the brink of yet another orgasm. My body is too far gone, poisoning my mind until the only thing I can think about is finding release.

"That's it, baby," Cal tells me coaxingly. "Just let it happen. Come on Kellan's cock while we use you like the plaything you are."

Wes is still gripping my throat, just barely cutting off my blood flow, but now he tightens his fingers. I gasp, but I don't fight it. No, I do exactly as Cal tells me to and relax into his hold.

Maybe I can't trust them, but I think in this moment, I can. Over the years, they've caused me virtually no bodily harm. I can trust them enough to fulfill my fantasy, and when they're done, I'll find a way to get out of here.

It's the only way I can survive.

“Wes,” I groan. A memory comes back to me then—one of him holding me while I passed out. He kissed me so softly I wondered if it was actually him who fucked my throat so heartlessly in the woods.

“Come for us, Harper,” he commands.

Just then, Wes loosens his fingers, and all the blood rushes to my head. My mind goes blank, and I come so hard I’m worried I’m gonna pass out again. Cries fill the room, and it takes a second for me to realize they’re mine.

“Yes,” I shout. “Oh my god, Kellan, please don’t stop. Please, *please*—”

Wes clamps his hand over my mouth. “What did I tell you about saying please?”

I whimper against his hand. For a moment, I debate biting him, but I don’t want him to shove a gag in my mouth again.

“I’m coming,” Kellan groans. He grips my hips as he does so, letting out a breathless moan that I hate myself for finding hot.

Now that my orgasm is fading, my senses are flooding back. Any notion of pleasure or satedness evaporates, replaced by a stomach-turning repulsion.

What on earth was I thinking?

I’m just about to beg Cal to stop again when he grunts. He lets go of my breasts, sitting up a little and stroking his cock right in front of my face.

*Ugh, of course he’s going to come on my face.*

Cal moans my name just as cum spurts onto my cheek. I close my eyes as more falls onto my nose and across the seam of my lips.

It’s not until Cal has slumped onto the bed next to me that I hesitantly blink open my eyes. Kellan is still inside me, and based on where his mask is aimed, I’m pretty sure he’s looking at me.

I've been expecting tears, but they don't come. Instead, rage ignites deep inside me.

*Who the fuck do they think they are?*

"Untie me." My voice is shaking, but not with fear.

Wes releases a half-amused breath. "You're not going anywhere."

"Untie me," I shout. "This was too far. You sadistic, selfish, *vile* assholes."

"Fuck," Cal mutters. He scrambles up and starts working at the cuffs on my ankles.

"Don't," Wes growls as he grabs Cal's wrist.

Cal shoves him off. "No, *you* don't. We've done enough."

Wes reaches for Cal again, but Kellan steps in between them.

"Maybe he's right," Kellan says.

"We're *not* backing down now," Wes snarls.

"Have you stopped to even think about what you want to do to her?" Cal undoes the second cuff before moving to my wrists. He runs his fingers through my hair, murmuring, "I'm sorry, baby."

"I've thought about it plenty," Wes snaps. "*You're* the one who isn't thinking straight."

"I am," Cal yells as he fumbles with the cuffs in the dark. "Fuck, someone turn on the damn light."

I wince and shut my eyes when Kellan flips it on. Now that I'm not so focused on coming, I realize my head is aching.

"You can't hurt her as badly as you want to and then still get to keep her," Cal tells Wes.

"That's not for you to decide."

"She won't want you."

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here." I yank against the cuffs, which only serves to delay Cal in undoing them. "And,

reminder, I fucking hate all of you.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” Wes growls.

“It’s not,” Cal tells him gently. “And that’s what you’re refusing to see.”

Finally, he finishes with the cuffs, and I yank my arms away from him. Using the sheets, I wipe off Cal’s cum from my face. There’s a glass of water on the nightstand, and I grab it and chug it down. “Where are my clothes?”

They ignore me.

“We’re not done with her,” Wes says.

“We’re not,” Cal agrees. “But we’re done hurting her.”

“Where the fuck are my clothes?” I shout.

Wes turns to Kellan. “Take her to the basement.”

“She’s sleeping with me,” Cal says.

“The plan was for her to spend the rest of the night chained up *in the basement*.”

*The fuck? Absolutely not!*

“The plan’s changing.” Cal steps in between me and Wes, and Kellan hovers just out of their reach. They’ve all taken off their masks, thank fuck.

“I’m not sleeping in a goddamn basement. I’m going home.” But the second I get to my feet, a wave of dizziness hits me. My legs give out, and Cal grabs me right before my knees hit the floor.

Gently, Cal lifts me into his arms and sits on the bed. I don’t want to sit in his lap, but that’s where I end up, and I’m not in a state to fight him. Fuck, I can barely even stay upright.

*How has this happened two times in one night?*

“I don’t think she’ll forgive us if we keep going,” Cal tells Wes. “Nor do I think we need to continue. We already found a new outlet—a much more productive one.”

“I’m not forgiving you no matter what,” I grit out, hating that I’m holding onto him. But my head is pounding, and the

room is spinning. I need some form of stability.

“You don’t get a choice in the matter,” Wes snaps.

“Wes!” Cal tightens his grip on me. “You’re delusional.”

They’ve absolutely humiliated me, left me tied to a tree in the cold and dark, and *fucking drugged me*. Not to mention, they’ve bullied me relentlessly for the past three years. Why on earth do they think I’ll forgive them?

Now that their hands aren’t on me, I’m thinking much more clearly. I could never trust them—*never*. I’ve spent too much of tonight turned on to even trust my own thoughts clearly.

“Wes, look at her,” Kellan says quietly. “We can’t throw her in the basement.”

At that, Wes clenches his jaw and glares at me. I cringe into Cal because he’s the closest thing to protection I have right now.

“Fine,” he says after a minute. “But get her out of my room. I don’t want to look at her. And *don’t* let her leave.”

For some reason, that hurts. After all Wes has done to me tonight, his usual disgust should barely register, but it sticks to me like gum on the bottom of a shoe.

“Where are my clothes?” I ask again. “I’m not sleeping here. I’m going home.”

This time, I’m able to keep my balance when I stand. But Wes grabs my hair before I’ve taken more than two steps. He hauls me into him until my back hits his chest.

“You’ll do as we say, Harper. We’re nowhere near done with you.”

Kellan and Cal exchange a glance, and Kellan pulls me away from Wes.

“You need to calm down, man.” Cal stands, pushing me and Kellan out the door. “You may be free of *him*, but that’s only one piece of this. If you actually want to get everything you’ve told us about—everything *we* want, too—then you’ve gotta chill out. Put yourself in her shoes.”

“I would never choose someone else,” Wes yells.

I flinch. *What’s he talking about?* Again, I think of Professor Kammes, but if they’re aware of that, then they’d know I didn’t choose him. Besides, Kammes is too good at covering his tracks.

“That’s not my point,” Cal says gently. “She paid for what she did. You know that.”

“I didn’t *do* anything,” I mumble.

“Don’t,” Kellan whispers, and it’s so quiet I almost don’t hear him.

I shoot him my best glare. If he thinks I’m going to listen to him after tonight, *he’s delusional*.

“You like hurting me,” I say, not directing it at anyone specific. It’s true of all of them. “You *want* to see me in pain. All this talk about me being your girl—of you *keeping* me? Of me forgiving you? It’s never happening. You’re all out of your fucking minds.”

Wes only smiles. It’s cruel and cold, and I find myself stepping back as he moves toward me. I hit Kellan’s chest, and he places a steadying hand on my hip.

When he’s so close that he takes up most of my field of vision, Wes leans down until he’s right in my face. His dark brown hair is tousled, framing his face, and some of the longer strands fall into his eyes. “If I’m out of my mind, it’s your damn fault. You want to know what my first and last waking thoughts are? What consumes every moment of my existence? Even my fucking dreams?”

Dread pools in my stomach, and I shake my head. *No*.

“It’s you, Athelia,” he whispers, his eyes glinting with pleasure as my expression turns to one of horror. “My heart—my *soul*—is drawn to you with so much force that even gods couldn’t stand between us.”

“That’s not my fault,” I choke out.

Wes shakes his head. “You’re not getting it. You’re as stuck with this as I am.”

My whole body goes rigid when he wraps his hand around the back of my neck. There's barely any space between us, and Wes closes it with no remorse. His lips crash against mine in a kiss that's so overwhelming that my knees give out.

I'm not sure who holds me up, but even as I try to pull back, I find myself gripping Wes's shirt. He plunges his tongue into my mouth with a groan. When I try to turn away, he grips my head, refusing to let me.

So I do the only thing I can.

I bite his tongue.

Wes grunts, ripping away from me. But then he grins, giving me a full view of the blood coating his teeth. "Nice try, Athelia. But remember, just like you enjoy a little pain..." He reaches out and pinches one of my nipples hard enough that I wince. "So do I."

"Enough." Cal knocks away Wes's hand. "She needs to sleep. I'll take her to my room."

"My bed's bigger," Kellan says, pulling me toward the turret.

For the moment, I let myself forget about the shit Wes just said to me. I have other things to focus on.

"I'm not sleeping with you," I say.

Both Cal and Kellan give me looks of disbelief—and amusement.

Honestly, who can blame them? I'm naked, dazed, and exhausted. I have no clue where my clothes are, let alone my phone.

*My phone.* By now, Haven has probably texted me a hundred times. It's possible she even called the cops. At this point, I hope she did.

"Where's my phone?"

"Right where you left it." Kellan pulls me into his room and up to the second floor.

*There.* I lunge for his nightstand, but he stops me with an arm around my waist.

“You’re not touching it, *ma belle*. You’re going to sleep.” He shoves me onto the bed.

My aching body welcomes the softness of his blankets, and the familiar scent of frankincense and sandalwood soothes me. It’s cozy and inviting, and the smell takes me back to freshman year, before everything got so fucked up.

Kellan climbs into bed and tugs me closer to make room for Cal. Even as I realize how well my body fits against Kellan’s—how comfortable he is—my mind rebels.

*No. No, I can’t stay with them. Who knows what they’ll do to me when I fall asleep again?*

“Is this a dream?” I whisper. “Please tell me I’m dreaming.”

“No, baby.” Cal kisses my forehead as he crawls under the covers with me. “It’s real.”

My face scrunches up, and finally, the tears come. A terrified, exhausted sob escapes my throat, and I cover my face with my hands.

“Ugh, please don’t cry,” Kellan groans. “I don’t want to sleep on a wet pillow.”

A loud *slap* fills the room, and I’m pretty sure Cal just hit him. It’d be comical if I wasn’t scared out of my mind.

“I want to wash my face,” I mumble.

Cal sighs, and then his warmth disappears, cool air hitting my body before the covers envelop me again.

Kellan pulls me closer. “I know you’re scared, but you’ll be okay.”

“Oh, shut up,” I mutter. “You like it when I’m scared.”

“Not like this.” His tone is heartfelt as he tucks my hair behind my ear. “Not when I’m holding you while you fall asleep.”



“Then maybe,” I say, happy some anger makes its way into my voice, “you shouldn’t be such a fucking dick.”

Kellan’s chuckle is deep and warm—something I’d find comforting if it wasn’t coming from *him*. “That’s never changing, *ma belle*.”

Cal comes back with a wet washcloth and gently wipes at my face. It’s not what I wanted, but it’s the best I’m gonna get.

When he’s done, he tosses the washcloth to the floor. I don’t thank him. He doesn’t fucking deserve it.

“Hey, get the light, would you?” Kellan says.

“In a second.” Cal traces a finger down my neck with a smile. “My mark looks good on you, baby.”

*The hickey.*

*Oh my god. How could I forget?*

Cal turns the light off and crawls back under the covers. I squeeze my eyes shut as I realize what waits for me tomorrow morning.

“He’s going to kill me,” I whisper.

Cal strokes my cheek. “He doesn’t want that. Besides, I won’t let that happen. Promise.”

*I’m not talking about Wes.*

But I can’t find it in me to tell that to Cal, so I just close my eyes and let him pull me into his warm, firm body. Kellan is spooning me from behind, and he kisses my shoulder before settling a protective hand on my hip.

Their soft, soothing caresses warm my heart at the same time they fill me with a cold, dreadful feeling of helplessness.

This is what I’ve wanted for so long. Someone who cared for me—protected me. Someone who was gentle and kind with me.

*Why can’t they be like this all the time? Why can’t they be like the versions in my head?*

“You’re safe with us, Athelia,” Kellan whispers in my ear.

There isn't a single part of me that doesn't hate them. They've been cruel—worse than cruel. *So much worse.*

I shouldn't let myself lean into their touches.

I shouldn't welcome the feelings of safety that come with being surrounded by them.

I *definitely* shouldn't fall asleep.

But my body is drained, and the drugs are still fucking with my system. That has to be it. There's no other explanation for why my judgment is so clouded, my head so fuzzy.

“Sleep, *ma belle*,” Kellan murmurs in my ear.

And no amount of hatred and fear can stop me from obeying his command.

# Chapter Seventeen

## Kellan

“He’s not going to want to leave you alone with her.” My voice is hushed as I continue stroking Athelia’s hair in the darkness.

She fell asleep mere minutes after we all crawled into bed together. I won’t be staying, but I’m enjoying having her body against mine.

“I don’t care,” Cal whispers back. “You’re the better match for this assignment.”

I hum in agreement. I’m not small, but I’m slimmer than Cal. If we needed to be intimidating, he’d be the better choice. But tonight, we need to go unseen.

“Wes doesn’t have much of a choice in the matter,” Cal adds quietly. “He can fucking deal.”

With a sigh, I glance up at my clock. It’s just past four. Wes and I need to get going, or we won’t be able to complete our assignment on time.

Carefully, I untangle my limbs from Athelia’s and slip off the bed. She doesn’t even stir.

“Be safe,” Cal whisper-shouts as I make my way downstairs.

I don't acknowledge him, not wanting to wake Athelia. He knows we'll be careful.

Downstairs, Wes narrows his eyes at me. "Of course he's the one who's staying."

"You and I both know I'm better for this job." I grab my black leather jacket from the coat closet and shrug it on. I've already got my gun on me—grabbed it when I was still in my room. "Ready?"

His only answer is to yank the front door open and march out onto the porch. Our bikes are already in the detached garage, ready to go.

Closing the front door quietly, I roll my eyes. We all get into pissy moods sometimes. He'll get over it.

Besides, I'm beginning to think Cal may be right. While Athelia fell asleep, she was... different. She didn't feel safe, but she wasn't as angry. All it took was a couple inconsequential acts of kindness—a small kiss here, a gentle caress there—and her resolve crumbled like plaster.

I suppose Cal standing up for her to Wes might've had something to do with it.

Regardless, it's obvious she wants us. Or at least, she wants to want us. And now that she's let us in a little, we're never leaving.

We roll our bikes out of the garage before starting them so the echo doesn't wake Athelia. Helmets on, we ride off into the darkness.

We're so far east in Pennsylvania that we're practically right on the border. New York City isn't even two hours away, and the suburbs surrounding it are even closer. Plus, with so little traffic, we'll be there in no time.

I ride behind Wes, letting the roar of my bike's engine overtake my thoughts. Athelia has been an obsession of ours for years. Wes may be the most vocal about it, but he's not alone. Cal and I just have more self-control.

Getting to fuck her tonight... god, it was better than I remembered. And I've gone through the memories of our first couple weeks together a lot—just about every night.

Since that first night in the hot tub, she'd already wrecked me for anyone else. Now, I'm a complete goner.

Once Wes and I are on the interstate, he picks up speed, weaving around the few cars that are out this early. I follow suit, watching as I approach one hundred miles per hour and surpass it. A grin spreads across my face as I easily catch up to Wes.

The sooner we finish this, the sooner we can get back to Athelia, and I'm sure Wes is thinking the same thing. This job shouldn't take much time, anyway.

When Wes told me and Cal that he had a way to get out from underneath his stepfather's thumb, we were all on board. The fucker shouldn't even be able to hold Wes's trust fund hostage, but somehow he got his hands on it.

It's a stroke of luck that we were able to get this type of job. According to Wes, it's what his dad used to do before he passed. His uncle is still involved, and he was able to hook us up. I've never met the guy. We communicate solely with an older woman named Charlotte, and she only ever tells us the bare minimum.

All I know is that she works for some type of top-secret organization. I don't even know if it's government-run or not. Hell, it could be a secret division of the CIA, and I'd never know.

To be honest, I don't care. They pay well, and that's what matters.

The summer before our junior year, the three of us had to go through intense training. Mid-August of last year, Charlotte started dishing out our assignments.

At first, it wasn't anything that big. Mostly just surveillance and reporting back to Char on the day-to-day lives of seemingly random people. But as it turned out, they weren't random at all. We still don't even know what any of them were

planning on doing. The second we reported something suspicious, we were kicked from the job, and more experienced agents took over.

Slowly, Char started trusting us and our abilities more. She gave us more intense jobs, and before we knew it, no one was coming in to finish the job because *we* were finishing it.

By the end of our junior year, we'd killed at least four people each. It caught me off guard, how much I enjoy it. There's a feeling of total power that comes with ending someone's life. From the terrified surprise on my victims' faces to the way the spark drains from their eyes, I've fallen in love with it.

Unfortunately, we're not killing anyone tonight. Our assignment is simple—steal a laptop and leave a sealed envelope Charlotte gave Wes.

The man we're stealing it from has been on a months-long trip, and his flight landed around two this morning. By the time we show up, he should be dead asleep, which makes our job easy.

Wes and I park a few blocks away from our target's house. He's silent as we move swiftly across the sidewalk, but his shoulders aren't as tight as they were when we left. Riding seems to have loosened him up some, as it always does.

He pulls his black ski mask over his head, and I follow suit. By this point, we know exactly what to do, so we exchange a wordless nod and move in.

The house is dark as we approach. It's half past five, so the city is just starting to wake up, but this neighborhood is pretty quiet. The people who live here are on the wealthier side. They wouldn't get up at five AM even if you paid them to—they simply don't need the extra cash.

We enter through the back door. I handle picking the lock, and Wes deals with the security system. As we move through the house, I flex my gloved hands. From what Charlotte told us, this guy isn't the type to set up booby traps, but you can never be too careful.

The laptop isn't anywhere on the first floor, so we make our way upstairs quietly. The first room we encounter appears to be a home office, and a laptop bag is sitting on the desk.

Wes opens it, shining a small flashlight over the device to confirm it's the correct one. With a small nod, he slips it out and slides it into his backpack. Then he pulls out the sealed cream envelope and places it on top of the now-empty laptop bag.

"Let's go," he whispers.

I follow him downstairs and back outside. We jog back to our bikes, where we both replace our masks with our helmets.

It takes us a half hour to get to our meeting place with Charlotte. She's leaning against her black Bugatti, her red lips pursed. Behind her, the sky is beginning to brighten.

"You have it?" she asks as we dismount.

After pulling off his helmet, Wes grabs the laptop from his backpack. Neither of us ask what's on it. If Char told us, she'd probably have to kill us afterward.

"Good." Tucking the laptop under her arm, she surveys us both. "You two look tired. Get home and rest up. A new batch of assignments will be heading your way soon."

"Do you have anything we could knock out this morning?" Wes asks.

Inwardly, I groan. It means more cash, but all I want to do is curl up in bed next to Athelia and sleep for the next decade.

Charlotte narrows her eyes. "You want something specific?"

Wes doesn't even hesitate. "I'd prefer a kill... or two." He nods to me. "You know, so Kellan doesn't feel left out."

With a sigh, Charlotte opens her car door. "Give me a moment."

While we wait, I punch Wes in the arm. "What the hell, man?" I hiss. "Have you already forgotten about Athelia?"

"No," he growls.

Wes doesn't have to say another word. Athelia pissed him off tonight—we all did. The main reason we took this job is because of the cash, but the secondary reason is almost as important.

The older we get, the harder it is to keep the darker parts of us in check. I *like* hurting people, and so does Wes. Cal does as well, even if we've had to coax him slowly into embracing that side of himself.

Tormenting Athelia over the past three years provided us with a certain amount of relief, but it was never meant to be enough. Especially not now that we've all realized we can *have* her, not hurt her.

Taking assignments from Charlotte has supplied us with a way to satisfy the monsters inside of us. And right now, Wes is close to losing control with Athelia. He has to let out some of his anger, and we'd all prefer if he directed it somewhere other than her.

“There's a job that looks like it'll be a decent fit.” Char looks up from her phone, which she's been typing on for the past few minutes. “It'll take you about an hour. It's mostly on your way back to campus as well.”

“That sounds perfect,” I reply. We'll be home in no time.

“There will be three of them. Two men, one woman.” Charlotte glances between me and Wes. “Can Cal join you?”

“No,” we say at the same time.

“You're sure the two of you can handle it?”

“In our sleep,” Wes replies smoothly. “Any additional details?”

“Just have fun with it.”

The grin that takes over Wes's face would scare me if a matching one wasn't already on my own features.

Char explains more about the situation we'll be walking into. As always, she gives us as little information as possible. No names, no details about why they need to die. Not even a fucking hint.



I like it that way. If these people deserve to die, I don't want to know. I'm not doing this to feel like a hero. If anything, that takes the fun out of it.

"We'll check in when we're done," Wes says before putting his helmet on.

Char's mouth twitches, which I'm pretty sure indicates her body trying to smile. Never seen her do it, though. As I turn away, I'm pretty sure she looks... proud of us.

It shouldn't, but it makes my heart swell. The happier she is with us, the better our assignments are. The better our assignments are, the more fun we get to have.

And I *guess* a small part of me likes her well enough that I'm glad to give her something to be proud of.

"Take care, Char," I tell her before sliding my helmet over my head.

She doesn't respond, other than to settle herself in her Bugatti and watch us ride off.

...

We abandon our bikes a quarter mile from the abandoned warehouse. The last thing we want to do is announce ourselves, so moving in on foot is the best option.

Giddy anticipation rushes through me as we walk side by side. This will be our first kill of the school year. It's only been a couple months since my last one, but the itch to shed blood has been growing inside me. I didn't realize just how much I've been craving this until Char gave us the assignment.

Gravel crunches under our feet as I position my ski mask over my face. The air is cool, the ground damp. At some point in the night, it must've rained over here.

"What the fuck did Cal mean?" Wes says out of nowhere.

"He said a lot of things, man."

"Athelia said she hated us, and I said the feeling was mutual."

*Right.* I sigh. "And then Cal said it's not."

“Yeah. And I’d like to know what the fuck gave him the audacity to say that. He doesn’t know what goes on in my head, and he has no clue how I feel about her.”

“C’mon, man. You know you don’t hate her, especially after tonight.”

Wes stops. Most of his face is covered by his mask, but I can still make out his eyes. They’re hard and dark, and he narrows them as I shoot him a challenging glare.

*Does he really not get it? After all these years?*

“I hate her,” Wes says lowly. “I hate her more than anything else on this goddamn planet.”

“Do you?” I ask quietly. “Or do you hate yourself for not being able to let her go?”

He swings at me, but I knew it was coming. I dodge with ease, and before he can try again, I shove him back.

“You’re wrong,” he shouts.

“Keep it down,” I hiss. We’re far enough from the warehouse that no one can hear us, but we still need to be cautious. “And, for the record, you know you’re lying to yourself.”

The leather of his gloves squeaks as he clenches his hands into fists. “No, I’m not.”

“Think about it,” I tell him. “*Really* think, Wes. This all started with you wanting to punish her for choosing someone else over you.”

“Not just someone else,” he spits out. “She chose *him*.”

“And she’s paid for that by now, over and over again. At this point, we’re tormenting her because *she* torments *us*.”

He’s breathing heavily, but he’s listening. Fucking finally.

“You know her existence isn’t her fault,” I continue. “Neither is our attraction to her.”

Wes works his jaw, but he still doesn’t say anything.

“Maybe you resent her, but she’s allowed to fuck who she wants. Maybe you’re angry, but you’re not at her anymore. And maybe you do hate someone, but it’s not her, Wes. *You hate yourself.* You’ve just been taking it out on her. We all have.”

Wes just stares at me. He’s often quiet when he gets into one of his moods, but never like this. Normally, he locks himself in his room or fucks off to walk through the woods. But this time, he’s looking at me like I just stabbed him in the back—and like I just gave him the biggest revelation of the century.

The silence grows between us, only filled with the distant sound of vehicles on the interstate. Wes doesn’t move, and I’m not sure he’s even breathing. But he’s finally using his head, so I’ll take it.

“Fuck,” Wes says after a couple minutes. He rips his mask off and rubs his face. Just as I think he’s about to pull it together, he drops to a crouch and pulls at his dark hair. “*Fuck.*”

How Wes hasn’t come to this realization on his own is beyond me. It was mere hours ago that he was telling Athelia his fucking *soul* is drawn to hers.

*My friends are idiots.*

“I know you’re having a crisis,” I say after giving him a minute, “but we need to finish this job.”

He heaves in a long, shuddering breath before standing. After shoving his mask back over his face, he turns to me. “We’re never talking about this again.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

With that, he stalks off, and I follow closely behind him.

The warehouse sits quietly, but there’s a beat-up truck parked by one of the doors. We enter quietly and cautiously, guns ready, but the main room is dark and empty.

“Over there,” I whisper.

On the other side of the building is a small room that looks like it was once used as a break room. It’s got a large window

facing us, and the light is on inside. Two men and one woman sit around a table eating and talking.

We move slowly, walking the long ways around the room to avoid being in direct view of the window. Odds are, they won't be able to see us, considering it's dark out here and they've got the light on, but caution won't hurt.

Once we approach the door to the break room, Wes whispers, "Keep one of them alive."

*Of course.*

"On my count," I murmur. "One, two, three."

Wes kicks the door open. Before the trio inside can react, we're already shooting. Two of them slump to the floor, blood gushing from the bullet holes in their heads. The third, I shoot in the shoulder. He cries out and clutches at his wound instead of reaching for a weapon.

Setting his gun on the table, Wes pulls out his knife and flips it open. He kicks a chair out of the way and advances toward the guy.

"No," he chokes out. "Please don't. You can take it all if you want, I don't—*fuck*," he screams as Wes stabs him in the stomach.

"You're not getting out of here alive, buddy."

"Please," the man cries as Wes slashes across his chest.

"I'm getting really sick of that word," Wes growls. He kicks the guy, forcing him to slam into the wall. "It doesn't do any damn good."

"Just take it," the man rasps. He falls to his knees, his face ghostly white from blood loss. "Just take the money."

"All I want is your life." Wes grabs a handful of the guy's hair and yanks his head back. His knife slides across the man's neck beautifully.

I watch with delight as blood pours from the wound. The man gasps and gurgles as blood dribbles from his lips. He reaches out, almost like he's begging for help, but his hand

drops to his side in seconds. His eyes go blank, and his body slumps to the floor.

With a satisfied grunt, Wes steps back and surveys the mess we just made. His eyes narrow at the space behind me, and I whip around.

Four duffel bags sit on the floor. I yank open one of the zippers and laugh. It's full of cash.

"Fuck," Wes mutters as he joins me.

We open up all the other bags. There's gotta be tens of thousands of dollars here—maybe even hundreds.

I nudge the masks discarded onto the floor next to the bags. "Did we just kill a group of bank robbers?"

"Looks like it." He grabs his gun from the table.

"And we're just supposed to... leave all this."

"Charlotte didn't tell us to take it, so yeah."

"Goddamn," I groan. There's just so much of it.

"Let's go." Wes brushes past me, pausing in the doorway when I don't move. "*Kellan.*"

"Coming! I'm coming." With one last longing glance at the bags, I follow him out of the warehouse.

As we walk back to our bikes, I pull out my phone and call Char.

"Finished?" she asks, not bothering with a greeting.

"Finished. There's a lot of cash in there."

"There is," Char says.

"Is it just gonna sit there?"

"You know better than to ask stupid questions, Ambrose."

I smile. "Take care, Char."

The call ends, and I slip my phone into my backpack. "Feel better?" I ask Wes as he takes his mask off.

"Much."

I already knew. It's evident in how he's holding himself. His steps are lighter, his head a little higher. The same is true for me. My kills may have been quick, but my body is still buzzing from the high it gave me.

The sun is just beginning to peek through the buildings as we reach our bikes. Before pulling on our helmets, Wes and I share a look. It's weighed down with a deep understanding that draws my mind back to our earlier conversation.

Wes gets it now. His obsession with Athelia has fueled his *own* self-hatred. He'll always like causing her pain, but that's not all he wants, no matter how much he wishes it's true.

In his own fucked up way, Wes loves her. I've convinced him of it.

Now, he just has to convince *her*.

# Chapter Eighteen

## Athelia

I jerk awake at the sound of my phone going off. Shoving Cal's arms off me, I reach over him and grab my phone. The sunlight streaming in through the windows pierces my eyes, and I squint at my screen as I slide to answer the call.

"Hello?" My voice is tired and rough. If Wes and Kellan hadn't abused my throat so thoroughly last night, it probably wouldn't be this sore.

"You're late," Professor Kammes growls.

My stomach drops. "I—I'm sorry. I overslept."

"You have twenty minutes."

Panic winds through me as I reach up to touch the hickey on my neck. "I need more time."

"Do you really want to test me right now?" he snaps.

Kellan groans, and I place a hand over the bottom of my phone so Professor Kammes can't hear.

"Answer me, Athelia."

"I'll be there as soon as I can. Probably about an hour."

"If you're that late, I'll—"

The call drops. When I glance at my phone, the screen is black, and hitting the power button doesn't help.

*Fuck.* Of course it had to die at this exact moment.

"Come back to me," Kellan mumbles. His arm slips around my waist as he tries to pull me back down.

"I can't. I—I have to go."

Cal wakes as I scramble over him. When my feet hit the floor, they're still tangled up in the sheets, so I crash to the ground.

"What?" Cal groans. "What's going on?"

Kellan sits up, the more alert of the two. He's completely naked, and his brown hair is damp. "You're not going anywhere."

"I have to." I jump to my feet, ignoring the way my head screams at me to stay still and close my eyes. "You don't understand."

Slowly, Cal pushes himself up and rubs at his eyes. I'm already halfway down the stairs, desperately looking around the lower half of Kellan's room.

*There.* I rip open his drawers until I find what I need. The hoodie is huge on me, and so are the sweatpants. I tighten the drawstring so they don't fall down before searching the room for my boots.

*Where are they? Goddammit, I have to get out of here.*

*You're dead either way. Might as well take your time.*

"Where are my shoes?" I shout.

Kellan walks down the stairs, completely unashamed at the lack of clothing covering his body. "You don't need them."

"I do," I insist. "I have to go, Kellan. I have to be somewhere."

He raises an eyebrow. "Where?"

"None of your damn business," I snap.



Cal stumbles down the stairs after Kellan. At least he's in briefs. "What's wrong? Why are you so freaked out?"

"You wouldn't understand." I rip my arm away when Cal reaches for me. "Just tell me where my boots are and let me go."

Cal and Kellan share a tired but wary glance. Without a word, they seem to come to the same conclusion.

"Just give me a minute," Cal says. He slips out of the room.

"Why are you so scared?" Kellan asks. I'd fall for the concern on his face if I didn't know just how much he loves seeing me afraid.

"Fuck you," I snap.

He steps toward me, and I back away. His frown deepens, and a line forms between his eyebrows. "Athelia, is something \_\_\_"

Cal steps back in with my boots and a bundle of fabric that look suspiciously like my clothes. I shove my shoes on, not even bothering to tie them.

"Do you need a ride or something?" Kellan asks.

I laugh, the sound ringing hollow in my ears. "I want *nothing* from you."

Snatching my clothes from Cal, I don't look back as I run out of the room. Neither of them follow me as I storm down the stairs and out the front door. I'm not much of a runner, and these shoes aren't meant for that, but I don't care. I run and run and run until I'm standing in front of my dorm's door.

"Where is it?" I groan, sorting through my things to find my keys. They're still in my dress pocket, thank fuck.

After shoving my door open, I throw my clothes to the floor. "Haven?"

But her bed is empty.

So is the bathroom.

*Maybe she's out getting breakfast.*

I start the shower before stripping out of Kellan's clothes. After plugging in my phone so I can call Haven when I'm done, I lock myself in the bathroom.

I brush my teeth as the shower warms up, staring at myself in the mirror. My stomach flips with shame as the events of last night come flooding back to me.

*How could I want that, even for a second? How could I want them?*

In the shower, the hot water stings, but I don't care. I scrub at my body, trying to wash off every touch from Wes, Cal, and Kellan. It's not until my skin is raw and red that I stop.

*You have to hurry.*

Out of the shower, I throw on the first clean clothes of mine that I find. The hickey on my neck is worryingly visible, but it shouldn't be a problem. Makeup can work miracles if you know how to use it correctly.

Once I'm dressed and I've covered up the hickey, I give myself a once-over in the mirror. My dark hair is still wet, and my eyes are bloodshot. At least I don't look like I spent half the night in the woods and the other half getting drugged and fucked by my bullies, which is what I was going for.

*Stop procrastinating. You have to get out of here.*

Before I leave, I grab my phone and call Haven, but she doesn't answer. By the time I'm throwing myself into my car, I've left her three frantic texts.

*Maybe she spent the night with that Aaron guy.*

*Or maybe she's dead in a ditch.*

I try not to worry about Haven as I speed all the way to Professor Kammes's house. This is the first year we've taken our meetings off-campus. It's wildly inappropriate, but everything about our relationship has been since day one. He exploited his position as my professor and as my advisor, and he has me helplessly cornered.

I park in front of his house before rushing up his driveway. After ringing the doorbell, I straighten my hair and clothes and

try to calm my breathing. But the second Professor Kammes opens the door, I realize there's no use.

He grabs my arm and yanks me inside before slamming the door shut behind me. In a split second, he has me pinned to the door with his hand around my throat. His grip is tight, pressing against my windpipe and cutting off my ability to breathe.

It's at this moment that I think of Wes. I lost count of how many times he had his fingers wrapped around my throat yesterday, but he was always careful not to crush my windpipe. Even when he was angry with me, he was still careful. And on the occasions that he wasn't, Cal stepped in.

"Stop," I'm barely able to manage.

"Where were you?" Professor Kammes growls.

I claw at his arms. He's wearing long sleeves, so it doesn't cause him much pain. As I try desperately to break free, he only tightens his hold.

My eyes bug out, and my thoughts grow fuzzy. When my eyes slowly start to close, he releases my throat.

"Where were you?" he shouts again.

I gasp in breath after breath, massaging my neck. "I just—I just overslept. I'm sorry."

"I heard someone when you were on the phone with me," he says, and his eyes flick from my face to where I'm rubbing my neck. "I heard a man."

"There were some guys talking in the hallway."

His gaze sharpens, and he rips my hand away. "Don't lie to me, girl."

I realize too late that by trying to massage away the pain, I was fucking with the concealer on my neck. "No—"

Professor Kammes drags me through the house and into his office. He shoves me toward one of the chairs near his desk, but I trip and end up catching the arm with my side as I fall to the floor.

“Want to explain that hickey to me?” He kicks my thigh once, twice, until I’m able to scramble away.

“I didn’t want it,” I cry, even though it’s only a half truth.

“I told you not to lie to me, Athelia.” He grabs my hair and pulls me back to him. “Who gave it to you?”

“I... I don’t know his name.” Tears fill my eyes at the sting in my scalp. My side aches, and he kicked my thigh so hard that the pain is still radiating through my leg. “Please let go of me.”

He obliges, and I crash back to the floor. The carpet does little to cushion my fall.

“What did I tell you would happen if you let another man touch you?”

I stare at the floor, at the thousands of tiny white threads. *Why did he have to pick me? Why did they have to pick me?*

“I told you there’d be consequences.” Professor Kammes is hovering over me now. His arms are folded over his chest, and the look he’s giving me is all rage.

It’s terrifying—more terrifying than Wes, Cal, and Kellan combined. They’ve never caused me bodily harm. Not like this.

“Get up.”

I don’t. The moment I do, I know what’s coming.

My disobedience earns me a kick to my side, and the force of it knocks me over.

*I should’ve stayed with the guys.*

But deep down, I know it wouldn’t have mattered. Why would they care about this? They love kicking me when I’m down. Besides, there’s no way they could’ve helped.

At first, Professor Kammes threatened to fuck with my grades. He said he’d fail me on grounds of cheating or plagiarism. I was eighteen and terrified, so I went along with it.

From there, things just got worse. He took video after video of me—giving him head, riding him, touching myself while begging him to fuck me. I never wanted any of it, but he’s always made me act like I like it.

The moment he showed me the video he recorded without my knowledge, I knew I was fucked. He barely even had to imply that he’s willing to post them online and attach my name to them.

I want to be a history teacher, for fuck’s sake. All it’d take is one of those circulating around online, and I’d become virtually un-hirable.

Professor Kammes can ruin me in minutes, and I’m helpless to do anything about it.

A slap to my face brings me out of my wallowing. It stings, but I blink back my tears. I’ve cried enough over the past twenty-four hours.

“Up, Athelia.”

Slowly, I climb to my feet. “I can make up for it. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, you will. Take off your panties.”

Bowing my head, I do as he says. My body aches, yet at the same time, it feels hollow.

“Hands behind your back.”

“Please don’t—”

He slaps me again before grabbing my wrists and forcing them behind me. Within seconds, he has them cuffed much more tightly than he normally does.

*I just want to die. I can’t take this anymore.*

Professor Kammes spins me around and bends me over his desk, and I wince as my bruised body hits the wooden surface. I try to adjust, but he forces me back down.

“Don’t fucking move.”

I stay frozen, too afraid of what he’ll do if I even breathe. He kicks my legs apart before placing a spreader bar between

my ankles. He only does that on days when I'm acting more reluctant than normal.

It's like he knows I want to fight back, so he's making sure I can't.

*This isn't worth it.*

Professor Kammes shoves the skirt of my dress up before squeezing my ass. I hear him undo his belt and pants, and I shut my eyes, bracing myself for the pain.

# Chapter Nineteen

Wes

“What happened?”

The sound of Athelia yelling woke me up, but I thought it was just because she realized she was in bed with Kellan and Cal. But then I heard her stomp down the stairs and slam the front door.

*You two had one job.*

Cal and Kellan both stare at the floor. I almost bash their heads together but stop myself at the last second.

“Do I need to repeat myself?”

“She got a phone call,” Kellan says. “She rushed out in a hurry.”

“And you just let her go?” I growl.

“She was really scared,” Cal says.

I don’t ask where she went. It’s Sunday—I already know.

*Why the hell was she scared, though?*

*The little bitch is probably worried about getting caught.*

Maybe Cal’s hickey *will* turn out to be a good thing.

There was a reason I wanted Athelia chained up in the basement, and it wasn't just to punish her. I didn't want *him* to ever touch her again.

It only takes me a second to throw on clothes, and then I'm grabbing my keys and heading out the front door. I slam it behind me, hoping to drive home just how fucking pissed I am at the guys.

They never should've let her leave, and I should've pushed harder to keep her downstairs.

*No, not downstairs. With me.*

After Kellan called me out on my bullshit, I wanted to strangle him. I hate that he's right—that I've been so hard on Athelia because I resent *myself*.

Still, they shouldn't have let her leave. She just ran straight to *him* even though I told her she belongs to us now.

I grab my helmet, start my bike, and take off down the streets. I need to figure out how I'm going to handle this. It's not like I can pull her out of his goddamn house, but if she lets him touch her, I'll lose my fucking shit.

She's ours now. We made that perfectly clear last night. I don't care how she feels about it. If I have to, I'll keep her chained up in our house for the rest of our lives. Maybe not in the basement, but I'm sure as fuck not losing her again.

When I pull up to the house, Athelia's car is already there. I park behind her.

*She's going to pay for this.*

I don't go inside. No, I head around back like I've done countless times before. When I approach the office window, I slow my pace as to not draw attention.

What I see is something I've witnessed plenty of times before, but it hits different this morning. My lip curls in disgust at the sight of Athelia bent over his desk. Her panties are discarded on the floor, and Kammes is fucking her from behind.



Athelia's head rests on the desk, but she's facing away from the window, so I can't see her expression. Her wrists are cuffed behind her back, and a spreader bar keeps her legs wide and open for him.

*Dammit.*

I knew she'd try to go back to him. He probably tells her she's special and that he's never fucked a student before. I've heard him say it to the girls who came before her.

As he comes, I look away. I don't want to watch that. Not with the two of them.

When I look back, he's already undone the cuffs, and he deals with the spreader bar quickly. Athelia slumps to the floor and leans against the desk as Kammes stalks off.

I narrow my eyes. That's different. She always acts happy when they're done—usually kisses him and everything. Maybe the drugs haven't fully worn off yet.

At this point, I hope they haven't. I hope they're making her fucking miserable, because after what she just did, she deserves it. Fuck the conversation Kellan and I had earlier. He may be right, but this is Athelia betraying us all over again.

I *know* she wants us. It was written all over her face yesterday, even if she was conflicted about it. So why the fuck does she always have to run back to Kammes?

*She'll pay*, I remind myself.

But for now, all I want to do is scare the shit out of her. So I head back around the house, using my key to unlock the front door. I close it loudly to give them a warning and make a pit stop in the kitchen to grab an apple from the counter.

By the time I'm near the office, they've had plenty of time.

Although... I don't think any amount of time can prepare Athelia for what I'm going to do to her.

# Chapter Twenty

## Athelia

*Freshman year, first week*

I fiddle with the hem of my shirt as I sit outside Professor Kammes's office. He's my advisor, and I'm also taking one of his history classes this semester. I woke up to an email from him requesting a meeting after his office hours.

For the fifth time in three minutes, I check my phone. I can hear a muffled conversation from inside his office, so I know he's not ready for me yet, but we're ten minutes past when he asked me to show up.

My first class with him was yesterday. I sat in the front because I want the full experience, and I adore history. There's so much to learn, not just about events, but about people and human nature. It's why I want to teach it so badly.

But I'm beginning to wonder if sitting in the front was a bad idea. Professor Kammes spent an odd amount of time looking at me. If any of the other students caught on, they didn't say anything to me, so maybe I'm over-thinking things. It's what I always do.

The door to Professor Kammes's office opens, and a boy walks out. He smiles politely at me as I stand from where I was sitting on a bench.

“Athelia,” Professor Kammes says when I knock on the open door. “Come in. Oh, and close the door behind you, please.”

I do so with shaky hands. Professor Kammes and I have already had an advisory meeting. His email didn’t hint at what he wanted to speak to me about, so I’ve been on edge all day, worried I did something wrong.

“Take a seat.” He gestures to one of the chairs on the opposite side of the desk as him. “How’s your first week been treating you?”

“Pretty good so far.” I keep my posture straight as I lower myself into a chair. “Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no. On the contrary, everything is wonderful. I was pleased to see you participating in class yesterday. Your enthusiasm is unmatched.”

“Oh. Um, thank you.”

“Honestly, since first meeting you, I’ve been intrigued. There’s just something about you that’s so... *different*.”

For some reason, that doesn’t sit right with me. Sure, everyone has their special and unique qualities, but the fact that Professor Kammes isn’t being specific makes his words ring hollow. Besides, we haven’t talked *that* much.

“I’m not sure what exactly you want, Professor,” I say, trying to keep my voice calm and even. “Is there something you wanted to discuss about class specifically? Or with my schedule or something?”

“Oh, no.” He smiles, and the interest in his eyes as he looks me over makes me shiver. “I have a little tradition going—something I like to do every year. Between all the classes I teach, most of my students blend in. But every year, there are a few who stand out.”

Relief billows inside me. For a second, I thought this was about to go somewhere inappropriate, but now we’re back on track. “I see.”

“My time is limited, but I usually pick one student to deepen a connection with. Young people have so much to offer, you know? Enthusiasm, different perspectives, et cetera.”

“Right.” I shift in my seat. “Are you—did you invite me here to offer to have that connection with me?”

He smiles. “Smart girl.”

“What exactly would it entail, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Well, that’s the thing. It’s slightly... unconventional, if you get what I’m saying. I need to know you’re *interested* before I continue.”

The relief I felt moments ago vanishes. Professor Kammes is looking at me with hunger and greed, not excitement at helping a student succeed. “I...”

Professor Kammes stands while I try to find the correct words to turn him down. Is this going to affect the rest of my school year? How am I supposed to walk into class knowing he’s had *those* types of thoughts about me?

“I don’t offer this to just anyone, Athelia,” Professor Kammes says in my ear, and I realize he’s circled around the desk and is now standing behind my chair.

“Professor, I—”

“And this year, the moment I saw you, I knew you’d be it for me.”

“I don’t want—”

“God, just look at you.” Professor Kammes’s hands slide down my arms before squeezing my breasts.

My blood runs cold. “What are you doing?”

“I want you, Athelia, and I think you want me, too.” He pulls my shirt up and slides a hand inside my bra so he can cup my breast. “Fuck, these are even more perfect than I imagined.”

I’m gripping the arms of the chair so tightly it’s painful. *Push him away. Push him away and get the hell out of here.*

But I don't move. It's like I'm frozen—stuck.

“Tell me you want me.” He kisses my neck, leaving behind a trail of saliva that makes me cringe.

“I don't,” I whisper. “Please stop.”

He chuckles, and the sound is full of confidence. “Or what?”

“I'll—I'll go to the police.”

Professor Kammes squeezes my nipple. “I don't think you will. And even if you do, no one will believe you.”

I squeeze my eyes shut as he yanks my bra up. He's still standing behind me, and with his arms on my body, he's basically caging me in. I'm pretty sure I could shove him off—my mind is screaming at me to do it—but my arms just... won't listen to me.

“You know the statistics, Athelia.” He continues massaging my breasts, making my stomach turn. “And if you say anything, just know that you run the risk of ruining your own reputation. The staff here trusts me—I gain my students' trust easily, too. You'll look like a girl who's hoping to get some attention. Maybe sue. Or maybe they'll say you're bitter that I don't give you special treatment.”

I open my mouth to tell him he's wrong, but I can't force the words out. Deep down, I know he's right. I can try, but Professor Kammes will spin this however he wants. Especially if he can get ahead of the story.

“All I have to say is that you seduced me. That *you* came onto *me*. Maybe I'll act a little broken up about it, tell everyone that I tried my best, but you were insistent. Who do you think they'll believe?”

“Just stop. Please just—”

“I already told you,” he says, and his voice is firm now. Agitated. “You're who I want. Maybe if you hadn't sat in the front of class in that tight shirt of yours, I would've picked someone else.”

*Don't listen to him. This isn't your fault. It's not, it's not, it's not.*

“I thought you wanted to know if I was interested,” I whisper.

“Mmm. It’s nice when you females are, but I don’t really need your interest. Not when I can take what I want.”

“You—you can’t just do that.”

Now, he full-on laughs. “Have you ever thought much about power? Have you ever held it over someone else and wielded it to your advantage?”

“No.” *Because I’m not a shitty person.*

“It’s quite enjoyable. You’re on track to become a history teacher, correct? You’ll understand one day when you’re in my shoes.”

“I’d *never*,” I spit out. Finally, my body cooperates, and I shove his hands away. Well, I try to.

Professor Kammes grabs both my wrists and holds them in a tight grip with one of his hands. I can’t manage to work myself free from his grasp, and he goes back to groping me with his free hand.

“I thought that too when I was your age. You’ll understand one day.”

“I won’t. Now *stop!* I don’t want this.”

He lets out a groan, and I realize my mistake too late. This is what he wants. The more I struggle, the more powerful it makes him feel.

*No. This isn’t how this is supposed to go.*

*I’m supposed to be free.*

“You’re mine now, Athelia,” Professor Kammes says. “And you’re powerless to stop it.”

“No,” I whisper.

“Yes.” He turns the chair so I’m facing him. “Now get on your knees and show me just how enthusiastic of a student you can be.”

# Chapter Twenty-One

## Wes

*Freshman year, second week*

When I was a kid, my mom enrolled me in a local Little League team. I didn't want to, but she insisted. It took me years to realize why.

John Kammes, my baseball coach—and once him and my mom got close, her secret lover for years.

I didn't figure it out until after my father was killed when I was in high school. My mom moved on too quickly, and all of a sudden the hidden smiles and lingering touches all made sense.

Junior year of high school, they tied the knot. I refused to go to the wedding on principle, instead spending the day locked in my room and wishing my dad was still alive.

It hurt that my mom used me to get to John, but what pissed me off the most was that she cheated on Dad. Until I met the boys, my dad was the only real person I knew. He loved hard, and he always made sure we knew we were his top priority.

Sure, his job had weird hours and kept him from us, but he was there for us every possible moment he could be. There was no problem or question that was too small or stupid for

him. Even when I was little, he never treated me like a nuisance.

My heart aches just thinking about him. It's been a couple years since he passed, but it still feels like it was yesterday. Coming home is always a sharp reminder that he's gone. Living in someone else's house instead of the one I grew up in leaves me feeling empty.

I have big plans—plans to get the fuck out of here as soon as I can. But my mom screwed that one up for me when she married John and gave him control of our finances before I turned eighteen.

I'd burn his house down in a fucking instant if I didn't have to live in the damn thing. Even now as I'm glaring up at it, I want to do it anyway.

Pretty sure my dad would approve.

As I head inside, I close the door as quietly as I can, hoping to avoid John. Earlier today, he saw me and the guys hanging out with Athelia. I had my arm around her as we walked toward the cafeteria, and for some reason, John seemed pissed about it.

Whatever his reasons are, I don't give a fuck. Athelia has been having a rough time adjusting to campus life. I think it's more than the usual homesickness, but she's refusing to open up about what's going on in her mind.

I'm not too worried. I have a plan to pry it out of her later this week when we all meet at Kellan's again.

“Wesley.”

Halfway up the stairs, I freeze. *Goddammit*. All I want is to hide in my room, get some homework done, and then get the fuck out of here.

Home hasn't felt like home in years, but I can pretend easier if I don't have to deal with John. It's why I refuse to acknowledge him on campus. I don't want anything to do with him, and I also don't want everyone thinking I get special treatment because I have family on staff.



I don't bother turning around. "What?"

"I don't want you speaking to Athelia Harper anymore."

That gets me to turn. With a scoff, I reply, "Why the fuck not?"

"She's not who you think she is."

"I don't have to listen to you." But even as I say it, I know it's not true.

Whatever my dad did for work, it made him a ton of money. He dumped boatloads of cash into a trust fund for me that I was supposed to get access to on my eighteenth birthday.

When John took over our accounts, though, that changed. He took charge of the trust fund and changed the conditions to which I get access. Now, I have to wait until I'm twenty-five—or until he signs it over to me.

That money is my ticket away from the power-hungry monster my mother married. Of course he found a way to hold it over my head. Now, if I don't do what he wants, I'll never see the cash my father worked so hard for me to have. Until I can figure out a way to deal with Kammes, that is. I refuse to stay like this forever.

"I'm not trying to force you, son," he says.

"Don't call me that," I snap.

John sighs. "Why don't you step into my office for a moment? I have something I think you'll want to see."

The last thing I want to do is spend more time with him, but if it'll get him off my back, then I'll do it. I can avoid Athelia on campus and see her in private elsewhere if that's what I have to do. There's a connection between us that I can't ignore. It's only been two weeks, and she's already taken over most of my thoughts.

Once I'm inside John's office, he closes his door and pulls out his phone. "I know we've never really discussed this with you, but you're aware that your mother and I have an open marriage, correct?"

I nod. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Because of Athelia.”

“What? I don’t underst—” But it clicks in an instant. Why wouldn’t it? I’ve been here before. “You’re fucking kidding me.”

“Look, some women just like older men. It’s—”

“You’re lying to me,” I snarl. “You just can’t stand that I found one thing—one girl—who made me fucking feel something. I swear to god, John, you—”

He angles his phone toward me, and the insult I was winding up for dies on my tongue. My stomach drops at the video playing in front of me. Athelia is on her knees in John’s on-campus office, and she’s enthusiastically sucking him off while staring up at the camera with those big, beautiful brown eyes of hers.

“That’s it, Athelia,” John says in the video. “Take my cock deeper.”

“Fuck.” I’ve seen enough, so I turn away.

“She manipulated you,” John says softly. He places a hand on my shoulder in a comforting gesture, but it just sends a wave of disgust through me. “She used you to get to me. I’m sorry, Wesley. I didn’t put the pieces together until I saw you with her today.”

I shove him off, too disgusted to even look at him. Without another word, I storm out of his office and up to my room. He calls after me, but I ignore him.

Who the fuck does Athelia think she is? I recognize the dress that was shoved around her waist in the video. She was wearing it the other day. But today, she was flirting with me and the guys. Even let me kiss her before she had to run off to class.

We told her she’s ours, and she knew we meant it. Yet she went and seduced Kammes. My fucking stepfather of all people.

I pull out my phone and text the guys.

Athelia won't get away with this. I'm not a stepping stone to be used to get to Kammes.

*You'll regret what you've done, Athelia Harper. Mark my words.*

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## Athelia

*Senior year, Professor Kammes's home office*

The knock on the office door still startles me even though I know it's coming. Professor Kammes isn't sure who it is, but he told me he has an idea.

The asshole doesn't clue me in, though.

After hearing the front door close, I had just enough time to pull myself together. It looks like a normal meeting, except for the fact that it's on a Sunday and I'm in his home.

"Come in," Professor Kammes calls.

We're both sitting at his desk now. He's on one side, and I'm on the other, fully dressed with my hair over my shoulder to cover Cal's hickey and any forming bruises from Professor Kammes strangling me.

The door opens, and I have to turn to see who it is, half expecting his wife. I almost choke on my next breath as Wes strides in, tossing an apple up in the air before catching it. He doesn't even look surprised to see me sitting in Professor Kammes's office.

*What the fuck is he doing here?*

“You missed our breakfast meeting,” Wes says, completely ignoring me.

Professor Kammes frowns. “I don’t remember scheduling one. I’m sorry, son.”

My stomach drops. Son?

*Oh my god. I’m gonna be sick.*

Rolling his eyes, Wes mutters, “Typical. Well, whatever. We can reschedule.”

“Of course.” Professor Kammes smiles placidly. “Later, though. I’m in an advisory meeting right now, as you can see.”

Finally, Wes looks at me. His gaze drops down my body to my legs, and he smirks. “Oh, I can see very well.”

*The fuck?*

“When will mom be home from brunch?” Wes asks.

“Not for another hour or so. Why?”

Wes shrugs. “Just thought it’d be nice to say bye before you two head off on your trip. Maybe I’ll drop by later. Have fun with your *meeting*.”

Professor Kammes frowns at Wes’s tone but says nothing as his *son* leaves, shutting the door behind me.

The room spins as I put the pieces together.

He knows.

He’s *known*.

My throat feels like it’s closing in on itself, and my lungs refuse to expand to get in enough air. How long has Wes known? Has he *always* known? Why didn’t he try to stop it? To help me? At least during freshman year, he cared. Unless... maybe he didn’t know back then?

*All of this because you made one wrong choice. Too bad for you, huh?*

“Oh my god.”

Professor Kammes gives me a look that's half confusion and half annoyance. "What?"

I cover my mouth with my hand as a deep ache radiates in my chest.

*You brought this on yourself, Athelia. All you had to do was not choose him.*

No. No, no, no. There's no way they think I chose Professor Kammes over them. I don't want this—I never wanted this.

But then I remember what Wes yelled yesterday. I *would never choose someone else.*

All of a sudden, everything clicks in my head, and the picture painted before me is devastating.

"What, Athelia?" Professor Kammes snaps.

It'll only upset him more, which will only lead to worse consequences, but I can't help it. I cover my face in my hands and burst into tears.

...

When it becomes obvious that I'm not going to stop crying anytime soon, Professor Kammes kicks me out. I don't know how I'm able to drive back to my dorm without crashing, but somehow I manage.

Inside, Haven still isn't back. I call her again, but she doesn't answer.

"Where are you?" I shout, throwing my phone against the wall. It drops to my bed, and I stare at it, willing the screen to light up with a call.

Nothing.

"I need you," I whisper.

My skin is crawling, so I turn the shower on again and step inside. The water is freezing as it soaks me, clothes and all, but I'm past caring.

My knees hit the hard floor as another round of sobs wrack my body. The past three years play through my mind like a

movie.

Is this why they did a one-eighty and started treating me so poorly?

Now that I'm thinking about it, it was only after Professor Kammes forced himself on me that the guys started bullying me. But... how did they find out? And why did they not stop to think that maybe it wasn't consensual?

I hear a muffled shout, probably from the hallway, and try to quiet my sobs. Sometimes I forget how thin these walls are, and I don't want everyone on my floor hearing me crying.

But the shouting only grows louder, and then I hear the unmistakable sound of the door opening and closing.

"H-Haven?" I call out. My voice is wobbly and weak, so I don't know if she even heard me.

"Athelia!"

Somehow, my body grows even colder, despite the freezing water falling from above. That wasn't Haven's voice.

It was Cal's.

"Go away," I shout. My voice breaks on the last syllable, and I cover my mouth to muffle my sob.

Everything hurts, and my skin burns at all the points where Professor Kammes touched me. All I want to do is wash him off me—to leave my body and never come back.

*I want to die.*

The bathroom door flies open, and Wes barges in, followed by Cal and Kellan. The look on Wes's face is murderous, but when he sees me, he freezes.

"What..."

"Oh my god." Cal pushes past Wes and throws the shower door open. He turns the water off before crouching in front of me. "Athelia."

When Cal reaches for me, I kick at him until he backs off. "Don't you fucking touch me," I yell.

I expect Cal to ignore what I said, but his gaze is fixed on my thigh, his expression grim. When I look down, I realize my dress has ridden up enough to showcase the bruise forming on my skin.

Cal stands, and at first I think he's going to drag me out of the shower, but then he turns to face Wes and Kellan. "Did either of you do that to her?" His voice is eerily calm, causing the room to buzz with an unsettling tension.

"What?" Kellan frowns. "No. Cal, you were with me this morning when she left. That bruise wasn't there."

"Wes, did you hurt her?"

"I..." Wes blinks a couple times before staring at the bruise. He didn't do it, but by now, he's probably put together who did. "Athelia, what—"

Cal grabs Wes by his jacket and slams him against the wall. "Did you do that to her?" he shouts.

"No." Wes doesn't take his eyes off me. I'm pretty sure he's barely even aware that Cal just shoved him. "No, I'd never... Athelia, what happened?"

I shove my dress farther down my legs to cover the bruise. "Why on earth do you think I'd tell you?"

"I... Athelia, did Kammes... did he do that?"

"What?" Kellan looks between the two of us. "She was with him?"

"Put the pieces together yourself," I grumble, "and get the hell out of my bathroom."

"No." Wes pushes Cal off him and stalks toward the shower. "You tell me who did that to you, Athelia, and you tell me right the fuck now."

"You already know who," I shout back. "You're just in denial because he's your father."

"Stepfather," all three of them correct at the same time.

*That explains why they have different last names.*



“That doesn’t matter right now,” Wes snaps. “Athelia, why did he do that?”

I set my jaw, glaring up at him. I’m sure it’s pathetic considering I probably look like a drenched cat, but I don’t care. He’s the one who assumed I actually *wanted* Professor Kammes.

Cal releases a short, frustrated breath. “Get out.”

“What?” Kellan and Wes ask.

“I said get the fuck out.” Cal shoves them both toward the door. “Give me a couple minutes with her.”

“I don’t want you to stay.” But the words don’t sound convincing. Now that someone’s here, I don’t want to be alone.

*I wish Haven was back.*

Cal locks the guys out before turning back to me. His expression softens, and he drops to his knees on the mat right outside of the shower. “Talk to me, baby.”

“It’s really stupid that you call me that, you know.” I regret saying it instantly. Out of the three of them, he’s been the nicest to me, so I don’t know why I’m lashing out at him.

“I’d stop, but I don’t think I can.” He grimaces in a half-apology.

I turn my head away from him and stare at the floor of the shower. Little puddles of water have formed on the surface, and I dip my finger into one.

“We need to get you into some dry clothes,” he says.

“I haven’t washed him off yet,” I whisper. My hands ball into fists, and I dig my nails into my palms in an attempt to keep the tears at bay.

“Okay,” he says gently. “Do you... want me to leave while you do that?”

I nod, but then I shake my head. *I don’t know what I want.*

“Do you want me to help you?”

That makes me cringe away. “Just turn around, please.”

Cal does as I ask. I turn the water on again, moving the dial to hot, and wait as it warms up. Before I peel my clothes off my shivering body, I double-check to make sure Cal is still facing away.

I wash my hair and scrub at my skin until Professor Kammes’s touches fade from my mind. The entire time, Cal stares at the door that leads back into mine and Haven’s room.

“Do you know where Haven is?” I ask.

“What? No.”

I sigh. I figured he wouldn’t, but at this point, I’m worried. She’s always been an early riser, so she should’ve gotten back to me by now.

*Her phone probably died, and she’s probably having hot morning sex with Aaron or something like that. Stop worrying.*

Once I’ve rinsed all the soap off my body, I shut the water off.

Cal stands, still facing away. “Which towel is yours?”

“The black one,” I mumble.

He grabs it from the towel rack hanging on the door. When he hands it to me, he keeps his gaze locked on the ground.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

It’s not until I’m done drying off that I realize my clothes are a soaked heap on the shower floor.

“I—I don’t have any dry clothes in here.”

“I can grab some.”

“No,” I blurt. If he unlocks the door, I don’t trust Wes and Kellan to stay outside. “I’ll just...” I look around, hoping to find something that I forgot in here, but there’s nothing.

“Here.” Cal pulls his hoodie over his head. “Is it okay if I turn around?”

I tighten my towel around myself. “Yeah.”

He hands me the hoodie, his jaw tightening when he takes me in. “Your neck.”

When they walked in on me, my hair had been plastered to my skin and obstructing their view. Now, it’s all behind my shoulders.

Slowly, I move so I’m in front of the mirror. My stomach turns at the sight of the long, thin bruises across my neck.

Finger marks.

I turn away, gasping in small breaths. It’s like his hand is still there, tightening, crushing my throat. It doesn’t matter that he wasn’t even strangling me for a full minute. I can feel it just as well.

“Athelia,” Cal says gently. He takes a tentative step closer. “What all did he do to you?”

“It might be better to ask what he hasn’t done,” I mutter.

“How bad...” When Cal’s hand comes to rest on my waist, I wince, so he pulls away. “How badly did he hurt you? Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“No. God, please no.”

“Okay.”

“What do you want from me?” I ask.

Cal sounds so genuinely concerned, and I don’t know what to do with that. Yesterday, he joined Wes and Kellan in doing whatever they wanted with me. I’m honestly not sure what’s more traumatizing—what happened last night or this morning. Because last night, I was so conflicted. I still am.

But today...

I try take a deep breath, and pain shoots through me.

*Fuck.* Never mind. What Professor Kammes did was so much worse.

“If you can’t breathe properly, then you should—”

“I’m not going to a goddamn hospital,” I grit out.

“Then at least let me see.”

“What good would that do?”

He laughs, but when he sees the confusion on my face, his smile fades. “I’m literally going to school to become a doctor, Athelia. Please just let me help.”

“Oh,” I mumble. “I forgot about that.”

“Give me the towel.” He doesn’t grab it, just holds his hand out.

With a sigh, I give it to him. It’s not like he hasn’t seen my naked body before.

“Fuck, baby.” His fingers feather over my left side, where a large, ugly bruise has already formed.

Averting my gaze, I stare at the sink. I just can’t look at what he did to me right now.

“Did he kick you?” Cal asks.

“Y-yes.”

“Did you hear anything crack?”

“What?” I can’t help the panic in my voice.

“I’m just trying to make sure you didn’t break a rib.” He examines my side as gently as I can.

“I didn’t hear anything crack, no.”

“And you’re sure you don’t want to go to the hospital?”

I nod. I’m still on my parents’ insurance, and I have no clue how I’d explain those bills to them. That’s a mess I’d like to avoid. They’ll just worry more than they already do.

“We’re going to need to keep an eye on it.” Cal straightens, stroking a hand over my wet hair.

*“I will keep an eye on it.”*

He shakes his head. “There’s no way we’re letting you out of our sight now. He’s not touching you ever again.”

I roll my eyes. “Why, because you’re the only ones who’re allowed to hurt me?”

His lips twitch, turning upward ever so slightly. “Yes. But we’d *never* hurt you like this, Athelia. Ever.”

“I know.” It’s one of the only things I’m actually sure of.

“Now tell me why he hurt you.” Cal takes the hoodie from my hands and positions it so I can easily stick my arms through the sleeves. He pulls it down until it’s settled over my shoulders. It smells nice—juniper and cedarwood with a hint of him.

“I don’t think you’ll like that,” I tell him, glancing down. The hoodie falls to my mid thighs, and something warm curls through me at the realization of how much bigger he is than I am.

“Just tell me, baby.”

“He saw the hickey,” I whisper, glancing up.

For once, Cal is the one who looks horrified, not me. “*What?*”

“He didn’t want me to have sex with anyone else. I tried to cover it up, but then...” I gesture at my neck. “The makeup wore off.”

“He hurt you because I... because I gave you that hickey.”

I nod.

The color drains from Cal’s face at my confirmation. “Athelia, I’m so sorry. I never would’ve... oh my god.”

The guilt in Cal’s eyes sends a wave of satisfaction washing over me. I’ll never forget that mere hours ago, I was trying to scrub *him* off my skin. After all the pain he’s caused me, he deserves to feel this.

*And I deserve to rub it in.*

“For the record,” I say, stepping back. “I never chose him.”

Cal’s brows draw down. “What?”

“Hey,” Wes shouts, and he pounds on the door. “Are you two done in there?”

I give myself another few seconds to take in the absolute shock on Cal's face. As the realization sinks in, his mouth opens, but he's speechless.

"That's why you three started tormenting me, isn't it? You thought I chose Kammes and was fucking him behind your backs."

"Yeah." Cal's voice is strained, like he just got punched in the gut.

I hope that's *exactly* what this feels like.

"Guys?" Kellan calls. "Is Athelia okay?"

I'm not. Honestly, I don't know if I'll ever be after this. But in this moment, I've taken a morsel of my power back, and that at least feels good.

"Athelia," Cal says unsteadily. "That means..."

"That you hurt me over and over and over again," I say, "for *nothing*."

# Chapter Twenty-Three

## Cal

Never in my life have I wanted to beg for forgiveness. But for Athelia, I'd drop to my knees this very second and say whatever she wanted me to. *Do whatever she wanted.*

I try to swallow down the lump in my throat as she glares up at me. Her eyes are full of tears, but she refuses to let them spill over.

"He forced you," I manage.

"For years."

The half-breakfast I ate before Wes texted us to come over here sours in my stomach. *For years. Ever since freshman year, I bet.*

"They need to know." It's not my place to tell her that, but I have to say it anyway. We all took equal parts in bullying her.

"You don't get to order me around," she says.

"I know. But Athelia—"

She holds up her hand, and I stop speaking immediately. All I want is to take her into my arms and make all her pain my own. She doesn't deserve this. I was saying that before, but now it's a thousand times more true.

“Go into my room and make sure they’re far from the bathroom door and my bed.”

I nod, rushing toward the door and feeling much like a dog running away with its tail tucked between its legs. Before I unlock it, I turn back. “Athelia, I’m so sorry.”

Pure hatred flashes in her eyes. “Good.”

When I open the door, Wes immediately tries to barge in. I shove him back.

“Just wait over there.” I nod toward the door that leads into the hallway. “It’s clear, Athelia.”

Only then does she peek her head out. When she sees that she’ll be far out of Kellan and Wes’s reach, she moves toward her bed and crawls onto it. Her expression is pained as she does so, but she doesn’t ask for help as she covers herself in blankets.

None of us speak. She’s currently sifting through her bed, trying to find something.

“Where the fuck is she?” Athelia grumbles.

There’s a stuffed black cat that’s on the floor. Slowly, I approach the bed and pick it up. Athelia eyes me cautiously until I straighten and hand it to her. She takes it and clutches it to her chest, and I wonder if she has some childhood attachment to it.

“What the hell is going on?” Kellan asks.

Wes shifts uncomfortably, barely able to look Athelia in the eye. “Something was different this time with him.”

She lifts a brow. “What do you mean, this time?”

“I’ve...” Wes swallows audibly. “I’ve seen you with him before.”

“You watched?”

He nods, jaw clenched.

Athelia doesn’t seem to like that, but she doesn’t address it. She strokes the back of her stuffed cat’s neck and takes a deep



breath. Her wince sends a physical pain shooting through my chest, but when I reach out to touch her, she glares at me.

“Just let me help adjust your pillows,” I plead. “I think I can make you more comfortable.”

“How badly did he hurt her?” Kellan asks. “I heard you mention a hospital, but—”

“No hospitals,” Athelia snaps. “They’ll ask too many questions, and I don’t know how to explain it to my parents. They already worry about me enough.”

Kellan’s voice is bordering on desperate as he says, “But you’re hurt badly enough that you need to go?”

Athelia glances at me. When I hesitate, she narrows her eyes.

“No,” I mutter. “I’d prefer it, but she’s probably fine.”

Running a hand through his hair, Kellan asks, “Then why is she in so much pain?”

“Because getting beat up hurts, you idiot,” Athelia seethes. When she tilts her chin up to look at me, her eyes soften slightly. “You can help me.”

I’m as gentle as possible as I help Athelia rearrange her pillows. When I help her lean back against them, she sighs with relief.

“That is better. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

*It’s the least I can do, considering this is all my damn fault.*

“Now go over there,” Athelia says, nodding to the others. “I don’t want any of you near me if I can help it.”

I retreat toward the opposite end of the room. If she could, Athelia would force all of us out of here in a heartbeat. The only reason she hasn’t is because she physically can’t.

Except... maybe she does want us here with her. She looked so lonely in the bathroom. We’re obviously not her first choice for comfort, but at the moment, we’re all she has.

Athelia grabs her phone and checks it. With a frown, she asks, “Have any of you seen Haven? Or heard anything about her whereabouts?”

“The last I saw her was after we...” Kellan clears his throat. “She asked me if I’d seen—”

“After you *what*, Kellan?” Athelia’s stare sharpens, zeroing in on him and making him squirm. “Say it out loud.”

“After we tied you to the tree,” Kellan says, shoving his hands in his pockets and staring at the floor. “After we tied you to the tree and left you there.”

Athelia nods, silently telling him to go on.

“She came up to me while we were standing around the fire. She didn’t know it was me, obviously, but I was the last person she saw you with. She asked where you were.”

“And what did you tell her?”

“I said that I showed you something upstairs, and then you wandered off on your own, and I hadn’t seen you since.”

“And then what?”

Inwardly, I groan. *There’s more?*

“She texted you,” Kellan says.

“No shit.”

“So I texted back saying that you were spending the night with some random guy you met.”

Athelia’s glare turns lethal. “You deserve worse than hell, Kellan Ambrose.”

He nods silently, still staring at the ground.

Sighing, Athelia hits a few buttons on her phone and holds it to her ear. We all stand there, awkwardly watching her while she waits for someone to pick up.

“What the hell did she tell you in the bathroom?” Wes whispers to me.

Athelia snaps her fingers, and we all turn back to her, backs straight. *Fuck*. Does she really have that good of a hold on us?

“That’s for me to tell.” She looks like she has more to say, but then a muffled, feminine voice comes through her phone. “Hey, Angie. Have you heard from Haven at all this morning? Or last night after, like, ten?”

I watch anxiously as Athelia’s frown deepens. Haven is her best friend. If she’s missing, then Athelia won’t be able to relax until she’s found.

“Okay,” Athelia says tiredly. “Thanks, Ange.”

“No word?” I ask.

Athelia shakes her head. The unease doesn’t leave her face, but she says, “I’m sure she’ll turn up. She’s probably still sleeping or something.”

Kellan blows out a short breath. “Look, I don’t want to rush you. But...”

“You need to tell us what the fuck he did to you,” Wes finishes.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## Athelia

I have half a mind to delay this just to piss Wes off more. But my body feels like it's about to burst. I need to get all this hurt and pain off my chest before it destroys me.

"Professor Kammes has been my advisor since freshman year," I start off quietly.

"We know that," Wes says impatiently.

Cal elbows him in the stomach, which shuts him up well enough.

"I also took one of his classes my first semester, and I have him again this semester. After my very first class with him, he emailed me to set up a meeting with me."

"The day you were wearing the green dress," Wes mutters.

"What? I—I don't remember what I was wearing."

He shakes his head. "It doesn't matter. Just keep going."

I want to ask why he remembers what I was wearing on a random day over three years ago, but I don't press. "Once he had me alone, he threatened me. I was eighteen and scared and didn't know what else to do, so I..." My eyes slide closed as blood rushes to my cheeks. "You know."

“Oh my god,” Kellan whispers.

“I tried to go to his department head, but he told me not to ruin my career by earning a reputation of accusing men of sexual assault. He didn’t believe me for a split second.” The helplessness I felt that day encroaches on my mind, but I shove it away. “It’s exactly what Kammes told me would happen, but I had to try.”

“Fuck,” Wes mutters. He rubs at his face.

“I didn’t want to continue.” Somehow, I laugh. “Obviously. But Professor Kammes made sure I didn’t have a way out. By the end of our first... encounter, he had a way he could ruin me. From there—”

“What does he have on you?” Cal asks. When I look at him, he’s crouched down on the ground with both his hands covering his mouth.

“It doesn’t—”

“What does he have on you, Athelia?” Kellan’s voice is dark. Threatening. But I don’t think he’s aiming it at me.

“Videos,” I whisper. “No school would hire me if they got out.”

Cal looks like it’s taking everything in him not to crawl into bed with me and hold me. Touch seems to be his go-to method of comfort. It’s mine as well—I just don’t think I want it from them.

They’re just as guilty in all of this.

“From there,” I continue, “things escalated. He started setting up more meetings than necessary. Then he made me come to his house on Sunday mornings when his wife was at brunch.”

Both Cal and Kellan glance toward Wes. By now, I’ve put the pieces together. Professor Kammes’s wife is Wes’s mom.

“I was too scared to say no.” I hug Mildred closer to my chest, the soft material of her ears rubbing against the bottom of my chin. “He threatened that if I let another man touch me,

he'd know, and there'd be consequences." I gesture vaguely to my body. "I didn't know what those would be until today."

"I'm so sorry, Athelia." Cal sounds broken. I don't want to believe that any of them have the ability to feel, but there's no way he could fake that level of guilt.

"I kept telling myself that it was only four years. That I could handle it. But he's been getting worse lately, and I..." I don't bother continuing. Don't have to.

They've seen the bruises.

Wes is shaking. Like, *actually* shaking. His fists are tight, making the veins in his arms bulge.

"Why didn't you tell your mom?" I ask him. "He's cheating on her. How long have you known?"

"They have an open marriage," he says flatly. "She'd never approve of him fucking someone as young as you, but frankly, that's none of my goddamn business. If I'd known it wasn't consensual, then I—"

"How could it possibly be consensual?" I shout. It makes my ribs ache, but I don't care. "He's my *professor*, you fucking idiot. The power dynamic alone—"

"He told me *you* came on to *him*," Wes snaps.

"Well, I didn't," I yell. A pained whimper escapes my lips, and I internally berate myself for the tears that flood my eyes.

*Don't you dare cry.*

"Stop upsetting her," Cal orders. "She needs to rest, not get worked up."

Wes ignores him. "Kammes saw us with you. Saw *me* with you. We were flirting and having a good time, but Kammes had already singled you out. I was still living with him and my mom at the time, so he caught me one day at home and told me to leave you alone. That you were his. That you... wanted him over me."

I shake my head, and the force of it causes my tears to fall onto my cheeks. "Never."

Even now, after all they've done, I'd choose them over Professor Kammes in a heartbeat. I don't *have* to choose, so as soon as this is done with, I'm kicking them out. But the point still stands.

"He showed me the video he took of you the first time," Wes says. "You looked like you wanted it."

At first, I bristle, because it sounds like he's accusing me of lying. But when I glance at him, his eyes are glazed over, and he looks numb.

"Wait," Kellan says slowly. "Has he always beat you?"

I shake my head. "He's just really rough. It hurts a lot, but he made me pretend I enjoyed it. Got him off easier, I guess."

Wes makes a disturbed sound and turns around to face the door. He rubs at his face again. "I can't believe I fucking fell for it."

Kellan's eyes narrow. "That bruise wasn't just from rough sex, Athelia."

"He did that because he saw the hickey I gave her," Cal says. The guilt and shame haven't left his face this whole time, and now, his expression falls further. "He beat her because of me."

I don't tell him otherwise. It's true.

"Fucking hell." Wes turns around to face me again, and I cringe into my pillows at the absolute fury in his eyes. "You never wanted him?"

"Not for a single second," I whisper.

*I wanted you.*

Wes moves toward me, but he only takes two steps before he freezes. Regret flashes in his eyes for a split second before he whips around to face Cal and Kellan. "He dies tonight."

My eyes bug out of my head. "W-what?"

Kellan is the only one who'll meet my gaze. The care on his face is so soft that it feels like a real touch. "No one hurts you and lives, *ma belle*."

He steps closer to the bed. Cal tries to stop him, but Kellan shoves him back.

“Athelia,” Kellan says, so close that he’s towering over me. “I know nothing I say will ever be sufficient. No apology will ever be long enough. But please listen to me when I say that I’m so, so sorry.”

I squeeze Mildred tight, staring down at the small stuffed animal. She’s brought me so much comfort over the years, but right now, it’s not enough.

*Nothing will ever be enough.*

Kellan reaches for me, but I shy away.

“Please. *Please*, Athelia, I need to touch you.”

“She doesn’t want it,” Cal says. “She asked for space. Give it to her.”

But Kellan’s fingers tangle in my hair. He brushes it over my shoulder before gently tugging the neck of Cal’s hoodie to one side. As he sees the bruises, his jaw clenches, and his eyes fill with sorrow.

“I don’t need your pity,” I grit out.

“Then take my regret.” Kellan grabs my hand and interlaces our fingers as he carefully lowers himself onto my bed. “Take my apologies. I’ve hurt you for the better part of the past three years for no reason. I’ve scared you, bullied you, and done my best to destroy you. I’ve taken *pleasure* from it.

“But Athelia... From now on, that stops. I’ll do whatever I have to, to make it up to you. I’ll beg for your forgiveness for years if that’s what it takes. I’ll do anything.”

I want to tell him that he could give me the entire world, and even that will never be enough. But he catches my gaze as he lifts our hands and gently brushes his lips over my knuckles. He looks—and *sounds*—so sincere.

*It doesn’t change all he’s done to you.*

*But you wanted him. You want him. Give him a chance.*



My phone goes off, and I gasp at the name and photo on the screen. I don't think I've ever answered a call so quickly in my life.

"Haven! Where the hell have you been?"

"Hey, I'm sorry. I had a... family emergency come up."

I frown. "Family emergency? But I thought—"

"With the good side of my family," she blurts.

"You didn't tell me you had a good side."

"I don't get to talk to them often. Look, I can't stay on the phone for long, but I love you, okay? I hope you had a really good night."

"I..." My heart clenches. I want to tell Haven just how horrible it was, but if she has something going on, I don't want her to worry. "I had a great night. I'll tell you all about it later. When will you be back?"

"I'm not sure." Something is off in her voice, but I can't tell what. "I'll text you when I know. It might be a few days. Bye."

"Haven—"

The line goes dead.

*The fuck? Might be a few days? What happened?*

"Is she all right?" Cal asks.

"Yeah," I say, even though I don't believe myself. I tear my eyes from my phone, only to be met by three pained, regretful gazes.

Serves them right.

Wes is the only one who hasn't apologized, which is typical. He wanted to chain me up in a fucking basement last night. Whatever his problem is with me, it stems from more than my supposed rejection of him.

Kellan's thumb strokes across the back of my hand. "Athelia —"

"Do you have any idea how much pain you've caused me?" I ask him.

He shakes his head remorsefully, but I wonder if he only does it because he knows it's what he's supposed to do.

“Do you have any idea how many times I thought of giving up on the idea of being a teacher? Of quitting school entirely because of you three?”

It's not completely true. Professor Kammes played a much larger role in me wanting to give up. But for the moment, these three need to understand just how shitty they've been.

“I lost count of the amount of nights I cried myself to sleep. Of how many times Haven had to persuade me not to kill myself.”

Kellan winces then, and Wes swears under his breath. Cal looks like he's on the verge of tears, but thankfully he's managing to hold them back. He won't get an ounce of sympathy from me. Not today.

“Even if I'd chosen Professor Kammes of my own free will, it wouldn't have justified a single thing you've done to me.” At that, I shake my hand free of Kellan's grasp, happy to see the pain in his eyes as I do. “I'm allowed to make my own damn choices.”

None of them try to defend themselves, which is the only reason I'm not actively throwing things at them. Well, that, and I don't want to hurt myself more.

“I deserved so much better than what any of you have given me. We had something going freshman year. At the very least, we still could've been friends.” My gaze cuts to Wes. They're all at fault, but he's their leader, even if it's never been spoken out loud. “And you did this all why? To punish me? Do you not see how fucked up that is?”

Silence.

“Do you not—” I catch myself as pain shoots through my chest. If I can't keep calm, I'm only going to make myself more miserable. I take a slow, cautious breath, my gaze never leaving Wes's. “Do you really not see, Wes? How cruel you've been?”

“I see it,” he says quietly.

“Then what do you have to say for yourself?”

He swallows, and the vein near his temple pulses. At this point, all I want is an apology. It won't be enough, but it'll be something.

I can work with something.

*Or you're delusional.*

“I'm sorry,” Wes says. “I'm sorry I never thought to check that you wanted my stepfather. I'm sorry that I didn't protect you from him, and I'm sorry for all the things I've done to you.”

Kellan moves out of the way as Wes stalks toward the bed. Cal throws his hands up before grumbling something about not respecting boundaries. It's pitifully ironic, but I don't have the energy to call him out on it right now.

“But...” Wes's fingers trace the curve of my face until they rest underneath my chin, lifting it up. “I love being the one who inflicts pain on you. I love your anger, your tears, and your frustration.”

I try to shy away, but he keeps a firm grip on my chin. It's not lost on me, however, that he somehow manages to keep his hold gentle. It's contradictory to what he just said, which only makes my thoughts even more jumbled.

“I love seeing you helpless,” Wes continues. “Holding that power over you... knowing we're the only ones who can give you what you want—what you *need*—that fuels me, Athelia.”

“But I can't go on like this,” I whisper.

“You won't have to. From here on out, things will be different. No more bullying. You're ours now—for real this time. You have our loyalty. Our affection. Our protection.”

“I don't understand.” My heart is breaking at the same time it feels like it's getting stitched back together. “If you want to see me in pain, then I can't—”

“There are other ways.”

I shudder. What could he possibly mean? But Wes doesn't elaborate. Instead, he leans down, closing the distance between us until his lips are pressed against my forehead in a sweet kiss.

It sends my mind back into that weird headspace I was in last night. He's so *gentle*. It reminds me of how he treated me before everything fell apart.

*But is it enough? How can it be enough?*

I'll *never* forgive them for what they've done.

"My soul," Wes murmurs against my lips.

I try to hold back my sob. I really, really do. But Wes says it with so much weight, so much tenderness, and I'm already so tired and broken and confused. My body doesn't care if I refuse to cry. And you know what? I've earned the fucking right to.

Wes doesn't back away. He sits on the bed and somehow manages to snake an arm around me without causing me more pain. I sob into his chest while clinging to Mildred.

None of the guys say anything as I let out all my frustration and pain through my tears. It hurts my ribcage to do so, but I can't stop.

Finding out that all the bullying I've endured for the past three years has been for no good reason is bad enough. Add on everything the boys did to me last night, plus Professor Kammes raping me this morning, and it's just too much.

The whole time, Wes strokes my back. I feel so naive letting him comfort me when he's a part of the reason I'm crying. If Haven was here, it'd be different, but I'm not close with anyone else on campus.

Everyone would just offer suggestions—tell me to go to campus security, to try to talk to someone else other than the head of the history department. I'd probably end up with a dozen pamphlets and at least three different therapists to call.

The thing is, that's not what I need right now. Maybe tomorrow or next week, but not today. All I want to do is cry

and sleep and then cry some more.

When my tears finally dry up, I realize I'm clutching Wes's jacket, which is soaked. I expect him to make some annoyed comment, but he just thumbs away my tears.

Based on the amount of crumpled-up tissues in the trash can by my bed, I'm pretty sure I used up almost a whole box. When I sniffle, Wes hands me yet another tissue, and I blow my nose for the thousandth time.

"Do you need to be alone?" Cal asks. His brows are furrowed with concern, and I can still see the guilt that he's doing his best to bury.

"I... I don't know." The thought of being alone scares me. I feel so raw—so unstable.

*I want Haven.*

"You should probably rest," he says. "Even without your injuries, you didn't get enough sleep last night."

"And whose fault is that?" I snap.

Cal closes his eyes and releases a strained exhale.

"I'm sorry," I say softly. "You were being nice. I don't know why I did that."

"I think you're allowed to be a little mean," Kellan says. His tone is light, and a small smile sits on his mouth, but the gravity of the situation isn't lost on him. It's clear in how he's holding himself and in how he's been watching me carefully this whole time.

"Probably," I mutter. A yawn overtakes me, which hurts like hell.

"Yeah, you need to sleep." Cal tugs on Wes's arm. "We'll come back later."

"I'm not leaving," Wes says.

I tilt my head, watching him. "But—"

"No." His voice is firm. "There's absolutely no way I'm leaving you alone like this."

“Have you thought that maybe Athelia doesn’t want you to stay?” Kellan asks.

“Don’t care.”

“Do you want us to force him out of here?” Cal asks me.

“I…” When I think about him staying, dread curls through my stomach. But when I think about him leaving, icy fear grips my heart. I don’t think I should be alone right now. “I don’t know.”

“I’m staying,” Wes grits out. “Now close her curtains and get out.”

Both Kellan and Cal look like they want to protest, but they don’t. Before they leave, Cal fusses over me much more than he needs to. It annoys me, but a small part of me basks in his attention.

I haven’t forgiven them—I don’t know if I ever will—but seeing their regret and hearing their apologies is helpful. Even if we were only friends for a couple weeks before everything went south, I felt such a strong connection to them back then. Part of me wants to be able to get back to that point. A very small, very hurt part.

Once the guys are gone, Wes stands and undoes his pants.

Panic shoots through me. “Wait—no, Wes, I don’t—”

“I’m not gonna touch you. Well, I will, but not like that. I just don’t want to sleep in jeans.”

“Oh,” I breathe out. My muscles instantly relax, and I close my eyes as I settle back into bed.

Wes crawls in behind me. He carefully pulls me into his body and strokes my damp hair back from my face.

“I should kick you out,” I say quietly.

“Wouldn’t leave even if you did.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Don’t care.”

“Well, you should.”

Wes stiffens at the coldness in my voice. Then he sighs. “I do care, Athelia. It’s why I’m staying.”

“Even if I told you I didn’t want you here? How is that caring?”

He scoffs. “Maybe I faded from your mind, but you never left mine. Not even for a damn second. I obsessed over you, watched you, craved you. I know you inside out, Athelia Harper, and the last thing you want right now is to be alone.”

“You watched me?” It’s not the correct detail to focus on, but I can’t help myself.

“Whenever I could.” He sounds pained as he says it. “Whenever I wasn’t around you, I felt like I couldn’t breathe. Fucking stupid, I know. But after that first night, it was like I needed you. But then Kammes told me that you’d used me, and I—”

“Used you?”

Wes is silent, so I turn around to face him. I have to lay on my bruised side, and when he sees the pain in my eyes, he flips me over so I’m on my back.

“Don’t do that,” he says. “Don’t hurt yourself more.”

“Then tell me what you meant.”

Wes settles so he’s on his back and staring up at the ceiling. “When I was a kid, my mom used me as an excuse to get close to Kammes. He was my baseball coach—she enrolled me specifically so she’d have some type of excuse to be around him.

“They fooled around together for years behind my dad’s back. He was killed when I was in high school, and my mom and Kammes got married quickly after. It made me so goddamn angry.”

My heart breaks for him, but I don’t say anything. Not that I’m sorry that it happened to him or that he deserved better. Because right now, he doesn’t deserve sympathy from me. Not at all.

“Kammes told me you used me to get to him,” We says. “It... brought back a lot of old feelings that I thought I’d buried.”

“I didn’t even know he was your stepdad until today.”

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “I figured that out by the look on your face when I walked into his office.”

We lay there in silence for a few minutes. Eventually, I turn my head to look at him. All I can see is his side profile—his sharp cheekbone and defined jawline, his long eyelashes, and the freckles dotting his pale skin.

“Have the past three years really only been because of that one incident? Because you thought I used you to get to him?”

It feels like there’s more. There has to be.

“I couldn’t let you go,” he whispers. “You were everywhere. Even if I managed to avoid you on campus, every time I looked at Kammes, I thought of you. And that night in the hot tub... It fucking changed me. Not a day has gone by that I haven’t thought about it.”

“And it made you angry?”

He lets out a soft, amused breath. “You haunted me, Athelia. I couldn’t even escape you in my dreams. So no, I wasn’t angry. I was *tormented*. You didn’t deserve what we did to you. But...”

My body goes stiff. “But what?”

“But I can’t change the past,” he murmurs, rolling onto his side and softly stroking his knuckles across my jaw. “And I can’t change what I want to do to you.”

“What about what I want?” I whisper.

“Whatever you want, we’ll give you.”

“And if I don’t want you?”

Wes shakes his head. “There’s no version of your life where you don’t end up with me. With us. You’re mine, Athelia. *My soul*. I can’t let you go.”



I'm silent as I stare at the snake tattoo that winds around his neck, as if it's just sitting there and resting on his shoulders. I can't see most of it, just what's visible above his black T-shirt, but it doesn't make the urge to trace my fingers over it any smaller.

"What *do* you want?" he asks.

"I don't know," I whisper. Then I roll my eyes. "I want the versions of the three of you that I created in my heads. The ones who loved me and were soft and gentle and protective. Not the assholes you are in real life."

I'm not sure why I'm being so honest with Wes, other than I hope my words sting. He should know that I much prefer a fictionalized version of him over the real thing. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to work, because the dick smiles.

"Is that really what you want? Soft and gentle?"

"You actually think that's *not* what I want?"

"I know how wet you got last night, and we were the exact opposite of soft and gentle. Not to mention how hard you came while I was fucking that perfect throat of yours."

My fingers close into fists. "Fuck you, Wesley Carver."

"You will," he says smoothly. His lips feather over my neck. "And when the time comes, I'll make you beg for my cock."

I blow out a frustrated breath before pushing him away. "You're not getting it. What I want in bed isn't what I want all the time. I have feelings, you know."

For a moment, he looks like he's going to make another joke, but he doesn't. His fingers tangle in my hair as he leans over me, careful not to put any weight on me. With his forehead against mine, he finally speaks.

"I told you I'll give you anything, Athelia. You want soft and gentle? Done. You want someone who'll drop whatever they're doing for you, no matter what? I'll be that person. You want me to follow you around and wait on you, hand and foot? I will. You're mine, Athelia, but I'm also yours."

"Wes—"

“You have me, okay? Every piece of me. I know I hurt you, and I understand if you hate me. But I can’t let you go. Trust me, I tried. Every time I tried to forget about you, I found myself stumbling back to you in one way or another.”

Wes takes my hand and places it over his chest. The fabric of his T-shirt is soft, and his body is warm. Hard yet comfortable. His heart beats rapidly under my palm, similarly to how fast mine gets when I feel a panic attack coming on.

“I don’t know if I want this with you,” I whisper. “I used to, but now...”

He shakes his head. “Maybe I’m not making myself clear. This is happening, Athelia, and there isn’t a thing you can do to stop it.”

“That’s not love.”

“It doesn’t have to be.” Wes kisses me, his lips barely touching mine for more than a second. “Call it obsession. Sickness. Whatever it is, I’ve tried, and I can’t stop it. Neither can Cal and Kellan.”

*My heart—my soul—is drawn to you with so much force that even gods couldn’t stand between us.*

When he said that to me last night, I hoped he was being dramatic. We were all tired. But now, there’s no denying it.

I can’t hide from them.

I’ve never been able to.

My fingers curl into his shirt. I’m too tired to continue this conversation, but I need to know. “How am I supposed to know that something like this won’t happen again?”

“Quite simply because I know not to trust my bastard of a stepfather,” Wes says, his tone dark. “I never should’ve in the first place.”

“And if—”

“There are no *ifs*,” he growls. “The four of us are set in stone.”

I sigh. He's being ridiculous, but even during freshman year—before everything went to shit, that is—the guys were oddly possessive of me. Maybe that's just who they are.

*But can I ever truly trust them?*

*Or... forgive them?*

*What if I want to get to that point?*

*No. God, fuck no. Absolutely not.*

“Athelia,” Wes murmurs.

I blink my eyes open, not even remembering when I closed them. “Hmm?”

The determination has faded from his eyes, replaced with a softness I haven't seen in years. “You need to rest. We can continue this conversation later.”

Wes pulls me so I'm in a semi-sitting position and props me up with pillows. According to Cal, I should try to sleep like this for a couple days. I must've slid down the pillows during our conversation.

After Wes has positioned the blankets over my shoulders, he searches through my crumpled comforter and places Mildred in my lap. My heart warms at the gesture, and I smile at him tiredly.

“Her name is Mildred,” I mumble.

Wes snorts. “Why'd you give her an old lady name?”

I elbow him in the gut, and he grunts. “I thought it was pretty when I was little. My parents got her for me when I was five.”

“Fair enough,” he wheezes.

“Now shut up and let me sleep.”

“You're the one who started talking.”

“Shut. up.”

Wes sighs, but at least he listens.

I'm not sure how I'm able to fall asleep with my literal bully sitting on the bed with me, but I do. Somehow, I feel safe, even if I know I can't trust him yet.

*You have our loyalty. Our affection. Our protection.*

The last thing I remember before falling asleep is the deep ache in my chest. I finally have what I wanted all those years ago, but now it doesn't matter.

I'll never be able to trust them.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## Kellan

A tense silence fills the air between me and Cal as we leave Athelia's dorm. The guilt has to be eating at him over the hickey.

When we get to our bikes in the parking lot, he takes his helmet in his hands, but he doesn't put it on. "I never wanted her to get hurt. Not like this."

"We know. *She* knows."

Cal works his jaw before turning to me. "We fucked up, Kellan."

I nod.

"We *really* fucked up."

"I know."

"I don't think she'll ever forgive us."

"She might," I respond. "She let Wes stay with her."

"Because she has no power or strength to kick him out!"

"She didn't tell us to drag him out, and you gave her the option."

Cal releases a short, frustrated breath. The late morning sun catches his blond hair, making it almost glow. He looks like an angel, which is so comically wrong that I almost laugh.

“We have to find a way to make this up to her,” Cal says.

“We will.”

I don’t care how long it takes. Athelia could make me beg and grovel for her forgiveness for ten years, and I’d do it happily.

We hop on our bikes and head home. It only takes a few minutes, but it gives me just enough time to think.

*She must’ve been so confused. So lonely.*

We were some of the only friends she had on campus. I can’t imagine being in her shoes. First, her professor raped her—*repeatedly* raped her—and then three of her friends abandoned her.

*No, I remind myself. We did more than just abandon her. We made her want to fucking kill herself.*

Over the years, we’ve done some horrible shit. We knew it’d make her feel awful. Hell, it’s what we wanted. First, we were punishing her for what she did, but after a while, it became more than that.

We were punishing her for merely existing.

None of us could stand it, having her so close but so far. But how we felt pales in comparison to how *she* must’ve felt.

By the time Cal and I have parked our bikes in the garage and pulled off our helmets, my stomach is roiling. We enter the house silently, and I wonder if he’s dealing with the same thing I am.

I haven’t felt it in years. Not on this level, anyway. But now it’s consuming me, wrapping tightly around my throat and threatening to never let go.

For the first time since we started bullying Athelia, I’m ashamed.

Not embarrassed. Not uncomfortable. The shame hits me so sharply and takes root so deeply that I don't know if I'll ever be able to get rid of the feeling.

Maybe I *shouldn't* ever get rid of it.

All of a sudden, the apology I gave Athelia feels laughable. It was just words—so little effort that it's insulting to her.

At the beginning of freshman year, we saw her moving in by herself and were instantly interested. Sure, she was hot, but it was the determination in her eyes that caught my attention.

She doesn't know we manipulated her that night—that we intentionally ignored her throughout the party. That way, when we finally showered her with our attention, she'd appreciate it all the more.

Worked like a charm.

Her mini panic attack in the pool was unexpected, but scaring her had always been part of the plan. She fell into it easily, clinging to Cal while he offered her the safety of being wrapped up in him.

From there, it took little work to push down the rest of the walls she had built up. She took a piece of each of us that night. We took a piece of her too, whether she'll admit it or not.

But now...

Fuck, I'd change everything if I could. We couldn't trust her yet, not back then. We barely knew her. But we should've given her the benefit of the doubt and let her explain her side of things. Then we could've taken care of this years ago.

But we were too immature. Too stupid.

I turn to Cal, who's glaring at his phone.

"How the hell are we going to fix this, man?" I ask.

"I don't know, but check this out."

I peer down at his phone. It's pulled up to a screenshot of an Instagram post. I don't recognize the username, but I do

recognize the photo. It's our house—specifically, the front room, facing the door.

“Great, you have a picture of two girls who took a picture at the party last night. So what?”

“Look at the background,” Cal says.

I take a closer look, and almost instantly, I see what he's getting at. Three guys wearing white masks and dark gray hoodies are in the process of leaving the house. In the arms of one of them is a painting.

*Retribution.* It's the painting Wes noticed was missing from our hallway last night.

“At least we have a lead on who stole it,” I grumble.

“More than a lead,” Cal says. He points to the wrist of the guy holding the painting. “We know that tattoo.”

I snatch his phone from him and zoom in on the photo. “Fuck.”

All the guys are wearing gloves, but the sleeve of this guy's hoodie has ridden up just enough to reveal part of a dagger tattoo I've seen plenty of times.

“That's Lucas.”

Cal nods.

“Which means the other two guys have to be Colton and Xander.”

“That's sure what it looks like.”

“I *know* that painting was there after we kicked them out,” I say.

Rubbing his face, Cal sighs. “Which means they came back even though we told them not to.”

“Motherfuckers,” I growl. “They'll pay for this.”

“Wes is gonna lose his shit.”

Ever since Wes can remember, he and Colton have had it out for each other. They went to school together, K-12, and they



competed with each other over everything. Grades, social status, girls, cars, bikes, you name it.

When Cal and I entered the picture in high school, they were constantly getting into fights. That stopped soon after the three of us became friends, though. All of a sudden, it was us against Colton, and he knew he didn't stand a chance.

Since freshman year of college, he's had Lucas and Xander, so the playing field is more even now. Things have gotten considerably less violent since none of us want to get kicked out of Pemberton, but the game has only gotten more vicious.

Stealing something from our house is a new low, though.

"Wait," Cal says. "I don't think they know they stole it from us. No one put it together that we're the ones who were behind those masks."

"Not yet, they haven't." I hand him back his phone. "But they're about to find out real fucking fast."

Cal raises an eyebrow, and mischief sparks in his eyes. Good—handling this while Wes is with Athelia will keep our minds occupied for a few hours.

"What are we going to do?" he asks.

"Make them regret ever stepping foot on our damn property."

...

We swap out our bikes for Cal's car before heading out.

Colton's house is about a mile from ours. I'm not sure when he bought it, if he even did. I wouldn't be surprised if his parents just gave it to him.

I won't deny it. Most of us are a bunch of spoiled rich kids who have it way too easy. Fucking with Colton gives us some type of challenge, and I usually enjoy the thrill.

Today is no exception.

I pound on his front door while Cal sneaks into his garage. For both ends of our plan to work, I'll need to distract Colton while Cal does his thing.

When the front door swings open, Colton is shirtless. His face instantly turns dark when he sees me standing on his porch.

“What the fuck do you want?”

“I believe you have something that’s mine.”

He leans against the doorframe and smirks. “Oh? What’s that?”

“A certain painting. *Retribution?*”

Realization flickers in his eyes. “I fucking knew it. Of course it was you three.”

“Give it back, Colton, or there’ll be hell to pay.”

He shrugs. “I kinda like it. Don’t really feel like giving it up.”

I glance behind him. From here, I can see into his living room. He already has the painting up on his wall.

“For the record, we didn’t know it was yours,” Colton says. “But it makes the victory that much sweeter. Have a shitty day.”

As he starts to close the door, I jam my boot in the way so he can’t.

“Seriously, man?” he says, sounding more annoyed than anything. “Just take the loss. Move on.”

“You don’t want to play this game with us. We always win, and you know it.”

Colton looks over his shoulder at the painting, and his smirk widens. “Not this time.”

Practically on cue, the sound of glass shattering comes from the garage. We almost miss it considering the amount of walls in between us and his brand-new car that he bought for his birthday.

Colton’s face pales. It seems that he’s only now realizing that I’m alone on his front porch. “You motherfuckers.”

He dashes through the house, leaving the front door swinging open. I step inside and look around. The house seems to be empty, and I wonder what Lucas and Xander are up to.

*Whatever.* I don't have much time to look around.

In the living room, I take the painting down and tuck it under my arm. As I move through the house, I catch a whiff of something familiar—lilac perfume, I think—but I can't place where I know it from.

I'll figure it out later, I suppose. I'd love to smash as much as I can in here, but I need to get out to the garage in case Cal needs help.

On my way out, I leave the front door wide open. I can hear Colton shouting, and as I make my way down the path to the driveway, Cal sprints out of the garage.

"Get in," he shouts as he dives into the driver's seat of his car.

I slide into the passenger seat and settle the painting on my lap. Cal doesn't bother with his seatbelt. He turns on the car, backs out of the driveway, and speeds off. I stick my hand out the window and flip Colton off.

He doesn't even bother chasing us, which is mildly disappointing. Oh well. I'm sure he's already cooking up some unhinged revenge plan.

I can't wait.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

## Athelia

The first time I wake, it's to the sound of a deep, low voice.

“Hey, Char. Yeah, of course.” There's a pause, and I feel an arm tighten around my waist. “Tonight? Yeah, we can make that work.”

Sleep pulls at my body, so I nestle in closer to the warmth that's pressed against me.

“He's hiding out near Birchwood Lakes? Yeah, that's super close, we can handle that. Could you text me the specifics? All right, thanks.”

I'm vaguely aware of making some type of noise.

“Go back to sleep, Athelia.” Wes's voice is so sweet. I'm not sure why my mind has decided to trick me into thinking he's cuddling with me, but I relax into it.

So... *cozy*. I can even smell his usual pine and leather scent.

*I wish this could be real life.*

The second time I wake, it's to the feeling of something cold against my ribcage.

“I meant to swing by before now,” Wes is saying quietly, “but I got caught up in some things. Sorry.”

“Well, I miss you,” a feminine voice says, but it’s different than if someone was in the room.

*Wes must be on the phone again.*

“Miss you too,” Wes says, but his voice is hollow. “When do you and John get back?”

“In about a week. Next Sunday, I think. Everything okay?”

“Yep. Just curious. Have fun on your trip, Mom.”

“Oh, I’m sure we will. Love you.”

“Bye.” With a sigh, Wes drops his phone into his lap and swears under his breath. He meets my gaze just as I try to push away whatever he’s holding to my body. “Hey. Did I wake you?”

“Cold,” I groan, pushing at his arm again.

He doesn’t budge. “Cal texted me and said you should be icing your ribs two to three times a day.”

I shake my head in protest, but I’m too tired to do much else. My mind is still foggy, and sleep is still pulling at the edges of my consciousness.

“It’s just for fifteen more minutes,” he tells me. “Go back to sleep.”

“What... time...?”

“It’s around four.”

*Shit.*

I sit up too abruptly, and my mind goes blank at the pain shooting through my body.

“Careful,” Wes scolds. He pushes me back into the pillows gently.

Groggily, I shake my head. “I have a paper to finish.”

“Already did it.”

“W... what?”

Wes gestures to my desk. “You had all your assignments written out on a little sticky note. It didn’t take much to find

your outline and what you had already.”

“How did you log onto my laptop?”

“Oh, Kellan helped me with that.” He says it like it’s enough of an explanation.

I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised since they managed to hack into my account sophomore year.

“And you just... wrote my paper for me.”

With a nod, Wes says, “Wasn’t hard. Your outline was practically a full paper all on its own.”

“I can’t turn in something I didn’t write.”

“You can.”

“Wait—did you turn it in already?” My voice is panicked, but why wouldn’t it be? The last time they fucked with my schoolwork, they replaced a well-thought-out piece that took me forever to write with the shittiest paper I’ve ever seen.

I was lucky that Professor Johnson let me have a second chance. I doubt I’ll get lucky again.

“No,” Wes says. “I figured you’d want to look it over.”

*Oh, thank god.* I sink into my pillows and rub my face.

Wes shifts slightly so he’s facing me more. This whole time, he’s had the ice pack pressed to my ribcage.

“How long have you been holding that there?”

“Just a couple minutes. You woke up pretty quickly once you had it against you. Sorry if I was too loud. My mom called.”

“I can do it.” Swatting his hand away, I hold the ice pack to the bruise. “You don’t have to stay.”

“Already told you, I’m not going anywhere.”

I roll my eyes. “So what, you’re just going to live here now? Follow me around like some type of guard dog?”

“Maybe. Haven’t quite figured it out yet.”

“Well, I would like to be alone.”

He narrows his eyes, but there's no denying the confidence in my voice. This time, sleep gave me the clarity to figure out what I need.

Right now, it's space. Lots and lots of space.

"You owe this to me, Wes. Don't tell me you'll give me what I want and then go back on your word. Get out."

"I'm coming back with food in an hour."

"No, you're not. I can take care of myself."

He shakes his head as he slides off the bed. "Not anymore. That's our job now."

That only serves to piss me off more. But... well, I might as well use it to my advantage.

Wes kisses me on the forehead before putting his pants back on. I can't bring myself to look away from his muscular, inked legs. As he zips his jeans up, he smirks.

"Try to get some more sleep," he tells me. "You still look exhausted."

*I'll do whatever the fuck I want.*

"Wes," I say as his hand closes around the doorknob.

He looks back, an eyebrow raised.

"Kammes will want to see me when he gets back from his trip."

The shadow that crosses Wes's face makes me shudder. "I meant it when I said we'll kill him, Athelia. He may be out of our reach for now, but he won't survive the night he comes home."

My lips part in shock as Wes leaves, shutting the door behind him. He can't kill his stepfather, can he? Could he get away with it? What if he doesn't?

*What if he does?*

*Oh my god.*

I let the ice pack drop to the bed. With Wes gone, my mind is clearer than ever. The three of them are batshit if they think

I'm theirs. After all they've done to me—after what they did just last night—they'll have to do a lot better than saying they're sorry.

With a huff, I get to my feet. My body aches and my head is pounding, but I can't afford to wait. Wes said he'll be back with food in an hour. I may have managed to kick him out for the moment, but he'll be back.

And by then, I need to be long gone.

I grab my laptop and pull up a browser, typing in *Birchwood Lakes* without even thinking about it. I'm not sure why it pops into my head, other than I have the vaguest memory of someone talking about it recently.

It's a nice little spot close by to hide out for the night. I can come back for classes tomorrow with a clear head and a game plan for how to tell the guys off.

Once I've booked a cabin that's right on one of the lakes, I grab some clothes, a box of granola bars, and whatever else I'll need for the weekend. Then I send Haven a quick text just in case she comes back and finds our dorm empty.

The guys will discover I'm gone, and hopefully they'll get the hint. If not, they won't be able to find me. Why would they think to look for me in a place I've never been to before?

I'm out the door within twenty minutes and get to the cabin just as my phone buzzes in the cup holder.

***Wes:*** *Where the fuck are you?*

I almost don't respond, but the angry side of me wins.

***Athelia:*** *You don't own me.*

My phone rings—Cal.

Of course they'd have him call me. They're all jackasses, but he's the nicest.

"That's not gonna work on me," I mutter, declining the call and shoving my phone in my hoodie's pocket.

*Nothing* is gonna work on me anymore. I'll use them to help deal with Professor Kammes. If they kill him, fine. I don't care



as long as I don't go down with them when they inevitably get caught.

But after that, I'm done with them. Fuck their apologies. They may have meant them, but they'll never be enough. Nothing ever will be.

As I get out of the car, I take a deep breath of the cool air. The scent of earth and lake fills my lungs, easing the ache of breathing too deeply.

I smile. *This is exactly what I need.*

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## Cal

“She’s gone.”

My heart skips a beat at Wes’s words. I look to Kellan, who’s watching me with a concerned look. My grip on my phone tightens. “What?”

“She’s gone,” Wes repeats in my ear. “I left to get her some food, and when I came back, her dorm was empty. Is she with you guys?”

“I haven’t heard from her. Kellan, has Athelia texted you?”

He shakes his head. Since we got back from getting the painting, we’ve both been hanging around the house. We had some homework to do, and we both needed to catch up on sleep, too.

“Kellan hasn’t heard from her either,” I say into my phone.

Wes swears. “Where do you think she went?”

“Come on, man. She obviously wants to be left alone.”

“She’s *hurt*, Cal. Physically and emotionally.”

I sigh, unsurprised but still annoyed. Of course Wes can’t let her go.

“Maybe she went home,” Kellan offers. “The past day has been hell for her, and she has a pretty good relationship with her parents. It’s what I’d do, probably.”

I shake my head. “That’s a four-hour drive. She wouldn’t do that just to have to come back for classes tomorrow.”

“We need to find her,” Wes grits out.

“She doesn’t want us to,” I counter.

“I don’t care! She can’t run off like this.”

“She’s a big girl,” I tell him. “She can take care of herself.”

Still, worry creeps into my mind. There’s no definite way to make sure her rib isn’t cracked without getting her to a hospital. She refused to do that, and I wanted to respect her, so I didn’t press. But if it *is* cracked, it could lead to a lot of problems.

She could die.

“Athelia is smart,” I say, mostly to reassure myself. “She’ll be careful.”

“I don’t like this.” Wes sounds upset—panicked. It’s abnormal for him.

“I know,” I say calmly, hoping that he’ll actually listen to what I’m about to say. “But if we ever want her to forgive us, we have to respect her boundaries. She wants space, Wes.”

“Fuck. *Fuck*. Char called me with an assignment for tonight. We can’t complete it and find Athelia.”

“You’re not listening to me. Leave Athelia alone.”

“Cal, I can’t. I just... I can’t.”

“You can,” I tell him gently, “and it doesn’t look like you have much of a choice. Give her some time to process.”

The call ends, and I sigh, pulling up Athelia’s number in my phone. I call her, but she doesn’t pick up, so I type out a quick message with instructions on how to take care of her ribs. Once I’ve sent it, I immediately send another one with symptoms that indicate she needs to get medical care ASAP.

Athelia doesn't respond. Not that I was expecting her to. I just need to make sure she knows how to take care of her injury.

"She'll be okay," I tell Kellan.

He shrugs. "*I* know that."

Both of us pace around the house restlessly until Wes shows up. I wasn't sure if he'd listen to me, and I think Kellan was worried too, even if he hides it well.

Wes doesn't even step all the way into the house. He stays in the entryway and says, "The guy we're after is named Michael Huxley. He's a serial killer who's been making his way up the east coast, and we've tracked him to a cabin in Birchwood Lakes. Char wants him dead by midnight."

Without any questions, Kellan moves for the front door. "Let's do this."

"Why'd Char tell you he's a serial killer?" I ask. Normally, she doesn't tell us our marks' professions.

"Said he's more dangerous than the usual fuckers she sends us after."

Kellan places a hand over his heart. "Is Char looking out for us? I'm touched."

Wes rolls his eyes and shoves him out the front door. He turns to me before following. "We're looking for Athelia when we're done. I don't like not knowing where she is."

"Fucking Christ, man, can't you take a hint?"

"Not when it comes to her. She can suck it up."

I'm about to protest, but Wes is already halfway down the front porch steps. With a sigh, I grab my keys, lock the door, and follow the guys into the garage.

...

The ride to the cabin doesn't take long considering Birchwood Lakes isn't that far from campus. It's already dark out, not that we're worried about anyone seeing us. This area is pretty deserted at this time of year.

When we pull up to the cabin, I narrow my eyes. Wes didn't tell us there'd be anyone with Michael, but there are two people hanging out on the cabin's front porch—a man and a young woman.

It's too dark to see well, but it looks like they're laughing and drinking together. Something about the woman seems familiar, but I can't see well enough.

Until she turns toward us, that is. As I get off my bike, a glare I've seen hundreds of times falls over her face.

*What the hell?*

"I told you to leave me alone," Athelia snaps.

Wes stops a few feet from his bike. "What're you doing here?"

"Oh, don't play stupid with me. I need space, Wes. Fuck off."

Michael stands, hovering next to Athelia. His large frame dwarfs hers, and it sends a wave of unease through me. She doesn't seem afraid, so I don't think he's holding her hostage—yet.

Is this what he does? Lures his victims into his home and then kills them?

*Fuck.* Why didn't I think to ask what type of person Michael usually targets?

"Athelia," Kellan says calmly, "you need to get away from him."

"You can't tell me what to do," she bites out.

"Who are these fucks?" Michael asks. "I can get them to leave."

Athelia hasn't stopped glaring at us. There's something else written on her features, not nearly as visible as the anger but still there nonetheless.

Betrayal.

"Athelia," I say. "We didn't—"

“Fuck you, Cal. Just leave.”

“We can’t do that.” Wes takes a tentative step forward. His hand is resting on his gun, which is still hidden under his leather jacket. “Just come over here.”

Michael crosses his arms, showcasing his huge, muscular arms. “You heard her. Fuck off.”

Wes’s voice is hard, but I don’t miss the undercurrent of desperation. “Athelia, *please*.”

Athelia narrows her eyes at his words. Wesley Carver doesn’t say please, and she knows it. Her eyes flick to mine before she takes a small step toward the stairs. “What’s going on?”

Michael watches us carefully. Just as Athelia takes another step, his gaze zeros in on Wes’s hand. He must put the pieces together fast. In a split second, he has Athelia in his hold and has a knife pressed to her throat.

She cries out, but she doesn’t try to struggle. Not with the blade threatening to slice her skin open with the slightest movement.

Almost as quickly as Michael grabs Athelia, we have our guns out and pointed at him. He just laughs.

“Go ahead, shoot. Be careful not to miss, though. Don’t want to take out the wrong person by accident.”

I tighten my grip on my gun but don’t shoot. Out of the three of us, Wes has the best aim, but I’m too afraid to take my eyes off Athelia to see if he’s going to take the shot.

Athelia touches his arm gently. “Mike, you don’t have to—”

“Shut up,” he snaps. He pulls her back a step, watching us carefully. “Put the fucking guns down. There’s no point in—”

A single, deafening gunshot echoes off the trees. The second Michael drops to the floor, I shove my gun into its holster and bolt for the porch.

Wes and Kellan do the same, but I get there first. Athelia fell when Michael did, and the knife is on the floor a couple feet

away.

“Athelia—baby, don’t look.” I grab Athelia’s chin just as she’s about to turn to look at Michael. “Just focus on me. Did he hurt you?”

“You... you had guns,” she says as she blinks up at me. She’s shaking, and she flinches when I lift her to her feet.

“We’ll explain later,” I tell her. “For now, we need to get you cleaned up, and I need to check on your ribs.”

I don’t think she even realizes she has blood splattered on her face. Her hands curl around the leather material of my jacket as she stares at Wes and Kellan. They’re watching us silently, blocking her view of Michael’s mangled face.

“You shot him,” Athelia says numbly.

“He was gonna kill you,” Wes says.

Athelia leans into me as she furrows her brows. “How did you know you wouldn’t shoot me?”

“You’re considerably shorter than he was.”

*Was.* Referring to Michael in the past tense seems to snap Athelia out of the shock-induced haze her mind is in. She tries to push past Wes and Kellan, but they don’t budge.

“You don’t need to see that,” Kellan says.

“He wasn’t going to hurt me,” she yells. “He was nice.”

“He’s a fucking serial killer,” Wes says. He’s losing patience. I’m sure he was hoping for some gratitude, but he scared the shit out of her.

Athelia laughs mirthlessly. “And why the fuck would I believe you?”

Wes throws his hands up. “Seriously? He had a knife to your throat.”

“Because you—he—” She turns to me, which seems to be her habit when she wants someone to take her side against Wes.

I just shrug.

“Why did you show up with guns?” she demands. “Why were you following me with *weapons*? Do you always carry those?”

“Not always,” Wes says.

She doesn't say anything, watching him expectantly, but Wes doesn't explain further.

“What were you doing out here?” Kellan asks. “How did you meet him?”

“I'm staying in the next cabin.” Athelia points to one that's about fifty yards away. “He was outside when I got here, and he was making burgers for dinner and offered me one.”

“Cal, get her out of here,” Kellan says. “We'll deal with the body.”

“What? No! I'm not going anywhere with you.” Athelia yanks her arm away from me.

“You really want to be alone out here after this guy almost slit your throat?” Wes asks.

Athelia's face pales, and I kick Wes in the shins. I know what he's trying to do, but his timing is horrible.

“Just come with me and let me make sure you're okay,” I say.

“I'm fine,” she whispers. I don't think even she believes herself.

Gently, I pull her down the steps and toward her cabin. She tells me again that she's fine and can take care of herself, but she doesn't fight me. Today has been overwhelmingly shitty for her, and I think she's finally out of energy.

In her cabin, I flip on the light and search around for a bathroom. Once I find one, I gently lift her and set her on the counter next to the sink.

“Is he really a serial killer?” she asks as I wet a washcloth and start wiping up the blood on her face.

“He is.”



“How did you know that?” she whispers.

We’re not supposed to tell anyone what we do—obviously. It’s dangerous and potentially very, very illegal. Even if we’re working for a government organization, which is unlikely, we don’t have any credentials. If we get caught, no one’s coming to save us. The same is true if we trust the wrong person and they turn us in.

“I think I should wait to explain that until the guys are in here.”

“I wanted to be left alone,” she says quietly. She’s staring directly into her lap, and she sounds so disappointed.

“I know. I’m sorry. For the record, we didn’t even know you’d be here.”

At that, she glances up at me. “Really?”

“We were here for him, not you. Never even crossed my mind that you’d come this way.”

“Really?”

“You don’t strike me as a nature girl.”

Athelia shrugs. “I like it. Don’t like sleeping outside or not having running water, but...” She gestures around the cabin. “I’ve got that in here.”

“That why you came here? You wanted to be surrounded by nature?”

“Not really.” Athelia rubs the back of her neck and squints, like she’s trying to remember something. “I think someone must’ve mentioned it in a conversation or something. It was the first place that popped into my mind when I was trying to figure out where to go.”

Frowning, I finish cleaning up her face and her neck. It feels too coincidental.

“What are they gonna do with the body?” Athelia asks.

I don’t answer. I shouldn’t give her any details until I talk to Kellan and Wes. “I need you to take your shirt off.”

She crosses her arms over her body. “Why?”

“I just need to check on your injuries. You could’ve hurt yourself when you fell.”

With an eye roll, she tries to hop off the counter, but I grab her hips to hold her still.

“Come on, Athelia. If it’s broken, it could kill you. You need to treat this more seriously.”

She glares at me for a few seconds, but she relents and pulls her shirt over her head. I grimace. Her bruises have more fully developed, and it looks painful as hell.

“Have you been coughing up blood?” I ask.

“No.”

“Are you having the same difficulty breathing as earlier, or has it gotten worse?”

“It’s the same.”

“And what about a fever?” I rest the back of my hand to her forehead. “Have you been running one?”

“I don’t think so.”

*That’s a relief.*

“Okay.”

“Is that a good okay or a bad one?”

“A tentatively good one.” I drop my hand and kiss her forehead, even though I know I shouldn’t. All I want to do is hold her and keep her with me all night. Don’t think she’d appreciate that, though. “Have you been icing your ribs?”

She glances away. “Um... yeah.”

“Athelia.”

She winces. “I meant to, okay? I promise.”

With a sigh, I toss her shirt over my shoulder and help her to her feet. “Let’s see what’s in the freezer here.”

“Hey! Give me my shirt back.”

“It has blood on it, baby. Grab a new one.”

With a groan, she disappears down a hallway, and I head to the kitchen. There’s not much in the freezer, but there’s a bag of peas, thankfully. I dig around until I find a tea towel, and when Athelia comes back, I hand them to her.

“Twenty minutes.”

“Fine.” She lowers herself onto the couch in the living room with a wince.

I watch her from the kitchen. “Did you eat dinner?”

“Yeah. I had a burger with Mike.”

I bristle at her calling him that. Odds are, he would’ve killed her, even if we hadn’t shown up and spooked him.

“You can leave,” she says.

“Oh, absolutely not.”

“You’re not staying here. Go help them with the body or whatever and then leave me the fuck alone.”

“Seriously? You almost died, Athelia. You’re not scared?”

I know she is. She’s still shaking, and she’s always been anxious.

“I’ll be fine. What are the odds of there being two serial killers hanging out in the woods on the same night? I don’t want you guys here.”

“Well, too bad.” I cross my arms and lean against the counter. “Maybe I would’ve been able to convince Wes to leave if he didn’t just shoot a man to save you, but there’s no way he’s letting you out of his sight now.”

Athelia groans. “I hate you all.”

Even though I know they shouldn’t, her words sting. I turn away with a sigh. “We’re trying to *help* you, Athelia.”

“Maybe I don’t want your help.”

*Goddammit.*

I know I deserve her anger. Fuck, I deserve worse than this. But it doesn't change that she's pissing me the fuck off.

Without another word, I head outside. I can't go far—Wes would kill me if I left her alone—so I haul myself onto the porch railing and stare off into the night.

Unease creeps into my mind even though I try to bat it away. I don't want to acknowledge what I'm worried will be our outcome.

*She's never going to forgive us.*

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## Athelia

It takes what feels like hours for Wes and Kellan to come inside. Cal follows them, his expression as cold as it was when he stormed out. I don't feel bad. I wanted space, and here they are invading it.

Again.

Both Kellan and Wes have blood on their clothes. They take turns in the bathroom, each coming out showered and with clean outfits that I'm assuming were in their backpacks.

“So you just kill people?” I ask when none of them make a move to explain anything to me. “How often? How many people have you shot like that?”

They said Michael is a serial killer, but they knew how to “deal” with the body, whatever that means. It sounds like they have experience killing people, too.

Wes pins me with a lethal stare from across the room. “Careful how harshly you judge us, Athelia. You can't be horrified that we're murderers and also want us to kill for you.”

My stomach turns. “That's different.”

“Is it? Michael was the villain in plenty of people's stories.”

“Are all the people you kill horrible?” I shoot back.

Wes shrugs. “Probably not.”

He doesn’t even seem remorseful.

“Why do you do it?” I ask.

The guys all look at each other cautiously.

“How much should we tell her?” Kellan asks.

“I don’t know if she’s ready,” Cal responds.

Crossing my arms, I put on the most annoyed look I can manage. “If you want me to even think of forgiving you, let alone trust you, you’d better tell me the goddamn truth.”

Wes bristles. “Seriously, Athelia? I just saved your fucking life.”

“Until you save my life as many times as you made me want to take it, I don’t give a shit.”

That makes him shut his stupid mouth. A vein near his temple pulses as he stares at me, but I don’t look away. For once, it seems like he’s actually understanding just how hurt I am. How *angry* I am.

“Fine,” Wes mutters. He plops onto the chair across from me. “Remember how I told you my father was killed?”

I nod.

“My mom and I didn’t know a lot about what he did for work, just that his brother got him the job. They worked together. He had weird hours, and sometimes he’d take trips and be gone for weeks. He didn’t like being away from us, but he wanted to make sure we were cared for.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. “What does that have to do with this?”

“Kammes has me in a financial chokehold—or, at least, he did. Everything changes tomorrow morning, but that’s a separate issue. The point is, I needed a way out. So I went to my uncle for help.”

*Oh.* I swallow as a chill sweeps over my skin. “You picked up your dad’s old job.”

Wes nods. “All three of us did. We don’t know who we work for, exactly. Don’t need to—all we care about is the money.”

“And the fact that Char is fixing your trust fund,” Kellan adds.

The corner of Wes’s lips tip up. “That too. John is in for a surprise when he comes back from that trip. Too bad we won’t be able to enjoy knocking him down a peg for long.”

I almost ask why, but then it clicks. *Because they’re going to kill him.*

“Aside from Wes’s uncle,” Cal says, “we have one contact within the organization we work for. She gives us our assignments, and we fulfill them as needed. They’re usually within a two-hour radius from here.”

“And you don’t know what organization it is?”

“Correct,” Wes says.

“That’s... Jesus.” I gulp in air, trying to get too deep of a breath. A sharp pain radiates from my side. I do my best to ignore it. “Wait. Wes, your dad got killed doing this job.”

His gaze travels over me slowly before his mouth curves upward in a satisfied smirk. “You worried about us?”

“Not in the slightest. I’d be happy if the three of you got killed on the job.”

He’s not too happy with that answer, but I honestly don’t know what he was expecting.

“I think you’re all fucking stupid,” I say, crossing my arms.

“Maybe we are,” Kellan says, “but the money is good, and it’s usually fun.”

“*Fun?! You enjoy killing people?*”

“I do,” he says smoothly, like we’re talking about the fucking weather. “Although we’re not always killing people. Sometimes it’s other stuff.”

With a groan, I rub at my face. “I don’t want to know. I need to get some sleep, and you all need to get out of here.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Wes says.

“Yes, you are. Get out.”

Wes shakes his head. “I’m not leaving you.”

“I’ll call the cops on you. I’ll—I’ll tell them you killed Michael.”

Cal groans. “I knew we shouldn’t have told her.”

Wes just shrugs. “We’ll tell them you killed him. It’s three against one, Harper. No one will believe you.”

“Wes,” Cal snaps. “Shut the fuck up.”

But it’s too late. Hearing Professor Kammes’s words from Wes’s lips, even though the context is different, is the final nail in the coffin.

Hot tears spring to my eyes, and I internally berate myself as they fall onto my cheeks. Wes knows Professor Kammes said that to me. He knows how hopeless I felt, how hopeless I *feel*, because of that very sentiment.

“Athelia,” Kellan says as I stand up, but when I shoot him a withering glare, he presses his lips together.

I barely feel myself stepping up to Wes. His eyes still hold a challenge—like he wants me to go to the cops just to prove how right he is.

A loud *slap* fills the air, punctuating the absolute silence in the room. My palm stings, but I barely feel it.

Wes’s face is turned to the side now, thanks to the force behind my blow. He tilts his chin upward, and I want to pull my hair out at his stupid, amused smile. “That feel good, Harper? Wanna do it again?”

With a frustrated scream, I do. I slap him once, twice, three times. It’s not enough, so I kick at him, but it hurts like hell, so I slap him again.

The whole time, his grin only widens.



Kellan and Cal are watching silently. Well, Cal is nervously hovering, probably afraid I'll injure myself further.

"You need to be careful, baby," Cal says. He places a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Your rib—"

"I don't care," I shout. I'm already in pain. What's some more if I can make Wes feel even a portion of what he's done to me?

Wes stands. He's so close that we're touching, so I stumble back.

"Keep going," he says, stretching his arms out like he's welcoming me in with a hug. "I told you I'd do anything for you, and I meant it. If you need to hit something—*someone*—then hit me."

My fingers curl into a fist, but just as I start to swing, Cal grabs my wrist.

"Stop it," I yell at him.

"Don't punch him in the face," Cal says. "You'll just hurt yourself."

I yank my arm away from him, ignoring how much pain the action causes me. I don't want to break my hand, so I beat my fists against Wes's chest. He barely even winces, and it hurts me like hell, so I shove him back onto the chair with a frustrated grunt.

"I hate you," I shout. And then I pounce onto his lap and wrap both my hands around his throat. I squeeze, glaring straight into Wes's eyes. "I wanna kill you."

Wes's smile is finally gone now. In its place is mild surprise and a hint of pride. He arches a brow, practically egging me on.

I squeeze harder as more tears fall from my eyes. But I can't. I *can't*. I'm not a killer, and if I was, Wes's life isn't the one I want to take. John Kammes's is.

After a few moments, I let out a scream that hurts so badly I can barely stay upright. My hands drop from Wes's throat, and I fall into his chest with a suppressed sob.

“Why did it have to be you?” I whisper.

He strokes my back and sighs. “I ask myself the same question every day.”

I close my eyes in an attempt to keep the rest of my tears at bay. Today has felt like an entire goddamn year. Being this angry is exhausting. Having to deal with *them* is exhausting.

As I pry myself from Wes’s arms, I whimper as a particularly sharp pain shoots through me. Instantly, his hands are on me, and he’s helping me to my feet.

“You need to rest,” Cal says.

“Shut up,” I reply weakly. “Stop telling me what to do.”

Cal makes a frustrated sound but doesn’t say anything else. I brush past him, ignoring all three of their stares burning the back of my neck.

“I’m going to sleep,” I say without turning to face them. “I’d prefer if you left, but I have a feeling you won’t. Do *not* touch me while I sleep. Don’t even look at me. Hell, if you come into the room, I’m beating you to death.”

They know it’s a lie.

But I hope they understand what I mean.

In my room, I lock the door, knowing it won’t do much if one of them decides to come in. Thankfully, there’s an ensuite bathroom, so I’m able to brush my teeth and wash my face in peace.

I wince when I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror. My eyes are bloodshot and haunted, and the bruises on my neck look worse than they did this morning.

Turning away, I grab fistfuls of my hair and pull. It’s not hard enough to yank it out, but it feels like some type of release.

*Why do they have to be so insufferable?*

As I crawl into bed, my phone buzzes on my nightstand. I roll my eyes when I see it’s a text from Cal, but I read it anyway.

*Cal: I know it sucks, but try to sleep sitting up. It's just for the first few days.*

I reply with the middle finger emoji.

Still, I do as he says. I'm not trying to kill myself or make the healing process last longer than it needs to. There are plenty of pillows, so once I've arranged them in a way that I'll be comfy, I turn off my lamp.

My body aches, and I'm still on the verge of tears as I stare into the dark room.

*Not enough.* That's the thought that keeps echoing around in my mind. Nothing the guys have done or said has been enough, and me trying to hurt Wes definitely wasn't, either. They have to pay. The question is, how?

I'm not big or strong enough to be able to cause them much physical pain, nor is that the route I want to take this. They caused me emotional pain. My mental health plummeted freshman year, and it hasn't recovered since. I thought I had a lot of panic attacks in high school, but thanks to the three of them, the number skyrocketed in college.

Professor Kammes is partially to blame, too, but Wes, Cal, and Kellan were present for more of my day-to-day activities. Thankfully, Professor Kammes has to keep his distance in public.

*What could I possibly do to hurt them the way they hurt me?*

Before I've even finished thinking through the question, an idea pops into my mind. Or, more specifically, something Wes told me.

*You haunted me, Athelia. I couldn't even escape you in my dreams. So no, I wasn't angry. I was tormented.*

Even when the guys couldn't have me, they couldn't stop thinking about me. I think Wes was probably being a little dramatic when he said I tormented them, but so what? I can still make them feel that way again.

Except this time, I'll make it worse.

I smile into the darkness. For so long, I've been powerless against Professor Kammes and the guys. But now, for the first time, I realize *I* hold all the power.

The guys are going to kill Professor Kammes for *me*.

They're obsessed with *me*.

Wes said it himself—he'll do anything. *For me*.

So what if... what if I decide to let them have me? What if I give them what they've been craving for years? I'll let them think they've won, and once they're in deeper than ever, I'll pull the plug.

I'll just... *leave*.

I can enroll in a different university for my last semester. Or I could transfer to Pemberton's online program and move back in with my parents. I'll be four hours away from the guys, so far out of reach that it'll drive them mad.

They won't know what hit them until it's far too late.

Of course, I'll still have to put up a bit of a fight at first. If I'm all of a sudden on board with everything they want tomorrow, they'll get suspicious. I'll have to find a balance.

Leaning into the pillows, I close my eyes and start dreaming up the specifics of my new plan. I'll have to let them touch me, but maybe that's a good thing. I can satisfy the part of myself that wants them while furthering my revenge plans. It's killing two birds with one stone.

Besides, it's just sex. I've had plenty of that without it meaning a single thing to me before. It's not like I'm going to fall in love with them or anything. All I have to do is give them a tiny bit of trust, and I can get as many orgasms as I want out of this.

Last night is proof that I'm capable of doing it. Except this time, they'll have my permission, so it won't be so fucking traumatizing.

As I fall asleep, a sense of peace washes over me. For the first time in years, I have control of my own life.

I don't plan on losing it ever again.

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

## Kellan

I wake up hungry.

We didn't eat dinner last night because we got too distracted with Michael and then Athelia.

*Athelia.*

All thoughts of food are instantly replaced by her. Last night, she was so upset I actually thought she was going to follow through and strangle Wes. We wouldn't have let her, but seeing that determination in her eyes...

It was hot as hell.

With a groan, I sit up. There were two bedrooms other than Athelia's, so I volunteered to take the couch in the living room. It wasn't out of kindness—in fact, it was mostly selfish. If Athelia tried to sneak out last night or this morning, I wanted to be the one who caught her.

She didn't try, though. None of us entered her room, but I kept an eye on the door. I'd be worried about her trying to leave through a window, but she's too injured.

After a couple minutes of letting my body wake up, I stumble into the bathroom. The house is well-stocked, so I'm

able to find a brand-new toothbrush and some toothpaste. Once I've brushed my teeth, I hop in the shower.

No matter how hard I try, I can't stop thinking about Athelia. I'm not used to being this close to her. Last night, I thought about picking the lock to her room once I knew she was asleep. Not to touch her, but just to *see* her. She's so pretty when she's sleeping.

I didn't, though. Once Athelia locked herself in her room, Cal lectured me and Wes about respecting her boundaries. I think he might've even gotten through to Wes a little, which is saying something.

It seems that Athelia's outburst finally set Wes straight a little. I don't think he meant to repeat his stepfather's words, but it was still a careless thing to say. Even I know that, and I can be a fucking dick sometimes.

I don't feel bad about most things, but the hurt in her eyes last night was like a stab to the gut. Yesterday morning, it felt like we were making progress. Now...

God, I wish we could go back to that Halloween party. Maybe I'd take it all back, but maybe not. I loved every second of it.

Before she knew it was me behind the mask, she was so into me. I hadn't acted any special way—I was myself. It made me wish things had been different between us. I liked the way she looked at me, even if the mask put her off a little.

And god, when she got on her knees and started sucking me off, it was a dream come true. She wanted everything I did. The roughness, the degradation. My control, her surrender.

"Fuck," I mutter. My dick is hard just at the thought of her.

I should do my best to reroute my thoughts—to *not* masturbate to the thought of her when she's probably still sleeping in the next room.

But there's a thrill in it, and I've never been good at resisting that.

I wrap my hand around my dick and move it up and down slowly. With my free hand, I brace myself against the tile wall. My eyes slide closed as I let my mind take over, imagining her hand in place of mine.

“Athelia,” I groan.

The memory of her in my room flashes through my mind. Her cheeks, flushed with desire and lust. Her brown eyes, wide and staring up at me while she took my cock in her mouth. Her tears were so pretty as they fell down her face.

As I remember the way she practically begged me with her eyes to fuck her throat, I choke on a breath.

“Goddammit, Thelia,” I gasp.

Just then, something clatters to the floor outside the shower. I look up, my gaze clashing with Athelia’s.

She’s frozen in the middle of the bathroom, staring at me with wide, shocked eyes.

“What the fuck are you doing in here?” I don’t stop stroking my cock. In fact, my hand moves faster at the sight of her. I can see the outlines of her hard nipples peaking through her dark green tank top, and it’s ridden up so part of her stomach is showing.

“I... I heard you say my name, so I thought—” She doesn’t finish. Red fills her cheeks as her gaze drops to my cock. “I can go.”

“Don’t.” I shove the shower door open and step outside, not even bothering to turn the water off. I’m dripping all over the floor, but I don’t care. “Get on your knees.”

“Kellan—”

“Do you want me to force you?”

Heat flares in her eyes at the threat, but she lowers herself to her knees willingly. I step up to her, and her lips part as she watches me stroke my cock.

“Don’t move.”



I brush the head of my dick against her soft lips. I'm not expecting her to do anything except glare up at me defiantly, so when her tongue laves across the underside of my cock, I grunt in surprise.

Athelia's eyes sparkle with satisfaction as she wraps her lips around my dick and sucks lightly. All I wanted was to see my cum splattered across her face, but this is much, *much* better.

As her hand replaces mine, wrapping around my cock and stroking in time with the movements of her mouth, I laugh.

"It's just like I told you. You don't hate us. You can't get *enough* of us. Another couple minutes like this, and I bet your panties will be soaked."

She grazes her teeth against my cock, and I hiss. I should've learned from yesterday that she's not afraid to use a little teeth.

"Careful," I say, "or you'll find yourself tied up and gagged again. But you'd like that, wouldn't you? *My* whore."

She releases my dick from her mouth with a *pop*. "Shut up or *I'll* gag you."

I laugh as I take her head in my hands and guide her back to my cock. "Sure you will."

However much I want to, I don't fuck her face. With her injuries, I don't want to make it harder for her to breathe. I may like causing her pain, but not like that. Many would say otherwise—myself included, usually—but I have a heart inside me... somewhere.

Athelia moans as she takes my cock as deep as she's comfortable. She works wonders with that tongue of hers, and my grip on her hair tightens.

"Such a greedy slut, aren't you? You went one day without my cock, and now look at you. On your knees the first chance you get."

She digs her nails into my thighs, but the joke's on her because I like the pain. I was already close, and at this rate, I probably don't even have a minute left.

“Don’t stop, *ma belle*. You look too good with my dick in your mouth.”

I couldn’t look away from her if I tried. Last time she did this, she didn’t know it was me. That came with its own thrill, but this is a thousand times better. She was just supposed to sit there and let me come on her face, but *she* wanted this.

The thought sends me over the edge. I come hard, my whole body going rigid. My eyes slide closed, but then I realize I don’t want to miss a second of this.

“Don’t you dare swallow,” I grit out.

She whimpers, her lips still wrapped around my dick as I flood her mouth with my cum. But she doesn’t swallow, instead blinking up at me with a question in her eyes.

I pull out, gripping her jaw and keeping it open. *There*. Athelia Harper, marked and mine.

Leaning down, I spit into her mouth before releasing her jaw. “Swallow every last drop.”

She does, keeping her eyes locked with mine.

If I didn’t understand the girl kneeling before me, I’d take her into the shower and use the shower head to make her come so hard she wakes Cal and Wes up. But I know exactly how Athelia works.

She’s squirming and rubbing her thighs together—needy little thing. But she loves being degraded. Being *used*.

So I smile down at her and pat her cheek patronizingly. “Good girl. You can leave. I’m done with you now.”

“What? But—”

“Shh.” I press a finger to her lips. “Good toys don’t talk back. They obey.”

Athelia looks like she wants to strangle me, but underneath that, I can see just how much she’s loving this. I’ll never forget all the things I learned about her during those first two weeks of freshman year. Athelia is kinkier than you’d think from just looking at her.

Without another word, I turn back and step into the shower. The door closes, and I watch her sit back on her heels with a flustered breath. The glass is fogged, but I can imagine her expression.

Stunned. Speechless. Needy—yet also grateful.

After a minute, she stands. “Fuck you, Kellan.”

I chuckle. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

The only response I get is the sound of the bathroom door slamming on her way out.

# Chapter Thirty

## Athelia

That fucking *bastard*.

I never should've assumed the guys would forget what I like in bed. The things Kellan said to me while I sucked his dick had me so turned on I felt like I'd burst. He knew that, and he sent me away without so much as a second glance.

I'd be more pissed, but I know he did it because it'll turn me on *more*. Kellan may be a dick, but he likes giving me what I want, too. This was the perfect opportunity for both.

Wes is in the kitchen pouring coffee from the pot. When we spot each other, we both freeze. You can't even tell that I tried to hurt him last night. There are no bruises, no marks. He's as attractive as always—more so because he's not wearing a shirt.

Wes's tattoos are on full display. The snake hanging around his neck, the sleeve of roses that starts on his shoulder and expands down his arm, and the roaring tiger on his ribcage. There are countless others, but those are the ones that stand out the most.

"It's rude to stare," he says smoothly as he sips his black coffee.

Instantly, I look away. “Where’s Cal?”

“Still sleeping.”

I storm back down the hallway to the closed door at the end. Cal is the least insufferable of the three of them, and hopefully he’s even more tame when he’s sleepy.

My plan from last night is still fresh in my mind, but fuck Wes. I can work on getting close to the other two. My relationship with Wes will deepen eventually, but if I make it obvious that I have a preference, it’ll make him jealous. It’s an added bonus to this whole thing.

I don’t knock as I enter Cal’s room. Wouldn’t matter, anyway. He’s still sound asleep, lying on his side and facing away from me.

When I climb onto the bed, he doesn’t stir. I shake him, but it’s no use.

*Of course he’s a heavy sleeper.*

“Cal,” I say, shaking him again. “It’s time to wake up.”

“Five more minutes,” he groans.

“Uh uh, no. It’s already past nine.”

He mumbles something that I can’t make out, so I rip the blankets off him. He grunts at the cold air, and my eyes go wide when I realize he’s completely naked.

He has more tattoos than when we were younger, and while he makes a sleepy grab for the blankets, I take them in. A large tree expands over his chest, with a sturdy trunk and detailed leaves. But the one that catches my eye is the lotus flower on his right bicep. It doesn’t quite fit in with the others, and I wonder if it means something to him.

“Theliaaaaa,” Cal whines. He squints up at me while trying to reach for the blankets again. “Whyyyyy?”

I smile. Who knew Cal was so adorable when he’s just woken up? “You’ll be fine. Gotta get up.”

He shakes his head with another groan. His arms slip around me, and he pulls me closer to him. No, not closer. *Onto* him.

With a surprised yelp, I grab onto the headboard.

“Cal! What are you doing?”

“I need to know,” he mumbles as he positions himself on his back.

“Need to know what?”

“What it’s like to wake up to your pretty pussy on my face.” He lifts me up, avoiding the bruise on my thigh as he does so.

*God, he’s strong.*

“Cal, you can’t just—”

“Please,” he groans. “Sit on my face. I need to know.”

He already has me in position for the most part. I just need to adjust and lower myself down.

“Don’t you want to—”

Cal slaps my ass. “I already asked nicely. Don’t make me ask again.”

That sends a new wave of arousal through me. Kellan left me dripping wet and aching for his touch. I might as well get some relief from Cal. Besides, if Wes hears, it’ll piss him off. He’ll know I went straight to Cal for sex instead of going to him.

I may want to punish all of them, but I want Wes to suffer the most. He’s been the worst throughout this whole situation.

After adjusting myself so I’m hovering over Cal’s face, I hesitantly lower myself, unsure of how much weight he can handle. I’ve never been with someone who wanted to do this before, so I’m not sure what exactly to do.

After pushing my panties to the side, Cal grabs my hips and yanks me down. He’s so strong, his hands nearly engulfing my waist. He’s the biggest out of the three of them, and I like the way he makes me feel. Small, but in a good way.

I gasp as Cal explores my pussy with his tongue. After Kellan deprived me, I’m extra sensitive.

“God, Cal,” I choke out.

He moans as his hands travel up my body. He yanks my tank top down and squeezes my bare breasts. When the pads of his thumbs brush over my nipples, I grab onto his wrists.

“Oh, please keep doing that. Please, Cal.”

If it was Wes, he'd punish me for saying please. Stupid asshole doesn't realize that I can't help it. But with Cal, he eats it up, groaning against me as he sucks on my clit.

As he continues, pressure slowly builds inside me. I move my hips, grinding against his tongue, and he moans with approval. It hurts a little, especially as my muscles get more and more tense, but it's worth it.

“Cal,” I groan, making sure I'm loud enough that the sound can carry. I don't peek down the hallway, though. I keep my attention solely on Cal.

Gently, I run my fingers through his blond hair. He seems to like that, pinching my nipples harder and flicking his tongue against my clit more enthusiastically. My stomach tightens, the pleasure overriding the pain, but I need just a little something more if I'm going to come.

“Grab my wrists,” I tell him.

“Hmm?”

“Hold them.” I place my hands together in front of me. “And don't let go.”

Cal catches on. He keeps playing with my nipples with one hand while his fingers circle around my wrists with his other. His grip is so strong, and when I try to pull from his grasp, it only gets stronger.

*God yes.* That feeling of helplessness rushes over me. I try to pull away again, but he's so *strong*.

“Fuck—oh fuck, Cal, I'm coming.”

Cal only sucks my clit harder. I scream, and this time, it's not even to piss Wes off. I can't help it. My orgasm shakes me to my core, lasting longer than normal with Cal pushing me to my limits.

Once I've come back down to earth, I lift my hips up. My clit is too sensitive, and I need a break. Cal, however, has different opinions.

"Where the fuck are you going?" He releases my wrists to grab my hips.

"I need a minute," I pant. "And besides, don't you want to... you know." I turn around to glance at his dick. Just as I expected, it's rock hard.

"I'm not done yet, baby. If I'm going to eat you out, we're not stopping until you've come at least four times on my tongue."

"That's ridiculous." I try to squirm out of his hold. "Four times? Cal, come on. It'll take forever, and—"

"Oh, don't worry. You'll make me come, too." Cal taps my thigh, finally giving me permission to get off him.

As I climb off, I feel his hands on me. He positions me so I'm lying on my back. He's so careful with me, treating me like I might break if he touches me wrong. It's such a contrast to how he used my body the other night.

Once he has me the way he wants me, Cal crawls on top of me so his dick is right above my face. "Open your mouth, baby."

I don't even hesitate.

Coming up with my revenge plan has given my mind just what it needs to let go and give myself over to my fantasies. Every time we have sex, I get fucked the way I've always wanted to, and it only builds our connection more. It's a win-win situation for the sides of me that have been at war with each other for the past day and a half.

"Oh, you're such a good girl, aren't you?" Cal slides his dick into my mouth slowly, and I immediately start sucking. "Fuck, just like that, Athelia."

I whimper when Cal lowers his head and laves his tongue over my clit. My body has had just enough time to recover



from the mind-blowing orgasm he gave me, and now it's desperate for more.

*Four orgasms?* I've had four in a row before, but not in years. Not since...

Well, since them.

And that only lasted for two weeks, tops.

Cal thrusts into my mouth with a little more force. He's groaning as he props himself up with his elbows and licks at my pussy like a man starved. His tongue works my clit as he fucks my mouth, and I find myself trying to take him deeper into my throat.

"Always wanting more," he murmurs before thrusting harder.

I fight not to gag as Cal sucks my clit into his mouth. He uses his tongue, too, and my moans are cut off by his cock hitting the back of my throat. When I gag, it hurts like hell, but I can't bring myself to tell him to stop.

*So good. So fucking good.*

I egg him on by grabbing his hips and pushing him farther into me. The rougher he is, the more I like it. I need to feel like I have no choice in the matter. Like I'm nothing more than a toy or something to be conquered.

Thankfully, Cal understands. His strokes are punishing, but they turn shallow every once in a while so I can catch my breath. The whole time, he never lets up on my clit. I find myself barreling toward a second orgasm faster than I can normally manage on my own.

Cal is groaning against my pussy, and the vibrations only heighten the sensations he's pulling from me. When he starts flicking his tongue faster, I dig my fingernails into his hips. He fucks my mouth harder, moaning, and it shoves me right off the cliff.

I cry out, but the sound is garbled by Cal's dick. Pain floods my system as my body convulses under Cal's ministrations, but pleasure follows just as quickly. It soothes the raw aches as

Cal grunts. A second later, I feel him coming all over my tongue.

Gently, I suck on his dick and stroke it lightly. Cal has exactly the reaction I was hoping for—a shudder and a pathetic whimper.

“Goddamn,” Cal groans as he pulls out of my mouth.

I swallow his cum, too breathless to reply. My ribcage aches and I’m covered in sweat, but I haven’t felt this satisfied in a while.

“What was all that bullshit about respecting her boundaries?”

I jump at Wes’s deep voice cutting through the room. My eyes fly open, and I realize he’s leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed.

“She wants it,” Cal replies, not even the littlest bit shocked that Wes is in here. “Don’t you, Athelia?”

*How long was he watching us?*

Heat rushes to my cheeks as Wes takes me in. My tank top is still shoved down below my breasts, and my nipples are hard. Wes’s gaze lingers on them before moving to my swollen lips.

He doesn’t look jealous. I’m having trouble reading him at all, actually.

As Wes and I stare each other down, Cal gets off me and moves between my legs. He lowers himself to his stomach before kissing his way up my thighs to my pussy.

“Cal,” I gasp, yanking my gaze away from Wes. “What are you doing?”

“Four times, baby. I told you.”

Desperately, I push his head away. “I can’t.”

“I distinctly remember that you can.”

“Cal, it hurts to come. Just not right now.”

That gets him to stop immediately. “Fuck.” He lifts his head, and his eyes travel up my body with concern. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, I—I’m fine.”

But now Cal is in full-on doctor mode. He crawls up next to me and lifts my tank top. I look away. Seeing the bruises on my body is just another reminder of what Professor Kammes did to me.

Wes has stepped closer to the bed, and his eyes track Cal’s hand as his fingers feather over my bruises. When I wince, Wes clenches his jaw.

“You’re warm.” Just like he did last night, Cal places the back of his hand to my forehead.

“I wonder why,” I say dryly.

“Did you cough much overnight?”

“Only a little, but—”

“Was there any blood?”

“No.” Carefully, I ease myself up into a sitting position and adjust my tank top so it’s covering my body. I don’t like the way they’re looking at me.

Like I’m broken—or worse, like I’m something they need to fix.

With a sigh, Cal sits next to me. “And have your pain levels gone up?”

“Not really.”

The question is on the tip of his tongue, but Cal swallows it down at my glare. I already told him—no hospitals. If my parents found out about this, they’d freak out.

“I’ll be fine,” I tell him. “For now, we need to get going. I have class at eleven.”

“Shit, so do I.” He glances at the clock on the nightstand. “I don’t normally sleep this late.”

“Lies,” Wes says. “You constantly oversleep.”

Cal throws a pillow that hits Wes squarely in the chest. “Shut up.”

Rolling his eyes, Wes turns to leave. “You both smell like sex. Shower before we leave.”

“Jealous?” Cal calls.

Wes doesn’t answer—just continues stalking down the hallway.

“He is,” Cal whispers. “Trust me.”

As I watch Wes through the doorway, satisfaction slithers through my stomach. He may have schooled his expressions and tried to play it cool, but he couldn’t take his eyes off me. I got to him, and I hope he’s in a bad mood all day because of it.

# Chapter Thirty-One

## Wes

I wait outside while everyone gets their shit together.

*Fucking Athelia Harper.*

After last night, I was hoping she'd soften toward me, even just a little. I let her hit me god knows how many times, but it just seemed to make her angrier.

I'll be the first to admit that we fucked up, but come on. She saw me in the kitchen and immediately scurried off to Cal's room to fuck him.

The thing is, I know she wants me. It's written all over that pretty face of hers any time she looks at me. But before she can let herself have me, she has to punish me first.

And you know what? Fine.

Two can play that game.

If she wants to get a reaction out of me, she'll have to work a lot harder than this. I've waited for years to be able to touch her again. I can wait a little longer.

My dick got impossibly hard from watching Athelia and Cal together, but I'm too spiteful to do anything about it. I stare off into the woods for what feels like a solid twenty minutes,

trying to distract myself. Just as it finally calms down, the others file out of the cabin.

Athelia is wearing a dark green sweater dress that reminds me of when her hair used to be dyed. It looked pretty, and it brought out the softness in her eyes. I used to imagine wrapping her long, green hair around my fist while I fucked her from behind. Never got to do it in that specific position, though.

As Athelia tosses her bag into the backseat of her car, she bends over, and I get a glimpse of her panties. Black lace.

*Goddammit.*

She gets into her car without a single glance at me. When Cal taps on her window, she rolls it down, and he leans in and kisses her on the lips.

*I'm gonna kill him.*

Kellan nods to her and smirks when Athelia's eyes darken with want. I'm not sure what that exchange means, but fuck it. I'll kill Kellan, too. Who the fuck does Athelia think she is that she can leave me out like this?

I wait until she's on the road before speaking. "She's moving in with us."

Kellan laughs. "Good luck getting her to agree to that."

"She doesn't need to agree. It's happening."

I want her close. First, for her safety—she was hanging out with a serial killer last night and had no clue. And second, because she thinks she has all the power right now, and it's pissing me off.

Our Athelia needs to be put in her place.

"We'll have to move her stuff for her," Cal says. "I don't want her lifting more than necessary."

"Easy," I reply. "You're skipping class this morning."

Cal rolls his eyes. "Of course."

...

“What the fuck are you doing?”

I glance up to find Athelia standing in the open door to her dorm. By now, we're mostly done packing up her stuff.

“Moving you into our place.”

“What? You can't just do that!” She marches into the room and shoves me away from the box I've been throwing shit into.

Waving my hand toward Cal and Kellan, who've just finished packing up the bathroom, I say, “And yet here we are.”

“Wes! *I don't want to.*”

“Don't care. You obviously can't take care of yourself considering you almost got murdered last night.”

“Mike was nice!”

“He was going to kill you, *ma belle*,” Kellan says as he grabs a laundry basket full of clothes. “If we hadn't shown up, you'd be dead by now.”

“Well, I'm perfectly safe in this building.” She snatches at the laundry basket, but Kellan wrenches it from her grasp.

“You'll be safer with us,” I say. “You don't have a choice in this, Athelia.”

She whips around and shoots me a deadly glare. Fuck, she's so hot when she's pissed. Her eyes come to life, and the fiery determination that fills them is captivating.

“It'll be easier for me to look after you this way,” Cal says.

“I don't need you to look after me,” she snaps.

“It's happening whether you like it or not.” Crossing my arms, I stare her down. It's not like she can stop us.

Her anger fades into realization as it hits her. The delusion that she held any power at all crumbles before her, and all that's left is one simple fact.

She's ours.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

## Cal

Athelia storms out of her room without so much as a glance toward me or Kellan.

I sigh and drop the bag I was holding. “Have you ever thought that maybe you should try being nice to her every once in a while?”

“Did that last night,” Wes responds. “Got me nowhere.”

“God, you’re an idiot,” Kellan mutters.

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t get into any trouble,” I say. “Text me when you two have all her things at the house.”

I don’t bother sticking around for a response. Athelia is moving quickly, and I can’t lose sight of her. Who knows where she’ll run off to this time.

As she heads across campus, I keep my distance. She won’t appreciate one of us following her, but I can’t let her go. Moving her into our house without even bringing it up to her is a dick move, but I can’t stop Wes.

I don’t believe he’s only doing this to keep her safe. If I had to guess, he thinks this is a show of power or something. Problem is, if he wants this to actually work, he can’t keep all the power.



*How does he not get that?*

Athelia takes refuge in a small coffee shop just off campus. I slip in after her, hoping her reaction to being followed will be subdued since we're in public.

When she spots me, her nostrils flare. She already has a cup of coffee in her hand, and she's just settling into a table in the far corner.

"What are you doing here?" she asks flatly as I slide into the chair across from her.

"Making sure you're okay."

Her look says one thing—*are you fucking serious?*

"Right. Sorry. I know you're not."

"You don't get it," she says tiredly. "I don't think you'll ever understand."

"Then explain it to me."

"Maybe I don't want to, Cal," she snaps. "Maybe explaining to *one of my bullies* that I've been repeatedly raped by my professor for the past three years, that I'm tired of getting shoved around by boys who think they own me, and that my body fucking hurts is the last thing I want to do."

"Athelia—"

She holds up her hand, silencing me. "That doesn't even touch on what you three did to me Halloween night. You had no right."

"I'm sorry," I murmur.

"That's not enough." She's glaring at me through tears, and I desperately want to wipe them away.

"I'd take it all back if I could."

"I know *you* would." She sniffles and looks away. "Even Kellan probably would. But Wes... He'd do it all again in a heartbeat."

"I don't think that's true." Quickly, I get up and grab some napkins from the counter nearby. When I sit back down, I hand

them to her.

She takes one and dabs at her eyes. “I wanted to kill him last night.”

“I know,” I say gently.

“But there’s a stupid part of me that wants to give you all a chance.” Her gaze drops to the table as she inhales a deep, shuddering breath. “I don’t understand why. You three suck.”

Inching my hand across the table, I place it over hers. “We don’t deserve it, but I’ll do anything for a second chance, Athelia. So will Kellan. Wes... he’s working through his shit the way he usually does. He’s an ass, but he’ll come around. He wants you. He just needs to get past his pride.”

She sighs. There’s silence for a few minutes as I give her space to collect her thoughts. Finally, she asks, “Am I going to have my own room?”

“What?”

“In your house. Am I going to have my own room?”

I shake my head. Of course, there are a couple extra rooms that she could have, but Wes will never allow that. If I’m being completely honest with myself, I don’t want her to have her own room, either. I want her with us.

“Seriously?” she grumbles.

“The renovations on the other bedrooms aren’t finished yet,” I lie. “We’ll probably create a rotating schedule or something.”

She wrinkles her nose in disgust. “I don’t want to sleep with Wes.”

“What about me and Kellan?”

At that, her expression softens ever so slightly. “I can handle that.”

“But not Wes?”

“Not Wes.”

“It’ll hurt him,” I say.

“I know.”

*Your funeral, baby.*

She has to know by now that pissing Wes off will only create more problems for her in the future. Every time she defies him, he'll find a way to punish her.

Unless... is that what she wants? Is that the reaction she's hoping to get out of him?

"I want to be very clear with you," Athelia says. "I don't *want* to move in with you three. I'm doing it because the three of you will harass me and break into my dorm and follow me around if I don't."

"Correct."

"But I like my privacy. Take it away from me, and I won't be happy."

Slowly, I nod. "I'll see what I can do."

My phone buzzes on the table.

***Kellan:*** *Everything's at the house.*

"We should head home," I say. "Get you unpacked and all."

"I have another class at two," she says.

As if I don't have her schedule memorized. We all do.

Standing, I take her bag and loop it over my shoulder. "We'll at least be able to get started. Come on."

Silently, Athelia gets up and follows me out of the shop. It's cold out today, so I zip up her jacket before we get far.

"I wish he could be nice sometimes," she mumbles. "Like you."

"I know."

As we walk back to campus, Athelia slips her hand into mine. I wasn't expecting it, but it feels right. Natural, even.

Smiling to myself, I squeeze her hand. If she's warming up to me this quickly, I'm sure it won't be long before the same happens with Kellan and Wes.

Our girl just needs a little kindness and patience. Nothing that should be too hard to give. I think Kellan is getting it—Athelia is okay with sleeping with him, so he must be doing something right. As for Wes...

I'll find a way to get through to him. And if I can't, then it's his loss.

...

Back at the house, Kellan and Wes have all of Athelia's things in the middle of the living room. They're both upstairs, but when I slam the front door, they come down.

Wes's eyes are instantly fixated on Athelia's hand, which is still clasped in mine. I pull her into the kitchen because I'm hungry, and she follows without hesitation.

On our way, we pass by *Retribution*, which is back in its rightful place. Wes pauses when he notices.

"The fuck?"

"Oh, right." Kellan stops next to him and stares up at the painting. "We discovered who stole it."

Wes shoots Kellan an impatient look when he doesn't continue.

"It was Colton," he says. "Colton, Xander, and Lucas. Cal and I stole it back yesterday. Forgot to mention it until now."

"Motherfucker," Wes grumbles.

"We got him good," I say. "Trashed his brand-new car."

Athelia peers into the hallway while making sure to keep distance in between her and Wes. "Haven was looking at that painting on Halloween."

I exchange a knowing look with the guys. Saying Colton is obsessed with Haven is an understatement. I think his preoccupation with her might be more intense than ours with Athelia.

Better not to dwell on that.

“Anyone else hungry?” I start pulling out food from the fridge for sandwiches.

“Sure,” Athelia says absently. When Wes makes a move to enter the kitchen, she darts to the other side of me.

“I think we should give Athelia her own room,” I say.

This time, Wes’s glare is pointed at me. “Absolutely not.”

“Not to sleep in,” I add. “Just a place for her to store her stuff and do her homework without disturbance.”

“I want my own bed,” Athelia says.

“No,” we all reply at the same time.

Turning to me, Athelia says, “I still don’t want to sleep with Wes.”

“That’s not optional,” Wes snaps. “You’ll sleep with me as often as you sleep with them.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I don’t care.”

They stare at each other for a second. I expect one of them to lash out. For Athelia to push him more or for Wes to force her to submit to his will again.

Instead, Athelia’s shoulders sag. Her voice is defeated—hurt, even—as she says quietly, “You’re no better than your father.”

His eyes flash. This morning before we left the cabin, it felt like Wes wanted to punish Athelia somehow. She was blatantly showing him that she preferred me over him, and it made something in him snap.

Now, that all falls to the wayside. Wes hates Kammes more than anyone else—more than he thought he hated Athelia and more than he hates himself for needing her. Athelia comparing the two of them is the worst insult she could’ve come up with.

“Stepfather,” Wes corrects. He moves closer until he’s towering over her, and his voice is low and threatening. “And I’d take that back if I were you.”

She has to tip her chin up to look at him, but her jaw is set. “It’s the truth.”

“I’m *nothing* like him, you hear me? Nothing.” Wes’s mask of calm is slipping quickly. His fists are clenched, and that vein near his temple is pulsing visibly.

“Then prove it to me.”

The way Athelia says it catches all three of us off guard. My thoughts come screeching to a halt, and Wes jerks his head back in surprise.

Her voice isn’t spiteful, nor is it hateful. It’s half heart-broken, half hopeful. She’s giving him a chance, and she *wants* him to take it.

Wes licks his lips and narrows his eyes at her. His first instinct is to fight—to destroy—and that’s especially true when it comes to Athelia. He loves peeling back every layer of her armor until she’s nothing but a helpless, sobbing, broken mess. But all of that’s been changing since we found out the truth.

“Fine,” he bites out. “You can have your own room, but you’re still sleeping with us.”

“Not with you,” she adds. “Not until I decide to.”

He works his jaw. “Fine. Happy now?”

Athelia shakes her head. “It’s still not enough.”

I disguise my smile with a cough into my elbow. *That’s my girl.*

Wes blows out an annoyed breath. “What do you want me to do?”

Athelia’s expression turns from cautious to hopeful, but it hardens again in a mere second. “Beg for my forgiveness.”

Wes inhales deeply, and just as I’m beginning to think the idiot isn’t going to do it, he opens his mouth. “Ath—”

“On your knees,” she says, her eyes flashing with the challenge.

Good. She shouldn't make this easy on him—on any of us.

Wes clenches his jaw, his eyes flashing. But then he smiles and leans in so close that his lips brush the shell of her ear. “You think, my soul,” he whispers, “that I wouldn't?”

Athelia's lips part in surprise. I'm sure she was expecting some type of protest, even if it was just a bitter comment.

But no, Wes lowers himself to his knees without another word. As he looks up at her, he takes her hands in his and kisses her knuckles softly.

Athelia blinks rapidly, and her breath catches in her throat. For a split second, I tear my eyes away to glance at Kellan, and he meets my gaze with a surprised smile.

“Athelia,” Wes says, “over the past years, I've caused you so much pain. I've spread rumors, I've fucked with your future, and I've destroyed things that were important to you. All for nothing.

“I should've protected you, but instead I'm who you needed protection from. I did my best to destroy you, and I let my obsession run wild. This weekend was no exception. We should've left you alone. We never should've tricked you or tied you to that tree or drugged you or raped you.”

Athelia's hands tighten around his. She's watching him cautiously, almost suspiciously, like she's worried he's just saying what he needs to say to help her get past this.

“I'm sorry,” he adds quietly. “I'd say I never wanted to hurt you, but that'd be a lie. I *did* want to hurt you.”

“You still do,” she whispers.

“In a different way.” He kisses the back of her hand. “But never like that. Not again. I'm sorry, Athelia. I know I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I'm begging for it anyway. I'll do this every day for the rest of my life if it means I can have you again.”

He stops, but Athelia is still watching him, like she wants more. When he doesn't continue, she tilts her head to one side.

“Say it,” she says softly.

“Say what?”

“You know what.”

Wes swallows, closes his eyes, and breathes deeply. When he looks up at her, his eyebrows are furrowed with desperation. “Please,” he says tightly. “Please forgive me, Athelia.”

“If you could take it all back,” she asks quietly, “would you?”

He doesn’t even hesitate. “Yes.”

Silence stretches for a long moment. I’ve never seen Wes be so sincere, but there’s no way Athelia will think it’s enough. Not after all the pain he’s put her through.

“Thank you,” she says, but her voice is empty. She retracts her hands and glances at the oven’s clock. “I have to get to class.”



# Chapter Thirty-Three

## Wes

Athelia's blatant rejection of my apology sends me reeling. Once I'm finished with classes, I spend the rest of the day locked in my room. Even when I hear the others downstairs in the kitchen making dinner, I don't come out.

Instead, I sit on my bed in near-total darkness. My curtains are only open a few inches, letting in some of the warm glow from the streetlights outside. I twist my skull ring around my finger, staring at it.

My father gave it to me mere weeks before he died. He said he saw it one day and it reminded him of me, so he got it on a whim. It made me feel so special and loved. He always did.

Back then, I promised myself I'd grow up to be just like him. I'd be big and strong yet affectionate and caring. I'd show my own wife and children that they'd always come first.

Now, I feel like I'm at war with myself. My father taught me to protect those I love and to always put them first. But Kammes shattered all of that. He taught me that to be happy, I had to be in power—of myself and of those around me.

Over the past few days, I've realized I have power over neither. First, it was Kellan and Cal forcing me to realize that I don't hate Athelia. Maybe I don't love her, maybe I do, but I

definitely care about what happens to her. I *want* her, however much I've refused to let myself believe that.

Then... well, then Athelia had to bust open my chest and force me to feel things I told myself were wrong. Things that show weakness.

When I decided to make her move in with us, it was to remind Athelia who's in charge here. To show her that she can win the occasional battle, but I'll always win the war. Yet all it took was seeing the hope in her eyes earlier, and my resolve crumbled.

Somehow, in a mere moment, Athelia was able to flip a switch inside me. She brought me back to my roots—back to the man I used to want to be. I can't change who I am now, but I can add to myself. Bring back the devotion my father had for me and my mother that I always wanted to mirror.

When Athelia asked me if I'd take everything back, I meant it with everything in me. It wasn't enough, but I wasn't expecting it to be. If I were in her shoes, I'm not sure I'd believe me, either.

I'm not even angry at her reaction. She can stay pissed at me for however long she wants to. Doesn't change the fact that she's mine.

With a sigh, I fall back onto my bed and stare up at the dark ceiling. My mind wanders back to the beginning of freshman year before everything fell apart.

How different would things be if I hadn't believed Kammes? If we'd listened to Athelia instead of thinking she was manipulating us? Would we have stuck together throughout all of college?

My fingers curl into a fist. We would've. I would've made sure of it.

To think about the fact that we could've had her all along without causing her all that pain...

I'm not sure how we would've handled Kammes back then, but we could've come up with something. We could've protected her, even then.

There's movement in the hallway, and then I hear the door across from mine close. I jump to my feet without thought and rip my door open.

But then I stop.

If Athelia wanted to be around me, she could've sought me out. Right now, I'm probably the last person she wants to be around.

Gritting my teeth, I lean against the doorframe and stare at her door. It's a dark wood, just like the rest of the trim in the house.

All I want to do is rip it off its hinges. It'd be heartless, and she'd hate me even more, but I could do it.

The side of me that I created as a way to survive under Kammes's control rages, telling me that I should. But the other side—the side influenced by another man—is much stronger. Much deeper.

I'd forgotten about it until today.

Quietly, I step across the hallway, wondering what Athelia is doing on the other side. I won't invade her privacy—I've done enough of that—but I need to be close to her for a minute.

The soft sound of her humming reaches my ears, and I move closer. Even though she can't hear me, I press my forehead to her door silently and whisper, "I'm so sorry, Athelia."

# Chapter Thirty-Four

## Athelia

The week flies by.

The guys help me move into the room across from Wes's. As agreed, there's no bed, but they buy me a comfy couch, a nice desk, and a good chair to go along with it.

It's nice to have my own space, although I miss Haven. She's responded to a few of my texts here and there, but otherwise, I haven't heard from her. She told me the situation with her family will take more time than she originally anticipated, but she still hasn't given me any specifics.

Other than helping me lift things that are heavier than the limits Cal set for me, Wes has mostly left me alone. It's ironic that the thing that got him to leave me alone was forcing me to move in with him, but I'll take it.

I've been alternating between sleeping with Cal and Kellan. I'm not the biggest fan of the idea, but they love it, and that's what matters. The more attached they get to me, the better.

Just about every night, two of the guys leave for hours. They don't explain their absences to me—they don't need to. I'm aware of their jobs, and frankly, I don't want to know anything I don't need to.

By the time Saturday evening rolls around, I feel like I have things under control. The guys strong-arming me into moving in with them actually ended up working in favor of my plan. Living with them has given me ample opportunity to cement myself into their lives. A toothbrush here, a hair tie there, and all of a sudden, I'm everywhere.

Inescapable.

As far as I can tell, it's driving Wes mad. I made out with Kellan in the living room earlier today while Wes was in the kitchen. If the way he slammed the cabinet doors was any indication, I've successfully weaseled my way under his skin. He's so jealous, he doesn't know what to do with himself.

Maintaining my distance seems to be working wonders, but I get the feeling that's all about to change tonight. Cal and Kellan are out on a job, and they won't be back until the early hours of the morning. That means Wes and I are alone in the house together.

He locked himself in his room after dinner, and I've been studying in mine, curled up on the couch with a blanket. Maybe I'm imagining it, but the air feels tense, like the house is going to explode at any minute.

It's making it extremely difficult to focus.

With a sigh, I text Haven, but she doesn't respond. I'm just about to call my mom so I can occupy my mind with *something* when a notification flashes across my screen.

My stomach drops.

***Professor Kammes:*** *My wife and I get in late tonight. Meeting as usual tomorrow. Wear that plaid skirt of yours I like.*

The room spins as I read and reread the text. I've been so focused on making sure Kellan and Cal are wrapped around my finger that I almost forgot about Professor Kammes.

*Meeting as usual tomorrow.* That means his home, in his office, at nine-thirty. Or else.

I reach up to touch the bruises on my neck. My injuries are healing, but they're still a potent reminder of what I face if I don't do as he says. That and the videos—the videos that could derail my career completely.

My chest tightens as I turn off my phone's screen and set it on the couch next to me. *Tomorrow morning*. If I don't show, he'll post the videos. I'll be ruined.

If Cal or Kellan were here, I'd show one of them the text, and they'd make a plan with Wes. But by the time they get home, they'll be exhausted, and I'll be asleep.

Which means I can't wait. I have to find a way to take care of this by tomorrow morning.

Reluctantly, I stand, letting my blanket fall to the couch. I'm only in shorts and a tank top since I like to remind Wes of what he can't have. That's not what I want to go for right now, but I'm too shaken to think of grabbing extra clothes.

Clutching my phone, I open my door, only to lock eyes with Wes and freeze. He's standing in the threshold to his room, shirtless, gripping either side of the doorframe. Watching me.

*How long has he been standing there and staring at my door?*

"What are you doing?" I ask.

His face hardens. "Whatever the fuck I want."

Involuntarily, I lick my lips. His broad shoulders look even more muscular at the angle he's holding them in, and it doesn't help that he's gripping the doorframe tightly. That skull ring is on his left hand, just as it always is.

Behind him, his room is lit with a blue light. It illuminates his messy dark hair and reflects off his skin. God, *so much skin*. My gaze travels down his chest and abs to where his black sweatpants are hanging low on his hips.

"Are you going to tell me what you want," he asks coldly, "or are you going to stand there with your jaw hanging open all night?"

I snap my mouth shut.

He smirks. “Was beginning to get the impression that you wanted me to do something with that.”

As my cheeks begin to burn, I clench my fists. I’d shoot back any of the dozens of comebacks I have for him, but I can’t afford to piss him off. Not when I need his help.

“Wow, you really have nothing to say?” Wes rolls his eyes. “Don’t know why I expected anything else.” He turns and enters his room, grabbing the door to shut it.

“Wes.”

I hate the way my voice sounds. Scared and small and pathetic. But it does the trick.

Slowly, Wes turns. He looks me up and down like he’s worried I hurt myself before he asks, “What’s wrong?”

“Kammes,” I whisper. “He texted me.”

Wes’s grip tightens on the door. “What did he say?”

“He wants me to meet him tomorrow morning like usual.” I show him the text, watching the way his nostrils flare at Kammes’s directions to wear the plaid skirt.

“Fucking bastard,” he mutters. “Tell him you’ll be there.”

“What? Wes, he’ll—”

“He’ll be dead by then,” he says, eyes meeting mine with a promise. “You never have to see him again if you don’t want to.”

“Oh,” I breathe out.

“But I need you to text him,” Wes tells me. “He can’t suspect that anything is off. No even a little bit.”

“Right.” My hands are shaking as I type out a simple text to Professor Kammes and hit send.

“Athelia,” Wes says gently.

When I look up, I’m startled by the gentleness in his eyes. I think it’s the first time he’s looked at me with any type of care since I made him beg for my forgiveness and then left with barely any acknowledgment.

“You’re safe. He’s never touching you again.”

I nod. “Y-yeah.”

But my throat feels like it’s closing in on itself. Seeing Kammes’s name flash across my screen brought back all the horrible feelings I’ve been able to squash for the past week.

“Hey.” Wes’s arm loops around my waist. “Athelia, breathe.”

I do, but every inhale is shorter than the last. I’m barely aware of Wes as he leads me into his room and sits me down on his bed. The blue light envelops me, as does the calming scent of leather and pine.

His comforter is soft under my palms, and I try to focus on that as he kneels in front of me.

“He can’t hurt you here,” Wes says.

“What if he already knows about us?” I blurt. “He knows about the hickey. What if he followed me or something? What if he already posted a video and just hasn’t told me yet? Oh my god, Wes, how do you even check for that?”

“He doesn’t know,” Wes says soothingly. His hands stroke up and down my calves. “I would’ve gotten at least an angry phone call by now.”

“But what if he’s been keeping it to himself until he gets back? What if he’s already back and he’s waiting until you leave to come in and—and—and—”

“Athelia,” Wes murmurs as I break down into sobs.

*Why did he have to be the one here tonight? Why couldn’t it have been Cal?*

“I’m not letting him hurt you,” Wes says. He pulls me off the bed and into his lap, where he holds me and rocks me back and forth. “Never again, Athelia. I promise.”

I sob into his chest as the panic takes hold of me. It grips me tightly, threatening to swallow me whole. But the entire time, Wes is there, whispering encouraging words in my ear and holding me securely.



*You're safe, my soul.*

*Breathe with me. In and out.*

*There you go.*

*Be a good girl for me and do it again, yeah?*

My heart aches, and now, it's not only because of Professor Kammes. I press my face into Wes's neck, wishing he could be like this all the time. Comforting and kind and *safe*.

Wes strokes my hair and holds me until the panic subsides. Once my tears have dried up, he stands, lifting me into his arms. "I have to get moving if I'm going to make this work tonight."

I don't want him to leave, but he can't stay. Not if I ever want to be free of Professor Kammes.

Wes carries me into Kellan's room and up the stairs before he sets me gently on the bed. He pulls the covers over my body and gently kisses my temple. This is the most he's touched me all week. Actually, I think tonight is the *first* time he's touched me all week.

"How do you want me to kill him?" Wes asks.

"I... I didn't realize I had a choice."

"He raped you, not me," Wes says. "I'd say it's fitting that you're the one who gets to decide how he dies."

I frown. "I don't think I have a preference."

"No?"

"Well..." I shift, dropping my gaze. "Maybe make it hurt? Make him sit in the pain?"

I hear the smile in Wes's voice as he replies, "Of course."

"Wes?" I ask right as he's about to turn to leave.

"Yeah."

"You're going alone?"

"Cal and Kellan are busy. Don't know when exactly they'll be back. Don't want to wait that long, either."

“But what if you need help?”

Wes pauses for a second before running a hand through his hair.

“What if he hurts you?” I ask when he doesn’t respond.

“Do you care?”

His question takes me aback. When he turns to look at me, I realize he means it. It wasn’t meant as a jab.

*He thinks you don’t. He doesn’t think you care one bit.*

And I’m not sure I do. Maybe a little, but I don’t know if that’s my self preservation instincts kicking in or not.

“I think he’s hurt me a lot,” I say quietly. “You’re killing him for me, and that’s dangerous. He’s really strong.”

Wes’s eyes spark with amusement. “I’m stronger, Athelia.”

“But—”

“Either say you care about what happens to me or leave me alone to prep.”

The silence stretches between us before I finally settle on, “Please just be careful.”

A muscle near his jawbone twitches. His gaze travels down my body, longing flashing in his eyes, but neither of us acknowledge it. I think he’s about to say something, but then his face hardens, and he goes, shutting the door behind him with a loud *thud*.

# Chapter Thirty-Five

## Wes

I let myself into my parents' house a little after eleven. It's dark and empty, and I make my way to John's office carefully. Knowing him, he'll come in here to drop off his laptop before he heads to bed with my mom.

Lowering myself into his chair, I lean back and close my eyes.

*You're just like your father.*

Even a week later, Athelia's words still sting. I can't deny the similarities between me and Kammes, but saying I'm just like him? It has to be too far.

*Is it, though?*

I grit my teeth as I think over the past few years. I've changed a lot, and I've been telling myself it's been for the better, but... what if I'm wrong?

There are some changes that have been good. I'm stronger, I'm smarter, and I've learned who I can trust. But as Athelia forced me to remember last week, I lost track of the man my father made me want to be. I'll forever be grateful to her, even if I didn't want to admit it.

Athelia is stubborn as hell, I'll give her that. For the past week, she's had me twisted up. But it made me realize something.

Even though there's nothing I love more than having power over her—having her submission, willful or not—I'm willing to give it up. Maybe not all of it, but at least some of it. I proved that to her and to myself when I let her have a room to herself and haven't made her sleep with me.

And when I got on my knees and begged her for forgiveness, I knew she wouldn't give it me.

Kammes would never do that. Even without knowing all the details of his relationship with Athelia, I know *him*. I know how he's treated me for the past few years. He saw a boy struggling to learn how to be a man—saw weakness—and exploited it for his own benefit.

I wouldn't be surprised if, somehow, he did the same thing to my mother. Neither of them talk about their marriage much, but I see the way his eyes light up when he wins arguments or gets his way.

Jaw clenched, I stare at John's desk. It's dark, but the streetlights illuminate just enough for me to see a framed photo of him and my mother.

To this day, I don't know what she sees in him. He's a selfish bastard and always has been. Took our money, took my own agency, and refused to give any of it back.

*See? I'm nothing like him.*

I'd never do that to Athelia, and I know I wouldn't have to. She's already adjusting to her new life with us. Enjoying it, even. It's different than what Kammes has been doing to her.

*Is it?*

I swallow, trying to shove away the thought, but it keeps buzzing around in my head like a pesky fly.

*If Athelia never warms up to you, will you let her go?*

My first instinct is a hard and fast *no*. She's mine, dammit, and she belongs with me, too. But the more I sit with the

question, the more I'm unsure.

Do I want to keep her caged forever? She'd only resent me—hate me. While I love seeing her riled up, I don't want those feelings to simmer forever.

*I want her to want me.*

Of course I do. It's why I've been so pissed for the past week. She's willingly given herself to Kellan and Cal whenever they want, but she's barely even looked at me.

My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of the garage door opening. I don't move—I'm already exactly where I need to be.

*Maybe after I do this, Athelia will let me sleep with her.*

It's a selfish thought, but when it comes to her, that's exactly what I am.

Tired conversation drifts through the house as my mom and John come closer. Just as expected, I hear her footsteps on the stairs. When John doesn't immediately come into the office, I'm worried this won't work, but then I hear the freezer drawer shutting.

*Right.* He always has ice cream before bed. You'd think he'd want to get right to sleep, but apparently not.

With a sigh, I tap my fingers against my thigh. It only takes a few minutes before I finally hear him heading my way.

As the room is flooded with light, John steps in. His eyes immediately snap to mine, and the instant terror on his features fades to confusion.

"Wesley?"

I stand. "You look tired, John."

"Been driving all day." He rubs at his face. "What—what are you doing here?"

"You and I need to have a little chat. Let's take a walk."

"Wes, it's the middle of the night. Can't it wait?"

“No.” I pull back my unzipped leather jacket and slide my hands into my pants pockets. The simple action reveals the handle of my gun, which is nestled inside its holster. “It can’t.”

The color drains from John’s face. “What’s this about?”

“We’ll discuss that on our walk. Set down your briefcase and empty your pockets.”

He scoffs. “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely.”

Existential crisis aside, stripping John of the power he’s held over me for years is like finally reaching the top of a mountain after a day-long hike. Fuck, it’s better. He’s reduced to nothing. All the money in the world can’t save him right now.

Nor can the videos.

Nor can his threats.

“You don’t want to do this,” John says. “You’ll never see a cent of the money your father meant for you if you continue like this.”

“Oh, you mean the trust fund that you were never supposed to get your slimy hands on?” My smirk widens. “You signed that account over to me on Monday morning. Paperwork was on Howard’s desk first thing.”

Howard, the man who handles all my parents’ finances—and the man who’ll happily look the other way if you give him the right incentive. It’s not like he’ll get into any legal trouble. Thanks to Char, on paper, it looks like John really did sign over the account.

“What?” John sputters. “How—”

“Stop stalling.”

All I have to do is place my hand on my gun for John to comply. He sets his bag on the floor before slowly pulling everything out of his pockets.

“Now strip,” I tell him. “You can keep your briefs on, though. I’ve seen enough of your dick to last a thousand lifetimes.”

“You only saw a few seconds of that video.”

“Like I said, enough for a thousand lifetimes. Now take your clothes off.”

“What was the point of having me empty my pockets, then?!”

I shrug. “The fun of it.”

John pulls off his clothes and tosses them into a heap on the ground. I can see the gears turning in his brain. He’s still trying to find a way out of this.

“If you call to her,” I say, motioning toward upstairs with my head, “you’re dead in three seconds flat.”

He swallows audibly.

“Hands on your head.”

His cheeks are bright red now. *Good*. My plan is to kill him, but I don’t mind humiliating him first.

“Now tell me all the places you have the videos of Athelia backed up.”

“Excuse me?”

“Tell me now, John. I know you’re smart enough to keep them in more than one place.”

He narrows his eyes. “You gave her that hickey. I told you to stay away from her. She was using you.”

“Don’t lie to me,” I snap. “You were raping her. You beat her.”

He snorts. “Who’d you hear that from, her? Of course she’d say that. Didn’t want to admit that she was going behind your back. Don’t believe her, Wes. She’s playing you.”

*No one will believe you.*

That’s what he said to her. What *I* said to her that night in the cabin. Fuck, no wonder she was so upset. I’m ready to shoot this fucker in the head, and he didn’t even say it about me.

“No,” I tell him. “The only thing she’s done is tell me the truth. You’re the one who played me, and I was stupid enough to listen to you.”

“Wes—”

“Where do you have the videos backed up?” I snap.

“I—it’ll be easier if I log in myself.”

Stepping back from the desk, I gesture for him to come forward. He walks forward with too much confidence, so I pull my gun out and aim it at him.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“Don’t try anything,” I tell him. “It won’t end well for you.”

He grits his teeth, resentment flashing in his eyes. As he sits at his desk, he asks, “Did Athelia run to you for help? Pathetic little bitch.”

I slap the back of his head. “Say her name again, and I’ll mutilate your body so badly not even your wife will be able to recognize you.”

At that, John starts typing into his desktop faster. He pulls up a cloud storage site and opens up a folder labeled “A.”

My stomach sinks as I scan over all the videos. There are dozens of them. “Delete them all.”

“What?”

I shove the barrel of my gun into his neck. “Now.”

His fingers move quickly as he grabs his mouse, selects the videos, and hits Delete. Only once they’ve all been wiped do I let myself relax a bit.

“You have them on your phone?”

“Y-yes.”

“Get up,” I tell him.

He hesitates, so I grab him, haul him up, and shove him around the desk. He stumbles, and I kick him, making him fall to his knees right in front of his clothes.



“Pull them up on your phone and delete them,” I grit out.

As he does, I watch him carefully. He has them in a password-protected folder—I’d expect nothing less—and he deletes them all with shaking hands.

“Drop it,” I say the second the last one disappears. I’m not giving him a chance to try to call for help or something. “Now stand.”

“Where are you taking me?” he asks as he gets to his feet.

“Keep your voice down,” I hiss. By now, my mom is probably already in bed with her earplugs in, but I don’t want to risk it.

Carefully, I push John through the dark house and out the back door, closing it behind us quietly. There’s a decent patch of woods behind their neighborhood, so I nod across the backyard.

It’s dark, and he doesn’t have shoes on, so he picks his way through the yard carefully. When we leave the grass and start moving through the forest, he hisses in pain.

“She has bruises all over her body from you,” I tell him once we’re far enough in the forest that the trees will absorb our conversation. “You almost broke one of her ribs.”

“What do you want me to do, apologize?” he snaps.

“Oh, no, nothing as extreme as that,” I reply flatly.

He stops and turns around to face me. “What are we doing, Wes? Are you jealous? Do you think this is a good way to get your anger out? You’re not smart enough to get away with murder.”

I bark out a laugh. “If only you knew.”

His brows knit together. “What do you mean?”

“I reached out to Uncle Dave for a job years ago.”

John’s eyes blow wide. “Wes! He’s a criminal.”

“So are you. Do I really need to remind you of that?” I shove him back around and force him to keep walking.

“Your father would be disappointed in you,” John says.

“You’re wrong,” I bite out. “He’d be disappointed in Mom. Disappointed in you, too. But he’d be proud of me for following in his footsteps.”

I don’t know if that’s true, but neither does John. He and my father barely spoke. Me, on the other hand? My dad taught me how to shoot a gun, how to throw a punch, and how to hit someone where it hurts.

I have to tell myself he’d be happy for the life I chose.

*He wouldn’t be proud of how you treat Athelia.*

That thought is like a punch to the gut. I shove it aside for now. I’ll deal with that later.

Once John and I are deep enough in the woods, I force him to his knees. I drop my backpack to the ground, pull out some duct tape, and seal his mouth shut. He tries to protest, but I’m the one with the gun, not him. He has to comply.

“For the record, she did come to me for help,” I tell John. It’s not a full description of how I ended up here, but it’s also the truth. “She’s always been mine. You tried to keep us apart, but ultimately, you failed.”

I zip tie his hands and feet together before holstering my gun and pulling out my knife from my pocket. I keep it in one hand and pull out a small flashlight with the other.

John makes a muffled noise when he sees the blade. The idiot tries to get up and run, but I shove him back down.

I shine my light in his eyes just to be annoying before moving to his feet. Just as I expected, they’re bleeding from all the sharp sticks and pine cones on the forest floor.

“You deserve worse than what I’m going to do to you,” I tell him, “but I want to get back to *my* girl as soon as possible.”

As I drag the blade up his arm, leaving a long, shallow cut, John cries out. The sound is muffled, but it still annoys me, so I kick him in the face with one of my steel-toed boots. Blood trickles from his nose as he groans in pain.

Shoving him onto his back, I trace another shallow cut along his chest. “You wanna know what Athelia’s one request was? She wanted me to draw out your pain.”

John shakes his head as he tries to protest.

“I was disappointed, too. I was hoping she’d want me to do something really nasty to you, you know? Like cut off your dick and make you choke on it or some shit.”

He lets out a horrified noise.

“You know what? You’re right! It *is* still on the table.”

I’m not doing it, of course. The last thing I want to do is touch my stepdad’s dick. No, I have other plans. I’ll inflict the pain Athelia asked me to, but I’ll also humiliate him.

With my boot, I shove him onto his back and pounce on him. He grunts and wheezes under my weight as I grab his face with a gloved hand.

“Hold still,” I tell him.

John screams as I bring my knife to his forehead. He tries to turn his head away, so I slash down his cheek.

“Stay. fucking. *still.*”

After that, he’s much better. Tears fall from his eyes as I carve the word *Rapist* into his forehead. He won’t be able to see it, but whoever finds him will.

Once I’m done, I move to his chest, carving *Liar* into his skin. Blood is everywhere, getting onto my gloves and dripping onto the forest floor.

“You disgust me,” I spit out as he whimpers in pain.

I get up, half expecting him to try to crawl away, but he just lies there crying. With an angry grunt, I kick him in the side, right where Athelia is bruised.

John cries out and curls up into a fetal position on his side.

“Oh, so it’s fine when you do it, but you don’t like it when it’s done to you?”

I kick him again. Then again, and again, and again. I don't stop until my boots are covered in blood and he's lying motionless on the ground.

Time slips from my grasp, and I have no idea how long I stand here staring at my stepfather's corpse. Shaking myself, I crouch down to check his pulse. When I can't find one, I throw my gloves in a plastic bag and shove it all into my backpack.

As I walk through the dark forest, it hits me that I've finally gotten everything I wanted.

I have my money.

I'm no longer under my stepdad's control.

Athelia is mine.

My shoulders may feel ten times lighter, and I might be free, but something isn't sitting right. By the time I'm climbing onto my bike—which I parked a good mile away from my parents' house—I've figured out what it is.

*Would my dad be proud of me?*

For some things, I'm sure he would be. But as I head home, I realize the thing I care most about is how he'd feel about my treatment of Athelia. I can practically see the disappointment in his eyes. He never would've hurt Mom the way I hurt Athelia—even if he'd found out she'd been cheating on him.

More regret seeps under my skin. By the time I'm home and have my bike parked in the garage, it's the only thing I can focus on.

Cal and Kellan aren't home yet, so I'm surprised to see the light in Kellan's room on. I thought by now Athelia would be sleeping, but as I approach the house, I can make out her form in the window.

When I catch her gaze, she immediately pulls the curtain shut.

I smile to myself, taking the porch steps two at a time.

*Nice try, Athelia, but you'll have to be sneakier than that.*

Inside, I kick my shoes off and walk straight into the living room. I had to make a pit stop to throw my boots in the lake because they're soaked with blood, but I anticipated it and packed extra shoes.

Before I left, I started a fire, and the warmth of the room envelops me. Carefully, I take the plastic bag out of my backpack and throw my gloves into the flames. I got some blood on my shirt, so I strip my jacket off and throw it to the floor. Just as I'm pulling my shirt over my head, the stairs creak.

I don't turn to look at her as she hovers near the base of the stairs. She can see into the living room from there, and she knows I'm aware of her presence.

"Is he..." She trails off.

"Yes." I toss my shirt into the fire.

"Thank—"

"You should be asleep."

Athelia doesn't answer. I can see her out of the corner of my eye—unmoving and silent.

With a sigh, I brace a hand against the mantle of the fireplace and stare at the ground. I want to tell her I'm sorry, but it won't do any good. I've already done that, and it wasn't enough.

"I've never had someone kill for me before," Athelia says after a couple minutes, "and now you've done it twice."

At that, I look up, finally meeting her gaze. She's watching me with a soft expression. I'm pretty sure I'm imagining the admiration on her features, but it's nice to pretend it's there.

"I'd kill anyone if you asked me to," I reply.

She blinks rapidly, like she's surprised I'd say that.

Without realizing it, I take a couple steps closer to her. She tenses, so I freeze.

"Athelia—"

“I care,” she blurts.

“Wha—”

“I cared earlier, too,” she adds quickly. “And I was worried about you. That’s why I couldn’t sleep.”

Some of the tightness in my chest eases. “I know.”

She frowns. “But earlier, you told me—”

“I just wanted to hear you say it.”

“Oh.” Athelia shifts, like she’s full of nervous energy that’s trying to escape her body. She’s still in the tank top and shorts that she was wearing when I carried her to bed, but thankfully, she’s not crying anymore.

I sigh, picking up my backpack. “I need to shower.”

With a silent nod, she presses herself against the wall to make room for me. She’s still standing on the bottom step.

I glance at the fireplace. Everything is burning nicely. I move the protective screen so it’s back in front before slowly walking toward the stairs.

As I pass her, Athelia touches my wrist. It’s so light I almost miss it.

“Thank you,” she whispers when I pause.

Turning to face her, I reach out and cup her cheek. Her skin is soft under my palm. “You don’t have to thank me.”

“You just killed a man for me, Wes. Your own stepfather.”

“He hurt me, too,” I say, unsure of why I do. If it hadn’t been for what he did to Athelia, I wouldn’t have killed him, and we both know it.

She huffs. “Just take the win, Wes.”

I lean my forehead against hers, grateful when she doesn’t shy away. “I made him hurt for you. He cried. Tried to beg me to stop. And I marked him as what he is so anyone who looks at him will know.”

Her eyes flash with confusion, but she doesn’t ask me to elaborate. It’s the last thing I see before I close my eyes. I’m

so goddamn *tired*, but touching her, inhaling her sweet honeysuckle scent—it revives me.

*I know I fucked up, my soul, but I need you.*

“Wes,” she whispers, and I feel her shift slightly. Her fingers brush against the bare skin of my waist before her hands settle on my hips.

I shudder, completely unable to stop it. I’ve craved her touch for years, but that’s no comparison to how I’ve felt for the past week. Not touching her felt like a part of me was dying and withering away.

When I feel her soft lips against mine, I almost pull back in shock. This is the last thing I was expecting from her, but it awakens something fiery and possessive inside me as she fits her mouth to mine.

The groan that escapes my throat is deep. Guttural. I lean in closer as all thoughts except her drain from my mind. My backpack falls to the steps, but I barely even notice.

This is the first time she’s initiated a kiss since we were both eighteen. It may be obvious by the way she looks at me that she wants me, but this is the first time she’s shown it so openly in years.

Gently, I cradle her head in my hands, tipping it backward. Nothing can compare to the pleasure that pours into me at the tiny whimper that escapes her throat.

Hesitantly, Athelia slides her tongue just past my lips. A rush of heat washes over me, and I plunge my tongue into her mouth. My tongue tangles with hers as we fall deeper and deeper into each other.

*Athelia. Athelia, Athelia, Athelia.*

She’s my only thought. My only care in the world. I need her—more than I ever realized before. *This* is how things should’ve been for the past three years.

“Wes!”

I break off the kiss to realize that I’m holding Athelia up, my hands gripping her thighs. Her legs are locked tightly

around my waist, and she's gripping my shoulders.

I'm out of breath.

I've never been out of breath just from a kiss before.

Athelia's eyes are wide with surprise, her lips swollen and parted. She's panting, too. Gently, she slides one of her hands up the back of my neck until her fingers are tangled in my hair. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to get that intense."

Slowly, I set her down, kicking myself when she winces. Her injuries aren't fully healed yet.

"Did I hurt you?" I ask, my fingers hovering over her side.

"Only a little." She's still holding onto me. Still staring at me with longing and need. "The pain is already gone."

"I'm sorry." I press my lips to her forehead. "I got a little carried away."

Her cheeks turn the lightest shade of pink. "So did I."

That pulls a smile out of me. Athelia Harper, blushing over a simple kiss when we've done so much more.

For a second, it looks like she wants to say something, but then she sighs. Her hands trail down my arms before falling to her sides. "You wanted to shower?"

I nod. I want more—so much more. But I don't ask.

She'll come to me when she's ready.

Upstairs, she stops in the doorway of Kellan's room, turning to face me. "Goodnight, Wes."

My heart soars when she meets my gaze and smiles.

"Goodnight, my soul."



# Chapter Thirty-Six

## Athelia

The sound of someone knocking on Kellan's door wakes me. I blink my eyes open, thankful that Kellan keeps his curtains shut so the sun isn't too painful.

"Athelia," Wes calls. "You have to get going."

Kellan stirs beside me, and he lets out a deep groan as his arms tighten around me. I don't remember him coming to bed. "Don't leave me, *ma belle*."

"Hold on." I kiss him on the forehead before stumbling out of bed. The spiral staircase is a challenge this soon after waking up, but I manage to get to the bottom floor of Kellan's room and push the door open.

Wes is standing in the hallway, fully dressed, his phone in his hand. Seeing him, I'm immediately reminded of our kiss last night. I figured it was time to move to the next phase of my plan with him—give him tiny tastes of me here and there to drive him crazy.

If the way he kissed me was any indication, it worked.

*Part of you wanted it*, a voice deep inside me says, but I shove the thought away.

“I’m sorry,” Wes says when he realizes he woke me. “I just don’t want there to be any suspicion on you.”

“What... what do you mean?”

“Your meeting,” he says gently. “You have to show up. You don’t know Kammes is dead.”

My eyes widen. “Shit. What time is it?”

“Nine. I’m heading over now—my mom called. All you have to do is make an appearance. Odds are, the police won’t be there yet.”

My blood pressure spikes. “Police?”

Wes nods. “My mom called them and filed a missing persons report. They’ll probably be over to investigate at some point today.”

“But Wes, what if—” The words get caught in my throat. I can’t manage to say them.

“I’ll be fine,” he says with a reassuring smile. “There’s no reason for the cops to suspect me—or you, for that matter. I’ll just be there as support for my mom and to answer any questions they have.”

“But...”

“I need you to not worry.” His voice turns firm, although he doesn’t sound annoyed. “You can’t show up looking nervous.”

“Got it. So I just... ring the doorbell like normal?”

“Yep. Either my mom or I will answer, and we’ll send you away once you say you’re there for a meeting with Kammes. But the cops are going to look through his phone, and if they see you had a meeting that you didn’t show up for, they’ll—”

“I get it.” Pushing past him, I head toward my room. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

...

My hands are trembling as I ring the doorbell to the Kammes residence. I clutch the strap of my bag to disguise it, breathing deeply as I wait for an answer.

*Please be Wes. Please be Wes. Please—*

When the door opens, a woman with long, dark hair and red-rimmed eyes comes into view. She narrows her eyes at me before asking, “Can I help you?”

“I, um.” I clear my throat. “I have an advisory meeting with Professor Kammes?”

“Oh,” she says flatly. “You’re one of *those* students.”

Wes comes into view behind her. My eyes flick to his, but he shakes his head.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Her eyes travel up and down my body. “You’re just his type.”

“I... Mrs. Kammes, I’m sorry—”

“Oh, he isn’t cheating on me, no worries there.” She smiles, but her eyes are empty. “He has my permission. Of course, not with someone your age, which I suppose is why he’s been doing it behind my back.”

Wes’s jaw is clenched tight, but he doesn’t say anything.

“I understand why you’re attracted to him,” Mrs. Kammes goes on. “He’s a good-looking man. It just irks me that he thinks I don’t know.”

My stomach turns, and I’m grateful I haven’t had a chance to eat breakfast. I thought I was past having to pretend being into that disgusting excuse of a man.

“He’s not here,” Mrs. Kammes says. “Disappeared last night. You wouldn’t happen to know where he went?”

“No,” I say thickly. “He texted me and said our normal meeting time this morning would work.”

At that, she turns to Wes with a concerned look. “So maybe he *didn’t* want to leave.”

“I already told you that’s probably the case,” Wes says gently. “You said you found his clothes in a pile in the office. Why would he strip and then leave? That doesn’t make sense.”

Unless he had some sort of mental breakdown or something, I guess.”

Mrs. Kammes snuffles, and Wes pulls her into a hug. He locks eyes with me over her shoulder and nods toward my car.

*Thank fuck.*

“I... I’ll go. Sorry to disturb you. I hope he turns up.”

Mrs. Kammes doesn’t acknowledge me as I go, shutting the door behind me. The moment I’m out of her sight, my shoulders feel fifty pounds lighter, even though I’m still filled with nausea.

She thinks I *willingly* sleep with her husband. I’d never. *Never.* He’s repulsive.

But then I realize that’s not quite right. He’s not repulsive—not anymore.

As I slide into my car, I glance up at the house. Relief fills me as I realize I never have to come back here again.

Never have to see him again.

Never have to let him *touch* me again.

I close my eyes, lean back against my seat, and smile. My feelings for Wes may still be complicated, but one thing will never change. I’m eternally grateful to him for what he did last night.

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

## Kellan

The police find Kammes's body on Sunday. A funeral is held for him on Friday.

We all show up, figuring it could look suspicious if we don't. We're Wes's friends, after all. Athelia comes too, since she was one of his students.

The authorities have ruled Kammes's death a homicide, but they have no leads. I expected nothing less. Wes knows what he's doing.

On Sunday, the funeral itself is miserable. Athelia is a ball of nervous energy. Cal keeps an arm around her almost the entire time, which seems to help, but not enough.

As planned, Wes plays the part of a heartbroken stepson. Mrs. Kammes is distraught, but I can't find it in me to pity her. She cheated on her first husband for years and saddled her son with an asshole for a father figure.

Her pain feels justified.

Once the service is over, Wes weaves his way through the crowd toward us. His eyes are on Athelia, who's leaning into Cal. She looks distraught—broken up over her professor's

death. If I didn't know the reason she looks that way is because she's so uncomfortable, I'd be convinced.

"Get her out of here," Wes says to me, not loud enough for anyone else to hear. "Find some way to distract her."

"You don't want us there at the grave site?"

"If it wasn't for Athelia, sure, but I'm not putting her through that. Get her something to eat and then get her mind off Kammes."

I nod. We told her it'd probably be fine if she didn't show, but she was too worried that someone would think it odd.

"Got it," I say. "Good luck."

Wes nods. So far, all he's had to do is answer some routine questions. He's more worried about having to deal with annoying extended family than he is the cops.

Cal and I usher Athelia out of the funeral home quietly. She glances behind us, probably looking for Wes, but he's already heading back to his mom.

"You can talk to him later, *ma belle*," I murmur in her ear.

She tries to hide her disappointment by dropping her gaze to the ground, but I notice. I notice *everything* about her.

Something's changed between Athelia and Wes. She's been more friendly with him, and his glares behind her back have morphed into wistful stares. They're still not talking much—unless Athelia addresses Wes, and then he'll say something—but things don't seem as tense.

Athelia doesn't say a single word during the car ride home. When I park in front of the house, she doesn't move to undo her seatbelt.

"Thelia," I say gently.

When she doesn't respond, Cal and I exchange a worried glance. I get out of the car and open her door, but she continues fiddling with her necklace and staring into her lap.

"Hey." I reach over her and undo her seatbelt, which seems to break her out of her thoughts.

Athelia blinks at me slowly, like she's only half-registering what I'm doing. "I didn't even realize we'd stopped."

"I know." Taking her hand, I help her out of the car. "It's been a long day."

Inside, we make a light meal, but Athelia barely touches her sandwich. Cal tries to convince her to eat, but she looks ready to throw up.

"Don't worry about it," I say, taking her plate.

With one hand over Athelia's on the table, Cal turns to watch me. "She needs to eat."

"She will," I reply. "When she's ready. Athelia, go put pants on."

On a different day, I'm sure she'd protest, but she just gets up and heads for the stairs. It's not until she's gone that Cal speaks.

"What're you doing?"

"Taking her for a ride. I'm hoping it'll clear her head. Always works for me." I put her sandwich in a bag and zip it up.

Slowly, he nods. If he's jealous, he can suck it up.

When Athelia comes downstairs, I've grabbed her sandwich and a blanket and put them both in my backpack. She frowns when I pull a small leather jacket out of the coat closet.

"What's that for?"

"You," I tell her as I hold it up to help her put it on. "Helps break the wind. Come on."

Hesitantly, Athelia steps closer and slips her arms into the jacket. I turn her around to face me and zip it up.

I smile. "It's a perfect fit."

"You didn't have to buy me a jacket. I have one."

Shaking my head, I push her out the front door. "Trust me, you'll want leather for this."

It's not until we're in the garage that it clicks in her head what we're doing. "I've never ridden on a motorcycle before."

That satisfies the possessive part of me that wants to keep Athelia all to myself. If Cal and Wes knew what she just told me, this would immediately turn into a competition to get her to ride with them first instead of me.

I may not be the only man she'll ever ride with, but this way, I'll always be her first.

After helping her with the helmet I bought for her, I slip my backpack over her arms and settle it on her shoulders. Once it's secure, we head out.

Athelia doesn't even ask where we're going, which is yet another sign that she's still out of it. I'm not stupid enough to think it means she trusts me—we're nowhere near that point yet.

As we ride, Athelia wraps her arms around my waist. I love the feel of her body against mine as I speed down the roads.

It only takes us about twenty minutes to get to where we're headed. There's a nice overlook that's out of the way enough that not many people even know it exists. The sun will be setting soon, and we'll have a perfect view.

My thinking is that the fresh air will be good for Athelia, and what girl doesn't like pretty sunsets? Maybe she'll even think it's romantic or something.

I pull into the section of bare dirt that could hardly be called a parking lot. Once we've climbed off the bike and dealt with our helmets, Athelia looks around.

"What is this place?"

"You'll see." Taking her hand, I guide her toward a barely-there path that leads into a thin patch of woods.

Athelia stops. "You're not gonna tie me to another tree and leave me here, are you?"

"No, *ma belle*. The last thing I want to do is leave you."



I'm not sure she believes me, but she lets me lead her up the path. It takes us to the top of a cliff, where there's a small clearing that gives us a view of the valley below.

"Oh," Athelia breathes.

"It's nice, right?" I take the backpack from her and toss it on the picnic table that someone brought out here years ago.

"It is." She hasn't taken her eyes off the view. The sky has just started to turn a variety of colors, serving as the distraction I hoped it would be.

We both sit with our backs to the table as we watch the sunset. It's not lost on me that Athelia situates herself so close to me that our thighs are pressed against each other. With a smile, I wrap an arm around her shoulders while she nibbles on her sandwich.

Already, Athelia seems more relaxed. She leans into me, so I press a soft kiss to the top of her head.

"How often do you come out here?" she asks once she's finished her food.

"Not as often as I should. I found this place when I was a teenager, and I came here whenever I needed to get out of the house. These days I use it as my place to process my emotions, I guess. I can show up here pissed as hell, and somehow, I always leave with a feeling of calm."

"Is that why you brought me here?"

I nod. "Thought you might need a distraction."

"Thank you."

I'm about to reply, but just as I open my mouth, Athelia's lips brush against mine. Whatever I was going to say vanishes from my consciousness when she runs her fingers through my hair.

I groan, which seems to be the permission Athelia needs to crawl into my lap. Instantly, my hands are on her body. Her waist, her hips, squeezing her ass through her black jeans.

"You're gonna miss the sunset," I say against her mouth.

Athelia pulls away slightly, and I regret saying it immediately. All I want is more. A better man would stop her—would say he doesn't want to take advantage of her when she's so emotionally vulnerable—but I've never claimed to be a good person.

She arches a brow in a challenge. "Do you want to give me a distraction or not?"

"Fuck." I cup the back of her head and kiss her again. My lips move slowly against hers, but after a second, she pulls away and shakes her head.

"I don't want you to be gentle." There's an undercurrent of pain in her voice, barely noticeable unless you know to look for it. "I don't want to feel in control. Degrade me, scare me, hurt me, make me cry—whatever you want. Just... don't be gentle."

For a split second, I just stare at her. Then my fingers curl into her hair, gripping tighter and tighter until she winces. I bring her head closer to mine until my lips are right up against her ear. "I'll do it all with pleasure, *ma belle*. Just remember that when it gets to be too much, you asked for it."

Before she can even process what I said, I stand and dump her on the table. Her injuries are healed, thanks to Cal keeping such an attentive eye on her over the past two weeks. I'm not afraid to be rough with her.

Athelia gasps as I drag her to the end of the table and shove her onto her back. Her head is hanging off the edge, and when she tries to sit up, I push her back down.

With one hand wrapped around her throat to pin her down, I use the other to undo my pants and pull out my dick. Athelia moans at the sight of it, opening her mouth wide and stretching her tongue out to lick the tip. I let her suck on the head of my cock for a minute, groaning at whatever magic she's working with her tongue.

"Such a good girl," I mutter as she tries to take more of my cock.

Athelia moans, laving her tongue across the underside of my dick. I sink in until I hit the back of her throat, and she does her best not to gag.

“So greedy, aren’t you? Do you need to please me, little slut? Is that what you want?”

She grabs at my thighs, trying to pull me closer, so I push into her throat.

“Athelia, *fuck*.” I keep myself like that, seated as deeply as I can go with her tight throat wrapped around my dick.

Her back arches, and I can feel her trying not to gag. When she tries to shove me away, I grab her wrists and pin them down. It’s not until her whole body convulses that I pull out. Athelia coughs and gasps, but I cut her off mid-breath by thrusting into her mouth.

As I push into her throat again, I groan. This time, I don’t keep myself as deep as I can. I pump in and out, watching her throat bulge every time I thrust into her. She’s struggling to breathe, but I can’t find it in me to stop.

Letting go of her wrists, I unzip her jacket and yank up her shirt. She’s wearing a pretty lace bralette, and maybe I’d enjoy it another time, but right now I shove it down below her breasts. Her nipples are already hard, and they get harder when they’re exposed to the cool air.

Athelia chokes around my cock, and I pull out. Tears drip from her eyes, and drool is running from her mouth. Her breaths are hard and fast, but I don’t care enough to give her more than a few seconds.

“Open up, slut.”

“Kellan, I need another sec—”

I slap her across the face, and she cries out in surprise. Her mouth is open enough that I can grab her head with one hand and guide my dick into her mouth with the other. She tries to turn away, so I slap her cheek again.

“You’ll take it,” I say as I fuck her mouth shallowly. My grip on her face is firm, and eventually, she stops struggling.

Only then do I let go of her so I can pinch her nipples.

Athelia whimpers and squirms as I hit the back of her throat again. I thrust in farther, groaning as I slap one of her breasts and watch it jiggle.

“These tits look like they were made to be fucked.” I pull out of her throat and immediately start doing just that, using my hands to squeeze her breasts over my dick. They’re so soft, and I find myself driving into them harder.

As I do, Athelia coughs and heaves in air. She grabs my thighs, not to push me away but to egg me on.

“You like this, huh?” I taunt. “You get off on being used up whatever way I feel like taking you?”

“Yes,” she groans.

“I bet you’re soaking wet, aren’t you? Fucking slut.” I release her breasts and grab her head before thrusting into her mouth again.

Athelia lets out a muffled cry of surprise. Her fingernails dig into my thighs as I fuck into her throat, and the sharp bite of pain makes me groan.

Leaning over her, I yank open her jeans and shove a hand into her panties. Just as I expected, she’s a wet, needy mess. I rub her clit as I continue pounding into her throat, loving how fucking tight she feels.

When Athelia taps my thigh, I don’t stop. I want to push her. Scare her. Remind her that at least for tonight, she doesn’t own her body. I do.

It’s not until Athelia is clawing at my legs and I feel like I’m about to come that I stop. I pull out of her throat, smiling down at her. Her makeup is ruined, and saliva drips from her mouth as she rolls onto her stomach and gasps in air.

I could give her a break, but that would mean being nice to her. That’s not what this is about.

Grabbing her, I situate her so she’s sitting on the edge of the table with her legs dangling off the side. Then I shove her onto

her back, grinning at the screech that escapes her abused throat.

“Kellan!”

“Shut up,” I snap. “I don’t want to hear a word from you unless I’m asking you a question.”

She whimpers as I take off her boots and throw them to the ground. Her jeans and panties come next, and then I lower myself to my knees.

“You should be embarrassed,” I tell her as I stare at her glistening pussy. “Look how wet you are. You’re nothing but a desperate, naive slut who’ll spread her legs for the first man who gives her even a shred of attention, aren’t you? I bet you don’t even have standards. As long as you’re getting dick, you don’t care.”

She sniffles, and I smile to myself.

“Hold your legs open,” I tell her.

Athelia grabs onto her thighs, holding herself wide open for me. Slowly, I run my tongue up her pussy, gathering her desire and bringing it to her clit. The moan that escapes her as I circle it drives me. I want her to come so hard she cries and begs me to stop.

As I eat her out, taking my time and building her up slowly, thoughts of fucking her fill my mind. I want to use her like a doll and degrade her in the way that turns us both on. None of that’s a surprise. What is, though, is the way I want to hold her afterward. Make sure she’s okay—that she knows I care about her, regardless of how I treat her during sex.

I shove those thoughts aside, sucking on her clit and making her cry out. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, I guess—if I still feel that way when we’re done. For now, I want to wreck her and wring every ounce of sadness out of her body.

“You just keep getting wetter,” I say after a few minutes, pulling away and licking my lips. “Tell me, what does that make you?”

“I—” She squirms. “I’m a whore.”

“Whose whore, Athelia?”

“Y-yours! I’m your whore.”

“Mmm. What else are you?”

“Kellan,” she whines.

I slap her pussy so hard she screams. “Keep going.”

“I’m nothing but a toy,” she says quietly.

“That’s it. Now say it again, but louder this time.”

“I’m nothing but a toy.” Her voice falters when I slide two fingers into her. “I only exist for your pleasure. For—for you to use.”

“That’s more like it,” I murmur, lowering my head to lick her clit.

She fists a handful of my hair. “Oh my god, Kellan.”

“Don’t stop,” I say before sucking on her clit while still curling my fingers inside her.

“I’m yours,” she pants.

“And what does being mine mean?”

“You can do whatever you want to me.” She gasps as I thrust my fingers into her harder. “Whenever you want.”

“And who else is allowed to touch you?”

“Only Wes and Cal,” she whispers.

“That’s right. But right now, I’m the one who owns you. I want you to suck my dick, you suck my dick. I want you to stay still while I use you like a flashlight, you don’t move a fucking muscle. You’re nothing more to me than a warm, breathing, self-lubricating toy. You got it?”

“Yes, master,” she whispers.

*Fuck.* As if I haven’t been struggling to control myself already. With a groan, I suck on her clit harder, using my fingers to massage her g-spot. She moans, holding my hair tighter as she grinds against my face.

She must have some idea of what her calling me that does to me. If not, she's about to find out. Athelia doesn't want to be in control? Well, I do, and I'm about to put her body to good use.

When Athelia comes, she screams my name so loudly it echoes through the forest. I only work her clit harder, sucking on it and flicking it with my tongue.

"Kellan! Oh my god, it's too much." Athelia tries to push my head away.

I slap her thigh, not giving her a moment of reprieve. She squirms uncomfortably, sobbing into the night air.

"Master," she whimpers. "Please."

Finally, I let up on her clit. Athelia slumps onto the table with a groan.

"Uh uh," I say. "You don't get a break."

She cries out in surprise as I yank her off the table and shove her to the ground. Once she's on her hands and knees, I get behind her and drag the tip of my cock through her wet pussy.

"Touch your clit," I tell her, needing to feel her come on my dick. "That's it. Such a good slut. Now don't stop until I tell you to."

She's an obedient little thing. As I plunge into her, forcing a cry from her lips, she works her finger in between her legs furiously. The harder I go, the more she clamps down on my cock.

Grabbing her hair, I shove her downward until her ass is in the air and I'm forcing her face into the cold, damp dirt. I move her head to the left and then the right, smearing her cheek into the mud. She fights it, but compared to her, I'm a giant. She's not nearly strong enough.

"You signed up for this," I remind her. "This is where you belong. You're nothing but a filthy slut. You should feel at home covered in dirt."

The whole time, I don't stop pounding into her. She's sniffing and crying, and her makeup is a fucking mess, but

she's close. I can feel it.

"Kellan," she chokes out.

"That's it, my little whore. Come on your master's cock."

Athelia does so beautifully. Her cries fill the air as she reaches her climax. I grab her free arm and pin it behind her back, fucking her harder, deeper. She takes it all as she rides through the waves of her orgasm.

As her cries start to quiet and her grip on my dick loosens, I pull out and flip her onto her back. Her expression is dazed, but she smiles up at me tiredly as I shove her legs apart and thrust into her. When she reaches down to touch her clit, I bat her hand away.

"No. You're done."

"But Kellan—"

I take both her hands and pin them above her head. "You're mine, Athelia, remember? You do what I say, and right now, you're going to lie there and take my cock like the obedient toy I know you can be."

She groans.

"When you're with me, you don't come without my permission. You don't come *at all* if I don't give you the go-ahead. Understood?"

"Yes," she whispers.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, master."

"Now open your mouth." When she does, I spit into it, watching her throat as she swallows. "That's a good fucking girl." I release her wrists, knowing she won't dare move them, and pat her head like she's a dog.

Humiliation burns in Athelia's eyes. She tries to turn her head away in shame, but I grip her jaw and force her to look at me. Her skin is covered in mud and smeared mascara, and in the dying light, she couldn't look more beautiful.



She's a mess, but it's because *I* made her that way. Because I can do whatever I want to her, no matter how dark or unhinged it is.

"Tell me you belong to me," I grit out as I feel myself getting close.

"I'm yours," Athelia moans. "You're my master, and I'm your toy. I belong to you."

"Oh, fuck." That does me in. As I come, I lean down and slam my mouth to hers. I bite her bottom lip, groaning at her whimper. Her pain will always bring me pleasure.

"Kellan," she gasps as I begin to come down. She's pulling at my arm, and I realize my fingers are wrapped tightly around her throat.

"Shit." I rip my hand away. "Did I hurt you?"

"N-no." But she's rubbing at the sides of her neck, and her voice is trembling. "I could still breathe, it just reminded me of..."

My stomach drops. *Fuck*. "I'm sorry." I lower my head until my nose brushes against hers. "I didn't even realize I was doing it."

"I'm okay," she says as her hands fist the material of my shirt. "Really. Just... could you..."

"What?"

Her eyes flick away for a second, and I can just make out a light blush on her cheeks. "Can you just hold me for a second?"

"Of course, *ma belle*," I murmur. Gently, I roll us so we're on our sides facing each other. I snake an arm around her as she buries her face in my chest.

Cuddling after sex is far from my thing, but everything seems to be different with Athelia. She's who I've wanted for years—so close yet untouchable, but always on my mind. I'm pretty sure I'd do anything if she was the one who asked me to do it. The weird thing, though?

I don't think I mind.

# Chapter Thirty-Eight

## Athelia

I smile into Kellan's shoulder as he presses a soft, apologetic kiss to the top of my head. He completely fell for it.

Sure, his grip around my throat was a little tight, but that's how I like it. The second he did it, though, I knew it was the perfect way to see how much I have him wrapped around my finger.

Apparently, the answer is *completely*.

All it took was me acting a little traumatized, and his hardness melted like ice left outside on a summer day. He's cuddling me, for fuck's sake. Even when we were eighteen, he didn't do that much.

Ever since Wes killed Professor Kammes, all three of them have been gentler with me. Kinder. It's made it easier for me to pretend to let my guard down.

For the past two weeks, I've been embedding myself in their lives piece by piece. I don't think any of them suspect a thing—they're just happy that I'm finally going along with their plans.

I've gotten some stuff out of it, too. Mainly orgasms, but also some really good food. Apparently, Cal loves cooking,

and he's happy to have another person around to taste test his new recipes.

So far, everything is coming along spectacularly. All I have to do is keep up the ruse until Christmas break, and then I'll have my revenge. Considering how head-over-heels Kellan is acting, I'm already doing great. He's literally trying to wipe the dirt and smeared makeup off my face with his sleeve.

"You don't have to do that," I mutter, grabbing his wrist. A shiver passes through me. I'm mostly naked, and it's freezing without the sun.

"I'm the one who made you into a mess," he replies. "I think it's only fitting that I should be the one to fix you up."

I can't help my laugh. Five minutes ago, he was calling me his whore and telling me I wasn't allowed to come. The contrast is too comical.

Rolling his eyes, Kellan gets up and pulls me to my feet. It takes a while to find my clothes in the dark, but eventually I'm fully clothed again. Kellan tries to straighten me up, threading his fingers through my tangled hair.

"I miss when your hair was green," he says as he tucks it behind my ear.

"So do I." The words come out sounding hollow. I look away, not having to fake the pain I know is visible on my face.

"Why did you dye it back to brown?"

"He made me," I whisper, squeezing my eyes shut at the memory. "He preferred natural hair colors, and I was too scared of what he'd do if I disobeyed."

Earlier, I wasn't faking how uncomfortable I was at Kammes's funeral. All I wanted to do was get as far away from his casket as possible, even if it was closed.

Kellan sighs. "I'm so sorry, Thelia."

"He's dead now," I say numbly, turning away. "That's all that matters."

“No.” Kellan grabs my arm and pulls me back to him. It’s dark enough that not all his features are distinguishable, but the worry is prominent enough that I couldn’t miss it if I wanted to.

“Kellan, I—”

“You’re allowed to be angry, *ma belle*. You’re allowed to hurt. It doesn’t make you weak. Nor does what he did to you.”

I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from snapping. The guys hurt me, too. *They* made me feel weak.

*You’re in the process of remedying that, I remind myself. Don’t fuck it up by getting mad now.*

“I get that,” I say after a moment of collecting myself. “I just don’t like thinking about it, you know? He tried to take everything away from me. I couldn’t even be myself—he did his best to change me into something I never wanted to be. I...”

When the tears fill my eyes, they’re real. Maybe Kellan is right—maybe I’m not letting myself feel enough. Problem is, I don’t want to. I don’t want to think about Professor Kammes at all.

“Athelia,” Kellan says softly. “He couldn’t have made you change. You are who you are, and you’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever met. Kammes may have tried to alter your appearance and control you, but on the other side, you’re still the Athelia I remember.”

“Am I?” I sob. I feel different. Bitter and used and angry. The determination I clung to when I first showed up to Pemberton is gone—stolen away by too many people who wanted to hurt me. All I want to do is give up.

“I think so,” he says. “I think people can change some, but fundamentally, they stay the same. You’ve grown and matured, but you’re still you, *ma belle*.”

“Are you the same person you’ve always been?”

He laughs mirthlessly. “To most people’s disappointment, yes.”

“Disappointment?”

Kellan shrugs. “Look at me. There’s no reason for why I turned out the way I did. Maybe I was always destined to have desires that are considered abnormal. Like, maybe it’s a part of my nature, not something I turned to because of something horrible in my past.”

I grab onto the chance to steer the conversation away from me. “What do you mean?”

“My parents may have faults, but they’re still good parents. They took care of me, and they made sure I felt loved as a kid. I was happy. So sometimes I wonder where the darkness in me came from, you know?”

“Cal and Wes both had shitty childhoods. It feels like it makes more sense for them to have fucked-up relationships with power and pain, whereas I didn’t have something horrible happen to me as a kid. For the most part, I had a normal childhood.”

I frown, realizing I’ve never heard Cal mention his family or his childhood. It never occurred to me to ask, so I’ve never thought about it much.

“There was nothing that messed me up,” Kellan continues. “Nothing that shaped me into a person who enjoys causing people pain—who enjoys killing people.”

“Were you like that as a kid?”

“Somewhat,” he says. “I wasn’t one of those boys who went around torturing animals or shit like that, but I liked scaring people. Probably good I don’t have any siblings.”

“But you still care about people,” I say. “You care about me.”

He smiles. “That’s different, and also not the point. I know what you’re trying to do, *me belle*.”

“W-what?”

“I’m not stupid. You’re trying to direct the conversation away from yourself.”

“I—what? That’s—”

“Don’t try to deny it,” he says on a sigh. His arm comes around my shoulders, the scent of sandalwood and frankincense filling my lungs.

“I just don’t want to think about him,” I mumble as we head back down the path to his motorcycle.

“Then don’t. Think about yourself. I promise you’re still the same. You still snore a little in your sleep, you—”

“I do *not!*”

“You do. I think I’d know better than you would.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

He ignores me. “You still have the same goals in life. You’re still passionate about history and human nature. You still text your parents nearly every day so they don’t worry about you.”

A warm feeling spreads through my chest. I didn’t realize he was paying attention to me this closely.

“Maybe you’re a little tougher, maybe you’re more cautious of others. But you still like the same things, and you still feel like Athelia Harper to me.”

We reach Kellan’s bike, and he zips up my jacket before pulling me in for a soft, chaste kiss. His body is warm against mine, and I wrap my arms around his torso and lean my head against his chest.

“Thank you,” I say quietly.

His arms encircle me, bringing with them a sense of comfort I never expected to feel from Kellan Ambrose. “Whatever you need, *ma belle*. Whatever you need.”

# Chapter Thirty-Nine

## Cal

“Kammes made her dye her hair brown.”

Every muscle in my body goes rigid when Kellan says that. He and Athelia made it back an hour ago. They were both covered in mud, and Athelia’s makeup was ruined, so I have an idea of what type of *distraction* Kellan gave her.

While they were both showering, Wes came home. Athelia went straight to bed without even coming downstairs, and he seems frustrated that he hasn’t had a chance to see her since the funeral.

Now, at Kellan’s words, Wes’s frustration is replaced with a sharp anger that burns bright in his eyes. “*What?*”

“He’s the reason she stopped dying it green,” Kellan says. “She told me that tonight.”

“How does he keep getting worse from the damn grave?” Wes grits out.

I stare into the flames in the fireplace. While Kellan and Athelia were out, I was restless, so I started a fire to give myself something to do.

“I always thought she just got sick of the green or something,” I mumble.



“Apparently not.” Kellan grimaces. “I feel really bad.”

*It's not enough.* Over the past two weeks, that phrase has been circling around in my brain constantly. After all the pain we've caused Athelia, I don't think we'll ever be able to fully make it up to her. She's been happier around us lately, but it doesn't feel right. There's no way she's forgiven us.

Wes glowers at the floor. “I wish I could resurrect him, just so I could kill him again.”

“There's nothing we can do about it now,” Kellan says.

“That's not true.” Wes looks up. “We can show her we're the exact opposite of that monster—that we support her and want her to dye her hair whatever color she damn well wants to.”

“How?” I ask.

“We'll set up an appointment for her at a salon or whatever,” Wes says. “Maybe we can ask Haven what stylist Athelia usually goes to.”

Kellan shakes his head. “Except Haven is still dealing with family shit or whatever. She's texting Athelia occasionally, but not often.”

Wes narrows his eyes. “That's an obstacle we can work our way around. Whose room is Athelia in tonight?”

“Mine,” Kellan says.

“Go grab her phone. I'm sure she's asleep by now.”

“What?” I stand, grabbing Kellan before he even takes two steps. “We can't do that. It's a betrayal of Athelia's trust.”

“It's to do something nice for her,” Wes counters.

“Exactly. If we're going to do this, then let's not taint it. Let's show her we're actually worthy of her trust.”

Rolling his eyes, Kellan pulls his arm from my grasp. “She doesn't have to know. It's not like—”

“No,” Wes says softly. “Cal's right. Maybe there's another way.”

“We could try her Instagram,” I say. “Lots of girls post pictures when they do their hair and tag their stylist.”

“And sometimes it goes the other way around,” Kellan says, pulling his phone from his pocket. “Stylists tag their clients all the time.”

It only takes a few minutes to find the woman who originally dyed Athelia’s hair dark green. Even better, she’s taking walk-in clients tomorrow.

“Road trip?” I ask the guys.

Wes nods. “Road trip.”

...

Athelia isn’t very happy with us for waking her up early, but we want to get on the road as soon as possible. This hairstylist seems to do good work, so I wouldn’t be surprised if there are lots of other people who’re planning to stop in today.

We don’t tell Athelia where we’re going, although she recognizes the route and asks us multiple times why we’re taking her to her hometown. None of us give her even the tiniest hint.

When we pull into a parking spot in front of the salon, Athelia only gets more confused.

“Seriously guys, what are we doing here?”

“Get out of the car,” I tell her. I’m sitting in the back with her, so I unbuckle her seatbelt and push her toward her door as Wes opens it.

She glances at the salon, and then toward Kellan. “Did you \_\_\_”

“Now, Athelia,” Wes says.

She climbs out, grabbing her backpack and slinging it over her shoulder. “I don’t understand. Why are we here?”

“Kellan told us that you missed having green hair, and that Kammes forced you to get rid of it,” I say. “Chelsea is taking walk-in appointments today.”

“You’re serious?” She’s eyeing us suspiciously, which would sting under different circumstances, but I get it.

We’ve earned her suspicion.

“Why don’t you go in and find out,” Kellan says.

Slowly, Athelia turns and looks up at the salon. “Give me one second.”

While she disappears inside, the three of us stand on the sidewalk awkwardly. Wes shoves his hands in his pockets. Since Athelia was so tired when we woke her up and Wes did all the driving, he still hasn’t had much of a chance to talk to her. I think it’s bugging her, too, but she hasn’t said anything about it.

Athelia comes bolting out of the salon and jumps straight into my arms. She takes me by surprise, so I stumble back as my arms clamp around her.

“Thank you,” she says while giggling. She leaves tiny, happy kisses all over my face. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Behind her, Wes clenches his jaw. Jealousy flashes in his eyes when I set Athelia down and she immediately throws her arms around Kellan’s neck.

“I was thinking about making an appointment over break, but this is so much better.” Athelia kisses Kellan, running her fingers through his hair.

Groaning, Kellan wraps his arms around her and dips her back slightly. When they straighten, he smiles. “I’m happy you’re happy, *ma belle*.”

Wes’s hands are in his jacket pockets, and he’s watching quietly. At some point, something flipped inside him. Instead of forcing Athelia to be near him, he’s backed off. I’m not sure why exactly, but I think she appreciates it, even if it’s killing him inside.

So when she turns toward him, his expression may not change, but I know he’s hopeful. Hesitantly, Athelia places her

hands on his chest. When she rises onto her tiptoes and tips her face up, he rests one of his hands on her hip.

After a moment of staring into Wes's eyes, Athelia presses her lips to his. The kiss is short and sweet, although I can tell they both want more. When Athelia steps back, Wes's grip on her shirt tightens, but then he lets go.

"This means a lot to me," Athelia says as she turns to face all of us. "I... thank you."

Kellan nods to the door. "Get in there, *ma belle*. Don't want someone to take your spot."

With one last grin, Athelia spins around and heads back into the salon.

# Chapter Forty

## Athelia

My heart hasn't felt this full in a long time. I stare at myself in the mirror, my face framed with my long, dark green hair. It's so close to the shade I fell in love with when I was younger.

Just having it this color again makes me feel more like myself. I tilt my head left and right, watching as the light catches it. It looks *perfect*.

"I'd ask if you like it, but considering you can't stop smiling, I think I have my answer." Chelsea grins at me in the mirror. "It looks great."

"Thank you so much, Chels. How much do I owe you?"

"Oh, your boyfriends came in and paid while I was rinsing you out."

My jaw drops. "*What?*"

"Where'd you find them, girl? They're hot as hell, *and* they paid for you to get your hair done? I'm jealous."

I laugh. If only she knew the truth. "You could say my college experience has been... unique."

"I'd say," she mutters with an amused glint in her eye. "Well, you're all set. Text me when you need to do your

roots.”

“Will do. Thanks!”

I find the guys hanging out at the cafe across the street. Wes is sitting nearest to one of the front windows, so he notices me first. His eyes lock onto me as I cross the road, and one corner of his mouth tips up into a half-smile as I pull my blow-dried hair over my shoulder.

“Fuck,” Kellan says once I’ve entered the cafe. “I forgot how well that color suits you.” He grabs me and pulls me into his lap, squeezing my ass as he does. “You look hot as hell, Thelia.”

I relax into Kellan’s hold, breathing in sandalwood and frankincense. They always smell so damn *good*.

Cal is sitting next to Kellan, and he grabs my chin and seals his lips to mine before I can reply. His tongue slips into my mouth, but I pull away before it gets too intense. I know they don’t care that we’re in public, but I do.

“I love this place,” I say, looking around the cafe. “I used to study here all the time when I was in high school.”

“What’s your favorite drink?” Cal asks, pulling out his wallet.

“You’re not paying,” I tell him. “You already paid for my hair.”

When I move to stand, Kellan locks an arm around my waist to keep me in his lap. “What’s your favorite drink?” he repeats.

“Seriously?” I squirm, but he only tightens his hold on me, so I give in. “Their hot apple cider is really good.”

Cal grins. “Got it.”

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Kellan brushes his lips across my jawbone.

“I could’ve paid,” I grumble.

Wes shakes his head, speaking for the first time since I came in. “We take care of what’s ours, Athelia.”

“But—”

“And you’re ours,” Kellan interrupts firmly. “Aren’t you?”

“I am.” I smirk, an idea forming in my head, so I lean down until my lips are right next to Kellan’s ear. “*Master.*”

...

The ride home is uneventful. Cal got my apple cider to go, so I sip it while cuddling with him in the backseat.

Wes has been awfully quiet, and I wonder if he feels guilty for leaving his mom. He said she has her sisters to comfort her, but it still doesn’t change the fact that he’s her closest relative.

Still, I can’t shake the feeling that Wes doesn’t really like his mom. I’m not sure I can blame him, though, after knowing that she cheated on his dad.

By the time we’re back at the house, the sun has already set. The guys mention that they have a job to do, and Cal and Kellan leave shortly after.

As for me and Wes, we both head to our respective rooms to study. We leave our doors open, which is new, and I can hear him typing away on his laptop.

It’s comforting, having him so close like this, but I don’t let myself dwell on the feeling too deeply. Even though Wes has more than proven that he’ll do anything for me, it doesn’t change how he used to treat me in the past. It definitely doesn’t change my plans.

After a while, I realize I’m not hearing him type anymore. I glance toward his room, only to find him leaning against my doorframe and watching me.

*How the hell did I not hear him?*

“How’re you doing?” he asks, not acknowledging the fact that he was just standing there watching me while I studied.

“Better.” Closing my textbook, I move to a sitting position instead of lying on my stomach. “Today helped. It was really nice of Kellan to come up with this.” I gesture to my hair. “I only told him about why I had to dye my hair back last night.”

Wes bristles, but I'm not sure why.

"He took me to this overlook last night, and we watched the sunset," I continue. "I didn't realize how much I needed to get away from everything. To just... not have to think for a while. It was really thoughtful of him."

"Was it?" Wes asks, his voice hollow. He looks... sad, almost.

"Are you okay?" I stand and make my way over to him. "I know you hated Kammes, but if his funeral brought up old feelings, then—"

"It was me," Wes grits out.

I blink. "What was you?"

He releases a short, pent-up breath. "*I'm* the one who told Kellan to help you clear your head last night. *I'm* the one who had the idea to surprise you with the hair appointment. *I'm* the one who set the damn thing up."

My legs hit the couch, and I realize he's backed me up to it while he was talking. I place a hand on his chest to keep him from moving forward more.

The harshness fades from his eyes, and he twists a lock of my hair around his finger. "It looks beautiful," he says softly. "You look like you again."

"Wes, I..." I swallow, my mouth going dry at the way he's looking at me. "I didn't know."

"I know," he mutters bitterly.

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Because the important thing was making you happy, not making sure you knew I was the one who came up with the plans." He works his jaw. "Until now, I guess."

"Well... thank you." My hands slide up his chest and around to the back of his neck. "It really does mean a lot to me."

He lowers his head, and his lips part like he's about to kiss me, but then he takes a couple steps back. "Why did you let them in before me?"



I'm almost caught off guard by the pain in his voice. Wes sounds *tortured*, and somewhere deep inside of me, smugness blooms. That's exactly what I wanted—to hurt him.

“Because this all started because of you.”

Wes's eyes close, but not before I see the pain in them.

“I'm not blaming you for believing Kammes,” I say. “At least not for the most part. But everything you did after? All the pain you caused? Originally, it was *your* idea.”

“I know,” he mumbles.

“Not to mention the fact that you were disregarding every boundary I tried to set,” I add. “Up until you killed Professor Kammes, you refused to let me have an ounce of autonomy. Cal and Kellan were at least a little better.”

*Fuck.* I'm being too hard on him. Not that he doesn't deserve it—he does. But at this point, my relationship with Wes is supposed to be *improving*. I can't set us back like this.

Cautiously, I step forward, placing my hands on his chest again. “But despite all of that, I couldn't help but want you.”

“I know,” he says thickly. “I'll never be able to get the way you looked at me on Halloween out of my head. Even while we were forcing you to fuck us, you had to convince yourself that you didn't want it.”

“Because I *did* want it,” I say. “Just not like that. I want you to take it from me, but I—”

“Take what?”

“My will. My ability to say yes or no. I want you to do the things you did to me on Halloween, and I want to fight and kick and scream. But...”

“But it's different,” he finishes for me. “Because you said yes to it previously.”

“Exactly. It's what I always wanted, and I thought that night would be the closest I'd ever get. But now I have a chance for it to happen with my consent.”

“I’m sorry, Athelia,” he murmurs, running his hands through my hair. “I regret everything we did that night.”

Staring at his chest, I nod. I know he actually means it, but it doesn’t change anything. I was so conflicted that night, and the morning after, I only felt worse.

“I know I’ve already said it,” Wes says lowly, “but I’ll say it again. I’ll give you anything you want, my soul.”

My heart skips a beat—it always does when he calls me that.

“Does this count as you giving me permission?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

Wes doesn’t move to touch me—to restrain me or force me to my knees or shove me onto the couch. He just nods. “Do you want it to be a surprise?”

“A... surprise?”

“Do you want to know it’s coming? Or do you want me to catch you off guard?”

“Oh,” I breathe out. I hadn’t thought of that. “Catch me off guard, I think.”

Wes’s lips just barely brush against mine. “Your wish is my command.”

# Chapter Forty-One

## Wes

After my conversation with Athelia, I head downstairs for a while. It's my night to do the dishes, and once they're done, I find myself scrubbing at the counters and the sink.

I think I inherited that habit from my mom. Whenever she's got a lot on her mind, she goes into a deep cleaning frenzy. My dad used to come home after a long shift and find her elbows-deep in cleaning chemicals, and instead of falling into bed, he'd roll up his sleeves and help her.

I used to think it was stupid. He would be so tired that sometimes I thought he'd fall asleep in the middle of whatever chore he decided to take off my mom's plate. Now, I get it. He was showing her that she'd always come first. That he'd always be there to offer his steady, undying love.

And she fucking squandered it.

By the time I've finished with the kitchen, I've worked off a lot of my anger. At my mom, at John, at the guys for not telling Athelia I'm the one who was looking out for her, and at myself for being such a shithead all these years.

We could've had her so much sooner. The blame never lied on her for that. It was always on us. On *me*.

Before going to bed, I sneak into Cal's room to check on Athelia, but she's not there. When I check the upstairs of Kellan's room, his bed is empty, too.

Worry fills me as I make my way back down to the second floor. I haven't heard her move around for a while, so I thought she was in bed.

My first thought is that maybe she fell asleep on her couch, but she's not in her room, either.

*Did she...*

*No. She wouldn't.*

But I creep across the hallway to my bedroom anyway. The door is slightly ajar, just how I left it, but when I peer inside...

*She did.*

I grip the doorframe as I stare at Athelia, fast asleep, in *my* bed. It feels surreal, the way she's nestled under my blankets with Mildred tucked into her chest. Her dark green hair is splayed out over my pillow, and she's messed up the blankets enough that her feet are peeking out from underneath them.

She looks so sweet like this. Peaceful. Cute, even.

Half of me wants to enjoy it—to crawl under the covers with her, pull her body into mine, and fall asleep with her next to me.

The other half of me wants to ruin it.

And, as usual, that's the half that wins.

Quietly, I slip out of my clothes and grab the neon mask I wore on Halloween night. I turn it on, the lights glowing red, before slipping it on over my head.

She said she wanted to be caught off guard. What better time than now?

Without disturbing her, I grab some supplies from my drawer and set them on my nightstand. It's a little difficult to see in the dark, but I don't want to risk waking her up.

Slowly, I loop a pair of leather cuffs around one of the rungs of my headboard and then secure her wrists. Athelia moans, but she doesn't wake, even when I pull the covers down some to reveal that she's not wearing a shirt.

She's on her back, so I crawl over her until I'm straddling her torso. With a groan, I squeeze her breasts and pinch her nipples gently.

Athelia's breathing pattern changes, and she lets out a tiny, sleepy whimper. I keep going, watching her eyelids flutter as I pull her into wakefulness.

"Mmmfgh," she groans.

I scooch forward a little more and brush the tip of my cock against her lips. She tries to turn her face away, but I grab her chin and keep her in place.

"Open your mouth."

Metal clanging against metal sounds throughout the room as she pulls on the cuffs around her wrists. A panicked sound leaves her, followed quickly by a surprised grunt as I force her jaw open and slide the head of my dick into her wet, warm mouth.

"Suck." When she doesn't, I gently slap her cheek. "Suck, Athelia, or I'll fuck your face until you can't breathe."

Her lips wrap around my cock, and she sucks gently while stroking the crown with her tongue. I push in farther, and she slowly blinks her eyes open to glare up at me.

"Such a naive little thing, falling asleep in my bed. What did you think would happen?" I feed her more of my cock until she gags, so I pull out slightly. "Did you think I'd give you sweet kisses and cuddles and hold you until morning?"

As she nods, her eyes turn pleading.

I bark out a laugh. "I don't know why you're expecting princess treatment. You're nothing but a stupid slut, and I plan on treating you accordingly."

Her protest is muffled, and I cut it off by grabbing her head and plunging deep into her mouth. I can't get into her throat at

this angle, but I don't need to. All I have to do is thrust my hips forward while I yank her head into me, and she gets the idea.

She's completely, royally fucked.

Finally, she seems to realize her legs aren't tied down. She tries to kick at me, but her legs just get tangled in the blankets.

"I'd be careful if I were you. Piss me off too much, and I'll gag you."

She stills, her eyes wide as she chokes on my cock.

"Which do you think I should use, hmm?" I ask as I hold her head to me, watching her struggle. "Should I use the ball gag again, or should I keep your mouth wide open and ready for me whenever I decide to use it?"

Athelia gags uncontrollably, so I finally release her head and let her fall back onto the pillows. Tears stain her cheeks, and her chin is coated in drool.

"Please don't," she says in between heaving breaths. "Wes, please, I—"

"Open-mouth gag it is."

"No," she screams as I grab it from the nightstand. She thrashes, trying to kick at me again, but my bodyweight pins her down.

"I already told you," I say as I shove my fingers into her mouth. "There are much better ways to beg than saying please."

She gasps when I retract my drool-soaked fingers and smear them across her face. "Wes! I'll do anything you want, just don't use a gag."

"What I want is to have access to any of your tight little holes whenever I want them," I growl. "Now open up wide, or I'll make this hurt."

Tears fill Athelia's eyes, but she does what I say. I position the gag behind her teeth and buckle the straps behind her head.

Humiliation burns in her eyes, which is exactly what I was going for.

Deep down, I know it's what she wants, too. She gets off on it, even if she likes to pretend in the moment that she hates it.

"That's better," I say, sitting back and taking her in. "Now I just need to get you wet and ready for a good, hard fucking."

She whimpers, turning her head away from me and rubbing her thighs together.

"Oh? Did me fucking your face turn you on, you little slut? Are you already soaking your panties?"

She manages to knee me in the back in response, but it barely hurts.

"Let's find out, shall we?" After crawling off her, I yank the blankets off entirely.

She's completely naked, squeezing her thighs together while glaring up at me. With her mouth forced open, drool is draining from the side of her mouth.

Grinning, I wrench her legs open, keeping a firm hold on them as she tries to kick at me. "You'll have to try harder than that. Or I can tie you up if you don't behave."

Frantically, Athelia shakes her head and tugs at the cuffs around her wrists. She tries to say something, and I'm pretty sure it's *no*.

"Then stop fucking moving." I slap her thigh, which makes her jump.

Whimpering, Athelia settles down. I shove her legs open and crawl in between her legs. Even in the little light there is in here, I can see just how turned on she is. I slide a finger through her desire, coating it.

"Feel how wet you are?" I ask her, moving up her body until my mask is right in her face. "You know what that makes you?"

She shakes her head, trying to squirm out from under me.

I slip my finger into her open mouth and rub my finger over her tongue, forcing her to taste her own damnation. “It makes you *pathetic*.”

Athelia sobs and shakes her head again. Her tears only bring me more pleasure.

“You can’t deny it, you whore. It’s dripping out of you and soaking my sheets. You’re a sick fucking freak.”

Again, she yanks at her cuffs, so I reach up and unclasp them from each other. Not for long, though—I flip her onto her stomach and connect the cuffs behind her back. I have to yank her legs open again, and I shove a pillow under her hips to give me better access.

Athelia turns her head to one side so she can breathe. Some of her hair is stuck to her face, caught in the drool and tears coating her cheeks. She’s exactly the way I like her—crying, pissed, and a fucking mess. The only thing that would make it better is if she was wearing makeup so I could ruin it.

Lightly, I trace a finger down Athelia’s spine. She shivers and arches her back.

“You like that?” I taunt. “Want more?”

She shakes her head and tries to close her legs, but her thighs hit my knees, which keep her nice and spread open for me.

“Maybe I should fuck this perfect ass of yours.” I smack one of her cheeks hard enough that she yelps. When she tries to roll onto her back to inhibit my access, I grab her hips and pin her down. “No? Then be good, and I won’t fuck your ass.” *Yet*.

Athelia snuffles, but when I squeeze her ass right where I spanked her, she moans. I do it again as I get into position and just barely slide into her pussy. This time, she tenses, moaning while shaking her head.

“Just can’t make your mind up, can you?”

I enter her in one hard, deep thrust. She screams and kicks her legs, but there’s nothing she can do. I’m too strong, and with her hands restrained behind her back, she’s helpless.



“If you didn’t want me to put this pussy to good use, then you shouldn’t have fallen asleep in my bed without any clothes on.”

Her sob is so loud it echoes off the ceiling. I grab her hair and press her face into the mattress. She won’t be able to breathe easily like this, but that’s exactly what I want. My little slut needs a reminder that I can do whatever I please to her body, and she has no choice but to take it.

As I hold her like that, I pound into her. Athelia clamps hard around my dick as her screams morph into wanton moans. It doesn’t last long, though. Eventually, she realizes she can’t get enough air, and she starts struggling again. She writhes underneath me, and her futile attempt to free herself only makes me drive into her harder.

“That’s it,” I groan. “Fight me with everything you’ve got. It’ll never be enough.”

Her whimpers turn panicked, and her movements grow wilder. She’s freaking out, probably wondering if she made a mistake in trusting me like this. I hold her down for a few more seconds before yanking her head up.

As Athelia gasps in air, I let go of her hair so I can snake my hand around her throat. I don’t squeeze—she needs to recover from having her oxygen supply cut off for so long—but I keep my grip firm.

“I’m going to fill your tight little pussy with cum, and it’s going to leak out of you while I keep you in bed next to me all night.”

She can’t respond well thanks to the gag, so she just shakes her head and groans. God, we’re so far in, and she’s still trying to fight.

I love it.

“Resist all you want, my soul, but you’re mine.” I thrust into her harder, feeling my orgasm approaching. “And I’ll have you whenever I want, however I want.”

Finally, Athelia slumps into the mattress with a sob, giving into her fate. Watching it happen—watching her give up after

fighting so hard—sends me falling into one of the best orgasms of my life. I come so hard my vision blacks out, and I barely register myself groaning her name.

When I've finished, I slowly pull out of her. My arms are shaking, and I'm overtaken with the urge to kiss her.

I toss my mask to the floor before undoing Athelia's gag. Not bothering with her cuffs, I force her onto her back. Drool covers her lips, so I wipe it away with the sheet before slamming my lips to hers.

"Wes," she moans, like she's been craving this exact moment ever since we got started.

"Goddamn, Athelia." I kiss her again, again, *again*. I just can't get enough.

Athelia arches into me. Her body is so warm, so perfect against mine. I roll us over so she's on top and straddling me, and I grab onto her waist.

Whimpering, Athelia begins grinding against my softening dick. It's too sensitive, so I tighten my grip on her hips until she stops.

"Please," she groans.

I smirk. "Oh, did you think you'd get to come? Silly girl."

"W-what?"

"Your body is meant to be used, not pleased." I reach behind her and undo the cuffs. "Now go clean yourself up—and don't even think of getting yourself off in the bathroom. If you're not out here in three minutes, I'm spanking your ass until you're crying and screaming for me to stop."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" she seethes.

I glance at the clock on my nightstand. "Countdown starts now."

Eyes widening, Athelia scrambles off the bed and darts into the bathroom. I smile, watching her form disappear before she slams the door behind her.

As she cleans herself up, I change the sheets. A feeling of calm settles over me as I do. For weeks, I haven't been able to stop thinking about having Athelia like this. She may be pissed at me right now, but she'll be thankful tomorrow. You can't get off on being used and expect orgasms every time.

After a minute or two, Athelia exits the bathroom. She's glowering, but when I kiss her forehead gently, she softens.

“Get into bed, Athelia.”

She pouts. “Are you actually going to leave me hanging like this?”

“I am, and you're going to obey me like the good girl you are.”

It looks like she wants to protest, but her fantasy won't be complete if she comes, and she knows it. So she crawls into my freshly made bed, and I follow her, tugging her close to me.

She's out in minutes, and so am I—and I sleep better than I have in months.

# Chapter Forty-Two

## Athelia

When I wake, Wes has his arm around me, and his face is buried in my hair. Light is streaming in through the open curtains. Slowly, I roll onto my back and turn my head to the side to look at him. He's still asleep, and the morning sunlight does wonders to his features.

His freckles are beginning to fade as they seem to do every autumn. Of course, his dark hair is even messier since he's been in bed. It makes him look different—less intimidating.

Last night was everything. The way Wes tossed me around and treated me like an object was exactly what I asked for—exactly what I wanted. It's going to be difficult to find someone who fucks me as well as these three do come winter break.

Wes didn't let me come, which I should've expected. I wanted to be treated like a sex toy, and that means not getting any attention for my own pleasure. I loved it, but I hated it at the same time.

My body is still wound tight, desperate for release. Just thinking about last night has me getting wet again. Plus, even though I cleaned up, Wes came so deep inside of me that not

all of his cum dripped out of me last night. I can feel it in between my legs, sticky and wet.

I glance at Wes. His breathing is still deep, and it doesn't seem like he's anywhere near waking up yet. I'm still too tired to get out of bed, but I can't stay like this or I'll explode.

Slowly, I slip a hand in between my legs. The second my finger rubs against my clit, I have to stifle a groan. Damn him for working me up so much last night just to leave my pussy begging for relief.

I relax as I let myself fall into the world of pleasure that Wes so cruelly deprived me of. His arm is still around me, so I have to be careful not to move too much, but it just adds to the thrill. I'm masturbating in his bed—touching him—and he'll be so pissed if he finds out.

The urge to test just how much I can do fills me, and I move my finger faster. Electricity shoots through me as I grip the sheets with my spare hand.

And then Wes's fingers are encircling my wrist and yanking my hand from my body. I gasp, watching as he opens his eyes. His glare is sharp and very, very awake.

“Just what do you think you're doing?”

“I—I just needed to—”

“You *need* to be obedient,” he growls. “You don't get to come again unless I say so.” Wes brings my hand out from under the sheets, and before I think to pull away, my fingers are in his mouth, and he's licking them clean.

“But—”

“I already texted Cal and Kellan. They're on board with it.”

*Fuck.* That's exactly where my mind went—the perfect loophole—but of course Wes thought ahead.

“You can't do this,” I groan.

“I can,” he says smoothly. “Now you have two options. One, be a good girl and do as I say, and there won't be any consequences for what you just tried to do. Or two, you keep

being a fucking brat, and I make you suck me off until I come down your throat. And no, you won't get to come after."

I bite back my retort. My jaw is still sore from last night, and I have no desire to subject myself to something that'll make it worse. "I'll be good."

He smirks and releases my wrist. "Don't expect a reward."

I huff but don't snap at him. The problem is, I *like* this, so it turns me on even more. I'm even worse off than when I woke up.

Wes moves onto his back and pulls me into him so my head is resting on his chest. It's the last thing I expected from him, but he's been gentler lately. More affectionate.

It makes me nervous—like he's playing a similar game to the one I am. Maybe this is all an elaborate ruse the three of them are working on together. Maybe their goal is to get me to fall for them so *they* can break *my* heart.

A smug smile forms on lips. Too bad that'll never happen.

When Wes and I head downstairs, Cal is already making breakfast. He looks exhausted—I'm not sure what time he and Kellan got in last night—but he still smiles when I step into the kitchen.

"Morning, baby." He kisses me on the head as I lower myself into a chair at the table. A plate full of waffles and fruit appears in front of me before he whisks himself back over to the island counter.

"Morning."

I watch Cal as he moves, efficiently cutting up fruit and pouring batter into the waffle maker. He's not wearing a shirt, and his blond hair is damp from a shower.

*God*, he looks good.

"How'd it go last night?" Wes asks.

"Just fine." It looks like Cal wants to say more, but then he glances toward me and presses his lips together pointedly.

“We didn’t run into any issues,” Kellan adds. He’s already sitting at the table, halfway through his breakfast. “Char seemed surprised, but she didn’t elaborate.”

“Typical,” Wes says on a tired sigh.

I stare at my food as I cut into my waffle, hoping they won’t go into any more detail. I already know more than enough.

Thankfully, the only thing they mention is that they currently don’t have another job until this weekend. Without going into it, they all agree that Wes and Kellan can handle it, and Cal can stay home.

*I wonder if it’s because he looks so tired.*

Every time they have to work, two of them head out, and the third stays behind. They kind of rotate through who goes, but it’s not always even. The first week I moved in, Wes was gone as much as he could be. This past week, Cal has been taking more jobs.

I don’t think it’s because he wants to. He always looks sad when he realizes he has to go out on a night I’m supposed to be sleeping with him. But I wonder what the other factors are that cause them from dividing the work more evenly.

Just as I’m finishing up my food, the doorbell rings. Wes gets the door, and a familiar voice drifts down the hallway.

I drop my fork and jump up from my chair. “Haven?”

“Athelia!”

I’m halfway down the hallway before I even realize I’m moving. Haven pushes past Wes and throws her arms around me.

“You dyed your hair,” she exclaims with delight. “Oh my god, it looks so *good*.”

“Thanks.” I pull away but don’t let go of her. “God, I’ve missed you. So much has happened.”

“Um, yeah, I’d say.” She glances over her shoulder at Wes. “You told me you moved, but not that you’d moved in with *him*.”

“All three of us, actually,” Cal calls from the kitchen.

Something like relief flickers over Haven’s face, but it’s quickly replaced with concern. “Are you okay?”

I barely even have to force my smile. “I am, yeah. Are you hungry? Cal is making waffles.”

“I already ate, but thanks.”

“How’s your family? Is everything okay?”

Haven’s happy expression falls for a split second. “Um, yeah. It took a lot longer to deal with than I expected, but it was nice to catch up with them. We can talk about that later, though. Tell me about you.”

I do my best to hide my frown. It’s not like Haven to keep things to herself. She’s allowed to, of course, but we don’t often keep secrets. Although... well, I suppose I’m keeping some from her, too.

“Um.” I bite my bottom lip. “Maybe... let’s take a walk.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Just give me a second.” I head upstairs to grab a hat since it’s so cold out.

Wes follows me, standing in my doorway and crossing his arms.

“Seriously? You’re not gonna let me talk to her alone?”

“We just need to make sure you’re on the same page as us,” he says quietly.

*Right.* Obviously, I can never tell Haven the truth about certain things—what happened to Professor Kammes, the fact that Wes shot a serial killer who was holding me hostage, etc.

“I’m not planning on telling her about the...” I wave my hand. “Crime stuff.”

“Are you going to tell her about Kammes raping you?”

*Oh.*

“I suppose I can’t, can I?”



Wes shakes his head. “If it gets around, it could cast suspicion on us. I know you trust Haven, but this needs to stay under wraps.”

“Right. I’ll just... I’ll leave him out of it.”

“And what are you going to tell her about us?”

“Whatever the fuck I want to.” My tone holds a challenge—a reminder that if he doesn’t want me to tell Haven how they’ve treated me, then they shouldn’t have treated me that way.

“Fair enough,” he mutters, stepping out of the way. But as I walk past, he places a hand on my stomach and pulls me against him. His body is warm and firm, and his breath caresses my skin as he leans down and whispers, “Don’t go too far.”

“We won’t.” Turning in his arms, I press my lips to his. I think it surprises him, because he lets out a deep, startled sound before pressing a hand to my lower back and deepening the kiss.

“My soul,” he whispers when I pull away.

My stomach tightens at the way Wes says it—like it’s actually true—but I push the feeling away. It doesn’t matter if he means it.

It never will.

...

“I... I don’t know what to say, Thelia. Wow.” Haven runs a hand through her hair, and the morning sunlight catches the purple highlights. “That’s one hell of a plan.”

We’re sitting at a picnic bench in a park nearby. I told Haven everything I could without incriminating myself or the guys. As far as she knows, there was nothing abusive about my relationship with Professor Kammes, and it’s a mystery why he’s dead.

She’s as shocked as I am that Wes is his stepson, though—although she thankfully heard it from another source.

I don't like keeping so much from her. It's not like it's much different than before, though. I was already hiding the fact that Kammes was raping me, but she knew everything about the guys.

*It's for the best, I remind myself. I don't want anyone going to prison.*

"They're falling for it?" Haven asks.

"So far," I say. "What do you think?"

"I think they're gonna be pissed, and that they might try to retaliate." With a sigh, she adds, "I'll also miss you."

After thinking things over, I decided to continue on with Pemberton University to finish out my senior year, but not in person. I'll transfer to their online program for the spring semester and move back in with my parents. That way, I'll be four hours away, and they won't be *able* to retaliate.

"If I can actually get them to love me, then by the time I cut them off, they'll understand."

"Love can be unpredictable," Haven counters. "And hurting them that badly? They'll be so angry."

"Are you saying I shouldn't do it?"

"No," she blurts. "Go for it. The assholes deserve it. I'm just worried, that's all."

"I'll be okay." Reaching across the table, I take her hand and squeeze. "I'll be completely out of their reach."

"You never know," she whispers. "Just because you think you're free of someone doesn't mean you actually are."

"I'll be *fine*, Haven. Even when they were angry at me before, they never caused me that much physical harm. The same will be true this time."

"I hope." Haven shifts nervously, and her eyes dart around the park. She's been glancing around like that for our whole conversation.

"Who are you looking for?" I ask.

“What? No one.”

But she says it too quickly, and she tucks her hair behind her ear immediately after. Both signs that she’s lying—she’s never been good at it.

“I feel like you’re not telling me something,” I say softly.

“My family is just...” She grimaces before shaking her head. “I have it handled. I don’t want you to worry.”

“Well, I *am* worrying. What’s going on?”

“Nothing! Seeing them just brought back a lot of memories, okay? I feel... weird. Off. But I’m sure it’ll pass.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, I should’ve thought of that.”

“It’s fine.” She tucks her hair behind her ear again. “It caught me off guard, too.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. I don’t even want to think about it.”

“Fair enough.”

Growing up, my parents were strict, and they’re still awfully traditional. But compared to Haven’s family, they’re a dream. I can’t even begin to imagine what it’s like, having grown up in a cult. She’s told me some of the things she was taught—some of the things she was forced to do and believe—and it makes me shudder every time I think about any of it.

“So you’re not gonna be back at the dorm?” Haven asks.

“Right. I’m sorry, I’ll miss you, but—”

“No, it’s good.” This time, she squeezes my hand. “It’ll help with your plan. And, uh, I don’t think they’ll let you leave, anyway.”

Groaning, I say, “Yeah. They’re awfully possessive.”

“Hey, at least they’re paying for your shit. That has to be nice.” Haven eyes my hair.

I shrug. “Kinda.”

Money has never been an issue for me or my parents, but the same isn't true for Haven. She had to start from scratch when she ran away from the cult she grew up in. If it hadn't been for Julie being so willing to help her out, I'm not sure she would've been able to leave.

Over the past three years, Haven and I have practically become sisters. She's come home with me on the holidays, I helped give my parents ideas for Christmas gifts for her, and I'm always happy to buy her whatever she needs.

More recently, she's gotten a work-study job, so money isn't as tight, and she already has a job lined up for after graduation. I'm happy for her.

"Do your parents know?" she asks.

"Not yet. The guys want to come home with me over Thanksgiving break, which shouldn't be an issue. My parents' house is big enough to fit all of us. You and I will have to share my room, but I figure that's not too big of a deal."

A shadow crosses over Haven's face, and at first I think it's disappointment at not being able to spend holidays the way we normally do. But she smiles apologetically and says, "Julie and Ben invited me to Thanksgiving again this year. I've turned them down for so many years, so I figure it's time I finally say yes."

"Oh. Yeah, no, that makes perfect sense."

When Haven was an older teen, Julie was her only connection to the outside world. Apparently, Julie visited Haven's church and immediately realized what it was—a cult. She did her best to visit regularly, so when Haven decided she wanted out, she was able to contact Julie for help.

Since Julie is on admissions staff at Pemberton University, and her husband Ben is on the board of directors, they were able to pull some strings. They got Haven a full-ride scholarship here and helped her change her name so her family wouldn't be able to find her.

So far, it seems to have worked. Haven is more jumpy than usual, though. She was visiting a part of her family that has no

ties with the cult, but I wonder if she's still worried they'll somehow figure out where she ran away to.

"It's just that they've helped me so much," Haven says. "They've made it clear that I don't owe them anything, but they've never stopped inviting me to things. It's really sweet, and I think they might actually want me there."

"Then you should go." I hide my disappointment behind a bright smile. "I'll miss you, but... well, I'll be occupied."

Haven laughs. "*Very* occupied. It's still so weird to me, though. It feels like yesterday that you came back to the dorm soaked from Kellan pushing you into the fountain."

"I know." I shake my head and pick at a loose piece of the worn, wooden picnic table. "At least I'm finally getting my revenge."

"They don't seem to have a clue?"

"No. I think I fought them enough in the beginning, and every once in a while, I snap at them. Not too harshly, just as a reminder that they still have to prove themselves. Which... they actually seem to be trying to do."

"Oh?"

"Sometimes, it feels like we're back in freshman year. They're being so kind to me, Haven. It feels like it *has* to be fake, like they're pretending or something, but then I look into their eyes, and they're so... sincere."

"But that's what you want, right? You need them to actually be invested in this."

"I do," I say absentmindedly. The way Wes calls me his soul lingers in my mind and tugs at my heartstrings. It's so sweet, so unexpected.

"I'd say you're well on your way to having them wrapped around your finger," Haven says with a mischievous grin. "I for one can't wait to see how miserable they end up. I'll text you updates every time I see them."

That pulls a laugh from me. "I can't wait."

# Chapter Forty-Three

## Athelia

Haven and I talk for another hour before we head our separate ways. I still feel like she's keeping something from me, but watching her smile and laugh eases some of my worry.

Who am I to fault her for hiding things from me, anyway? If there's something more going on, Haven will tell me about it when she's ready.

When I get back to the house, the first floor is empty except for Kellan lounging on the couch in the living room. He beckons for me to join him, so I crawl on top of him and fit my mouth to his.

Groaning, Kellan tosses the book he was reading to the floor and grabs onto my waist. His tongue delves into my mouth, and I lightly grind against him.

"Careful, *ma belle*. Don't want to get yourself too turned on. Not when you aren't allowed to come."

"Please?" I bat my eyelashes and slide a hand down his body until I'm cupping his dick. "Just one orgasm? We don't have to tell the others."

Kellan clicks his tongue. "You're a naughty, naughty girl, Athelia. I should tell Wes you're trying to go behind his back."

I gasp. “No! No, I didn’t mean it.”

“Liar.” He smacks my ass hard, and it stings enough to make me whimper. “If you want me to keep my mouth shut, you’ll have to give me something in return.”

“What?” I ask, already expecting him to tell me to suck him off.

Kellan reaches up with both hands and squeezes my breasts. He hums appreciatively before squeezing harder, making me wince in pain. “Oh, that’s it. I love seeing that look on your face.”

I squirm as he keeps going. Finally, he lets go, only to slap my right breast *much* harder than he needs to.

“Get up.” Kellan doesn’t even give me time to respond before he’s shoving me off him. Once he’s dumped me onto the couch, he stands and grabs a bottle of clear liquid from the drawer of the end table.

“Seriously? You have lube down here?”

He smirks. “When I want you, *ma belle*, I lose all patience. I figured you’d appreciate this.”

I think about the comment Wes made about fucking my ass last night and nod quickly.

“So I thought. Now take your clothes off. I’m fucking those tits of yours before coming all over you.”

Eagerly, I rip my long sleeve off and then unclasp my bra. Want is already stirring between my legs. I know I won’t get to come, but Kellan is watching me with such ravenous heat in his eyes.

It’s nice, being wanted. Being *desired*. Even more than that, it’s nice to have my needs fulfilled, even if it may feel like the opposite in the moment. Whenever Wes finally lets me come, it’ll all be worth it.

Kellan strips, so I get a good look at his lean, tall body. His chest is entirely covered by a tattoo of the grim reaper with some trees and a full moon in the background. Briefly, I

wonder how long it took to do it, but then Kellan pulls his pants and briefs down.

His dick is long and hard, and I lick my lips at the sight of it. Soft skin, the salty taste of precum... my mouth is practically watering just thinking of it.

“All your clothes, Athelia.”

I glance down and realize I’ve only taken off my shirt and bra. Quickly, I follow Kellan’s orders, until I’m completely naked in front of him.

“That’s more like it.” Kellan sits in the armchair near the fireplace and strokes his cock. “Now get on your hands and knees and crawl to me.”

Heat courses through my veins as I lower myself to the floor. As I crawl toward him slowly, I arch my back so my ass is in the air. I don’t take my eyes off him for a second.

The three of them made me do this once before, and it humiliated me. But this time, even though Kellan is doing this to degrade me, I feel powerful. He swallows hard, and his fingers tighten around his dick as he watches me crawl closer.

I may have to obey him, but he can’t deny how much he wants me.

“Good girl,” he says thickly when I stop in between his legs and sit back on my heels. He’s able to collect himself enough to give me one of his patronizing pats to the top of my head.

“How can I serve you, master?”

Kellan doesn’t reach for the bottle of lube that’s sitting next to him. No, he grabs my breasts, groping and massaging them. Then he pinches my nipples gently between his fingers, rolling them and making me moan.

“So eager to please,” he mutters. “Such a willing slut.”

I cry out as he pinches my nipples harder, harder, *harder*. It takes everything in me to not squirm away as the pain reaches an unbearable point. “Kellan, it hurts!”

A sadistic light fills his eyes. “Good.”



Kellan spits on my face, the saliva landing below my eye and running down my cheek. The power I felt moments ago disappears. Tears prick my eyes from the pain and the humiliation.

“You want to serve me?” he asks, his voice cruel.

“Yes,” I manage to croak out.

“Then use these tits to make me come.”

Finally, Kellan lets go of my nipples. I gasp in air as I grab onto his thighs. The pain lingers, but it’s not nearly as intense.

When I don’t immediately move to obey, Kellan slaps me across the face. “Now, you worthless slut.”

I grab the lube as I blink back more tears. They’re involuntary, brought on by the sharp sting emanating from my cheek. Still, I can’t deny the heat growing between my legs.

As the cold lube hits my chest, I take a deep breath. My thighs are growing wetter by the second, slick with my own desire. I want him to hurt me more—to say more cruel things to me—but all Kellan does is watch me with a disinterested stare. I smear the lube over my breasts before wiping the excess liquid off on his dick.

“I’m waiting,” Kellan says boredly.

I lean in, grabbing my breasts and wrapping them around Kellan’s cock until it’s enveloped in the soft flesh. Then, slowly at first, I begin moving up and down.

“That’s more like it.” Leaning back, Kellan closes his eyes and places his hands on the armrests of the chair. He doesn’t even look at me—doesn’t even acknowledge that I’m using my body to please him.

To him, I’m not a body—that would require me being a person.

I’m an object. Nothing more.

*God*, it’s so hot.

As I continue stroking his cock in between my breasts, I reposition my hands so my fingers can gently rub against my

nipples. They're sore from Kellan abusing them, but the cool wetness from the lube on my fingers comes as a welcome relief. I moan, swiping my fingers back and forth.

Kellan's eyes crack open. "I thought you wanted to please me."

"I do."

"Then don't touch yourself. I want you dripping and needy and unable to do a single thing about it."

I whimper in halfhearted protest, but I move my fingers away from my nipples. However much I want to get some type of pleasurable sensation out of this, I want to be used even more. Some would call me sick, but I love that Kellan is getting off on depriving me.

"Go faster," he commands. He's keeping his eyes open now, probably to make sure I obey.

My knees ache from being on the hardwood floor, but Kellan doesn't care. All he wants is to see me squirm with need while I get him off. So I do my best to go faster, although the position isn't exactly conducive to it, and I get tired quickly.

"Useless," he grumbles when my movements grow sloppy. "I have to do everything myself, don't I?"

Kellan shoves me back, forcing me onto my ass. His feet connect with my shoulders until he knocks me onto the ground. My back hits the hardwood, and I let out a surprised yelp.

He didn't use a ton of force—it barely even hurt—but it reminds me just how much stronger he is than I am. And when Kellan moves from the chair to on top of me in one fluid movement, I gulp. He doesn't need my obedience. He could force me to do whatever he wanted, and I'd have no choice but to comply.

*He wouldn't, though, I remind myself as he straddles my upper body. Not anymore. He'll stop if you need him to.*

Kellan takes my breasts into his hands and squeezes them over his cock. He lets out a deep groan as he starts fucking them. His thrusts are violent, his grip on my breasts painful.

“Are you really going to lay there like a lifeless doll?” he growls. “Or are you going to put in some effort?”

With a gasp, I grab my breasts and replace his hands. He leans forward then, placing his hands on either side of my head for balance.

It feels... *good*. I love the way his cock feels against my skin as he slides in and out of my breasts. Even when Kellan spits on my face again, my thoughts of disgust and shame quickly morph into a type of euphoria I've been craving for years.

“Use me, master,” I whisper, staring up at him with wide eyes. “Take whatever you want from me.”

“Oh, fuck,” Kellan grunts. He lets out a breathless groan as his movements slow.

Hot spurts of cum cover my chest and run down to the base of my neck. I'm pretty sure some gets in my hair, but I don't dare move my hands to find out. Not until Kellan pulls out from between my breasts and inhales deeply.

“God, look at you.” Kellan stares down at me with a satisfied smile. “Covered in your master's cum like a good, good girl.”

I run a finger through some of the cum on my chest and then suck it off my finger, watching him the entire time. His next breath is stuttered and sharp, and then he leans down and slams his lips to mine.

Kellan's kiss is far from gentle. He nips at my bottom lip, making me yelp, before shoving his tongue into my mouth. Even though my lip hurts, I arch into him, desperate for more.

But Kellan pulls away with a smirk just as I was beginning to hope he forgot about Wes's rule. “I'll keep your secret, but from now on, you'd better be on your best behavior.”

Disappointment winds through me even as Kellan's words make me even more wet. *Shit*. Why do I have to get turned on by being deprived of what I want? What did I do to deserve this curse?

"Now go to Wes's room. He wanted to see you when you got home."

I move to put my clothes on, but Kellan snatches them from my reach. "No. You go just like that, covered in my cum like the dirty, used-up toy you are."

I can feel my cheeks growing hotter by the second. "But Kellan—"

He smacks my ass and shoves me toward the stairs. "Now, *ma belle*, before I change my mind and tell him what you did."

That's all it takes. I run up the stairs and dash down the hallway until I find myself in front of Wes's door. It's partially open, but I knock anyway.

"Come in."

When I push the door open, Wes's eyes immediately snap to the cum dripping down my breasts. He leans back in his desk chair, arms crossed.

"Did you come?"

"No."

"And how wet are you?"

"I..." Bashfully, I glance down at my body. What am I supposed to say? How do you quantify something like that? And how wet am I, exactly? I haven't touched myself to check.

"Come here."

Wes's gaze burns as I take a couple shaky steps toward him. I feel vulnerable without any clothes on when he's wearing a black T-shirt and sweatpants. It's made even worse by the fact that it's obvious what Kellan just did to me.

Gently, Wes reaches a hand in between my legs. I choke on air when he drags a single finger through my pussy, just barely

brushing up against my clit. When he pulls away, his finger is glistening.

“So needy,” he murmurs, staring at his finger for a few seconds before sucking it clean. “God, and you taste as good as I remember.”

I whimper. *This isn't fair.*

Wes stands. “Get on the bed.”

*Dammit.* Can I take being used more without getting off? My pussy literally aches with the need to be filled. “Why?”

Wes shoves me across the room until I fall onto the bed with a surprised cry.

“Seriously? What the hell, Wes?”

But he’s already lowering himself to his knees. He grabs my thighs and yanks me to the very edge of the mattress, making me fall onto my back.

*Oh my god. Is he going to—*

“Fuck,” Wes mutters, and then he dives in like a man starved.

His tongue lashes at my clit, and it’s so needy and sensitive that I cry out. I prop myself up on one elbow and grab at his hair with the other. He groans and sucks on my clit, which causes my eyes to roll back into my head.

“Wes,” I groan. “God, please don’t stop.”

So of course, he pulls away. His glare is sharp as he growls, “What did I tell you about saying please?”

My cheeks burn. “I can’t help it.”

“You’ll learn to stop,” he says. “From now on, every time you tell me please, you get fucked without getting to come.”

“But Wes—”

“This is the exception.” His gaze drops back to my pussy. “I’ve been waiting too long for this to have any distractions.”

He goes back to sucking on my clit—much harder this time—and I yelp. I’m so sensitive, and he’s not giving me any

mercy. It's too much for me to handle.

“Wes—Wes, I need you to be more gentle. I—*ahhh*,” I breathe when he stops.

But he's still glaring at me. “You seem to be mistaken, my soul. I'm not doing this for your pleasure. I'm doing it for *mine*. Now shut up and take it. If I hear a single word from your mouth that isn't my name, you don't get to come.”

I open my mouth to protest, but his gaze sharpens, so I press my lips together. *Fine*. As long as I get an orgasm out of this, I can deal.

Wes's tongue flicks over my clit, and I let my head fall back. The sensations are intense, causing my lower stomach to tighten and my pussy to clench around nothing. It's like he's setting off a thousand tiny fireworks with every swipe of his tongue.

After a minute, Wes pulls back. “It's been years since I've gotten to eat pussy, and you're not ruining it for me. Stop squirming, Athelia. It's pissing me off.”

*What?* There's no way he's telling the truth. Wes could probably get any girl he's ever wanted. Any of the guys could. So why—

Wes lowers his head again while slipping two fingers inside of me, and all thoughts leave my brain. I gasp out his name as I realize an orgasm is about to hit me out of nowhere. My grip on his hair tightens, and he pumps his fingers into me faster, and then I'm crying out and writhing while he holds me down with his free hand.

“Wes! Wes, oh my god, I can't take it. I need—”

He pulls away and slaps my pussy so hard I scream. It *hurts*, oh my god it hurts. But a part of me likes it, too.

“What did I tell you?” he snaps. “The only thing you're allowed to say right now is my name.”

I whimper my apology, staring down at him with pleading eyes, but he doesn't care. He thrusts his fingers into me again

and sucks on my clit *hard*. It's overwhelming, and the pain from him spanking my pussy still lingers.

"Wes!" I push his head away.

"Uh uh, no. You don't get to tell me when I'm done." He turns away, and I give myself a moment to close my eyes and relax.

My mistake.

Wes grabs one of my ankles, wrapping something around it and fastening it tight. I open my eyes to realize it's a cuff attached to a spreader bar.

*Oh my god. He's going to make sure I really can't stop him.*

"Wes!" I try to wiggle away, but he grabs my other ankle and fastens the other cuff to it. When I try to close my legs, I can't, thanks to the bar spreading me wide open.

"You'll either learn to take whatever I give you," Wes says, "or I'll fucking make you."

I cry out when he grabs the spreader bar and shoves it toward my face. He grabs my hair, lifts my head until my chin hits my chest, and forces the spreader bar behind my neck. It effectively folds me in half while keeping my pussy completely exposed to him.

"Stay," he growls.

With a groan, I grab onto the spreader bar to keep the pressure off the back of my neck. I'd attempt to get it out from behind my head, but I'm not sure I want to find out what Wes will do if I try.

"Much better," he says, taking in my helpless, restrained body before dropping to his knees again. "Now stay fucking quiet."

I do my best. Thankfully, my body had time to relax a little while he was busy with the spreader bar, so it's not painful when he goes back to eating me out. It's still intense and takes my breath away, though.

When he slides his fingers inside me again, I do my best not to squirm. But he's curling them into me perfectly. Paired with the way he's sucking on my clit while using his tongue, I'm close to coming again in minutes.

"Wes," I gasp as I feel an extra pressure building. "Wes, oh *Wes!*"

"Just let it happen," he says before returning to what he was doing. He curls his fingers extra hard, adding a third, and it shoves me over the edge.

"Wes," I scream as I come, squirting all over his fingers.

He doesn't seem to care. In fact, based on the way he works me harder, forcing me to squirt more, I think he *wants* this. Heat fills my cheeks as it happens, but he doesn't make fun of me.

No, he just gives me *more*. His lips close over my clit again, not giving me a chance to come down from my high. It's too much, *fuck it's too much*, but he doesn't care. Wes keeps going until I'm coming again and squirting everywhere.

My body is shaking, and I don't know how much longer I can stay in this position. Wes, however, was apparently just getting started. He stands and sheds his clothes while I hold onto the spreader bar and watch him silently.

"You're going to come on my cock while you scream my name loud enough for the whole damn neighborhood to hear, understood?"

I nod breathlessly, too far gone to tell him no.

When Wes enters me, it's in one deep, heartless stroke. I gasp in pain as he forces my body to make room for his long, thick cock.

"That's it, Thelia. You're going to take every inch like the fucking whore you are."

Wes slams into me with no mercy. I'm turned on enough that it doesn't hurt too much past the first couple thrusts. No, it feels good—*overwhelmingly* good.



“See? I knew you could do it.” Wes jams three fingers into my open mouth, shoving them deep enough to make me gag.

My grip on the spreader bar tightens when he removes them and uses my drool as lube to rub my clit. *Holy shit*. My muscles ache and my body is screaming at me to give it a break, but I can't. I have no choice but to let Wes manipulate my body into giving him whatever reaction he wants.

“Wes,” I choke out when I get close.

“God, I love watching your tits.”

Wes slaps one with his free hand before pinching one of my nipples. It's not that hard, but they're so sore from what Kellan did that it makes me cry out in pain.

“Fucking take it,” Wes grits out, slamming into me harder. “My perfect slut. I know you like the pain.”

When he pinches my nipple harder, I scream, the sensations sending me hurtling into another orgasm. Wes pulls out, still rubbing my clit, and I feel myself squirting again.

“Oh, such a good girl.”

Something cool and wet hits my pussy, and I'm just able to make myself open my eyes enough to watch Wes squirting lube onto me. Then he tosses the bottle to the floor and rams into me.

“Break,” I croak out. “I need—”

Wes slams a hand over my mouth as he thrusts into me. His other hand is still working my clit. It's sending my body into overdrive, but his cruel smile tells me that's what he wants.

Wes's hand slips up so he's covering my mouth and my nostrils. I can't breathe—he knows I can't breathe.

“Come for me one more time,” he says, his voice strained. Sweat covers his forehead in a light sheen. “Come with me, my soul.”

I don't think my body has another orgasm left in it, but not being able to breathe has my body winding tight again. My

mind is fuzzy, and I'm not sure if I'm about to pass out or come.

I whimper, my eyes turning pleading. *I need to breathe.*

"Look at you," Wes grunts. "You just keep coming back for more, huh? Can't get enough. I thought you would've learned by now that by stepping into this room, it means you're giving me permission to fuck you to within an inch of your life. You naive fucking slut."

*Oh, shit.*

Finally, he pulls his hand away. On my first gasping breath, my orgasm slams into me, and I break apart with him still pounding into me. Wes moans at the sight, and he grabs onto the spreader bar and presses it into the mattress, forcing me into a slightly different angle.

"Athelia," he chokes out, and finally, his thrusts slow.

I relax, thankful to not have to keep the spreader bar from pressing against the back of my neck anymore. As Wes comes, filling me with his hot cum, I watch him. His eyes are closed, his mouth partially open. He looks different in this moment—vulnerable.

"Wes," I whisper.

With a strangled grunt, he opens his eyes and looks at me. Concern flashes across his features, and he gently removes the spreader bar from behind my head. When I groan in relief and start rubbing my legs, he instantly moves to undo the cuffs.

"Did I hurt you?" he asks once my ankles are free and he's tossed the bar to the floor.

"Not more than I could handle," I say, feeling a blush settle over my cheeks. "Or more than I liked."

"Good," he murmurs. He kisses me gently, although it's a little messy considering we're both sweaty and I'm trembling like a fucking leaf.

He lays on the bed with me for a minute as we catch our breath. It's startling, how quickly he goes from fucking me

like he hates me to holding me like I'm something he cherishes.

My heart aches as I feel myself drifting off into a light sleep. This is exactly what I've always wanted—to be fucked like a slut and then treated like a princess. It's gotta be some cruel joke the universe is playing on me that I've finally found three men who satisfy my every need, and they're my fucking bullies.

*Not anymore,* a quiet voice says in the back of my head.

*That doesn't matter,* I chide.

I can't deviate from my plan. How could I ever trust them? Why would I ever want to? It doesn't matter if they've started treating me differently. That could change at any minute. All it would take is another misunderstanding, and we're right back where we were three years ago.

*It'll never happen,* I tell myself, my resolve hardening. *I won't let them in.*

# Chapter Forty-Four

## Cal

The next couple weeks fly by so fast I get whiplash. I miss having Athelia in my bed every other night, but I'm glad she's been giving Wes attention. Besides, it means that the times I do have her, I cherish them even more.

Before I know it, we're packing up and heading to Athelia's parents' house for Thanksgiving. Wes and his mom got into a huge fight over the fact that he'd be out of town, but he doesn't care much. It wouldn't surprise me if, five years from now, they barely even talk.

As for Kellan, his parents are more understanding, especially since he promises them he'll stay home for Christmas. And my family... well, let's just say they wouldn't have been expecting me anyway. I usually go to Kellan's for the holidays.

Since Athelia needs to get her car inspected and she likes the mechanic her parents use, we take two cars—Wes's and hers. Athelia requests that I ride with her, which makes me feel like I'm on top of the world. I think Wes and Kellan are a little disappointed, but they'll get alone time with her later.

Thankfully, Athelia volunteers to do the driving. Char gave us one last job before Thanksgiving break, and I volunteered

to go with Wes last night. It was simple—take out a seemingly ordinary man and make it look like a home invasion gone wrong.

There was nothing too difficult about it, but I'm still exhausted. Every chance I get, I've been jumping on the opportunity to get out and do something. It's the best way for me to get out all the pent-up anger inside me, and it keeps my mind off other things.

I can tell that Athelia is worried about me. So are Wes and Kellan, but they have the full picture, so they get what I'm doing.

This time of year, everything is more potent. More painful. The holidays remind me of the good times I should've had and the loving parents I always wish I'd grown up with. It just makes me bitter.

"How did the job go last night?" Athelia asks as we pull onto the interstate.

Over the past month, I've come to figure out what exactly she means with that question. She doesn't want details and doesn't want to know anything incriminating, but she wants to know how we felt we handled whatever obstacles we came across.

At first, I didn't get why she asked if she didn't really want to know, but then it clicked. What she actually wants to know is if we're being safe.

And of course she does. Wes's dad literally got killed doing what we do. I see the anxiety in her eyes whenever we head out, even though she tries to hide it.

"No issues," I tell her. My hand is already resting on her thigh, and I rub my thumb back and forth. "It was easy, really. The driving took longer than the job itself."

Staring at the road, Athelia bites her lip. Whatever she wants to say, she's doing her best to keep it locked down.

"What?" I ask. If I can ease her worries, I'd like to.

"Nothing."

She directs the conversation elsewhere—finals, her parents' reaction when she told them she was bringing three guys home, some of her favorite places that she'd like to show us while we're in town, et cetera.

I well and truly thought we'd moved past me when Athelia blurts, "Isn't it dangerous that you're not sleeping enough?"

*There it is.*

"I'm fine, baby. Don't worry about me."

"I can't stop! I'm, like, literally half anxiety. And you're doing a lot of driving and a lot of things that you need to have a sharp mind for. Your grades seem to be doing fine, but how long is that going to last? What if you slip up and get hurt? Or—or—or—"

"Thelia, slow down."

She takes a deep breath.

"No, I mean hit the brakes. You're too worked up to be going twenty over."

"Oh, fuck."

As the car slows, Athelia drags in a few more breaths, releasing them through her mouth. She's gripping the steering wheel like the car will swerve to the side if she stops paying attention.

"Hey," I say gently. "I promise I've got this, okay? You don't need to worry. Besides, Wes and Kellan have my back."

"Do you have theirs?" She sounds like she hates herself for asking. "Because I don't want either of them to get hurt because you were supposed to be watching out for them but you couldn't because you were too tired."

"I have their backs. They're my best friends. I wouldn't put them in danger."

"Right." She nods, but her muscles are still tense. "Of course you wouldn't let them get hurt."

"If it makes you feel better, Char is going to be handing out fewer assignments for the next couple weeks. With finals

coming up, she's handing things off to other agents who aren't in school still."

"And after that?"

"After Christmas, I'll slow down."

"After Christmas?! Cal, that's a month away. You can't keep going like this!"

"I already told you I can handle it." I keep my voice firm this time. It's not up for negotiation. I did it last year and managed just fine.

"But—"

"No, Athelia."

She purses her lips and glares at the road. Normally, Kellan and Wes are the ones who're harsher with her. I've always been the softest. The protector—the feeler. But if Athelia doesn't stop pestering me, then she's not leaving me with a choice.

"I'm sorry," I tell her after we sit in a tense silence for a few minutes. "I know you don't like it, but that's just how it has to be for right now."

"Why?" she demands. "Why can't you, Kellan, and Wes take an even amount of jobs? Why are you taking on more than they are?"

My hand turns into a fist on her lap. I don't like talking about my family. Doing so causes the memories to haunt me for weeks afterward, which is why I've been trying to distract myself.

"Why, Cal?" Athelia asks again when I don't answer.

"We're not talking about it."

She presses her lips together at the hardness in my voice. I don't like upsetting her, but I can't talk about this shit. I just *can't*.

"It's just for the next—"

“Don’t,” she snaps, not even glancing at me for a split second.

“Athelia, I—”

“No! You’re being reckless. I don’t like it, Cal—and I especially don’t like that you won’t tell me why.”

I think she’s hoping that’ll get me to open up, but I can’t go there. Not right before I’m about to meet her parents.

“It’s... really hard for me to talk about.”

“Can you at least try?”

I grit my teeth. *Why does she have to be so goddamn stubborn?*

“I’ll even take the bare bones,” she says. “Just give me something.”

“The holidays are a rough time of year for me. I just need a distraction. That’s all you’re getting, okay? I don’t want to fucking talk about it.”

Just like that, her expression softens. “Oh.”

*Oh.* Like it’s simple. Like I can shove my feelings and past into a box and never have to think about it.

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly.

“Don’t apologize,” I grumble. “You didn’t know.”

“Yeah, but I shouldn’t have pressured you. I just... didn’t think, I guess.”

With a sigh, I take one of her hands and wrap it up in mine. “It’s okay, Thelia.”

Really, she deserves space to get mad at us. After all we’ve put her through, we can’t expect her to take our word for things. I’m grateful it seems like she’s actually given us a chance, but it’s all been really fast.

We’ve done our best to make up for the years we spent tormenting her, but that same phrase keeps popping into my mind.

*Not enough, not enough, not enough.*



It doesn't matter how hard we try to show her we'll never go back to how we were. We can't erase the past.

# Chapter Forty-Five

## Kellan

By the time we make it to Athelia's parents' house, I'm starving. We left late morning the day before Thanksgiving. Since we all wanted to get the drive over with, we didn't really stop anywhere for lunch.

As we pull into the driveway right behind Athelia and Cal, I take in the mansion in front of us. "Jesus," I mutter. "I think their house might be bigger than my parents' is."

Wes doesn't make any comment, which has me suspicious.

"You've been here before, haven't you?"

"Why would you think that?"

"Because I fucking know you. What did you do, sneak in or something?"

He grins. "Summer before sophomore year. Watched her sleep for a while. Thought about coming all over her bare pussy, but I didn't want to leave any evidence behind."

"You're a fucking creep, man."

Rolling his eyes, Wes throws open his door. "You'd have done it if you'd thought of it."

*Fuck me.* He's right and he knows it.

We grab our bags and make sure Athelia isn't carrying a single thing as we approach the front door. She warned us that her parents are traditionalists. We're already on shaky ground considering there's three of us. I don't want to deal with drama or lectures or empty threats from her dad, so I figure it's best if we start this out on the right foot.

Athelia is pulling out her key to the front door when it opens. Her mom stands on the other side of the storm door with a wide smile on her face. She's a small woman—a similar size to Athelia—with the same dark brown hair as her daughter.

“You're here,” she cheers. “Oh, I've missed you so much, honey.”

The second the storm door is open, Mrs. Harper pulls Athelia into a long, firm hug. Athelia returns it with enthusiasm, which I think is sweet. I don't have a bad relationship with my parents, but it's not this good.

“Mom, these are my...” Athelia pauses, and I realize probably at the same time as her that we've never given each other labels.

Except one, that is—that she's ours.

“Boyfriends,” Cal finishes with a chuckle. “I'm Calidore Graham, but everyone calls me Cal.”

We all introduce each other while Athelia watches silently.

“You can all call me Ruth,” Mrs. Harper says. “My husband Bill isn't here right now—he's still at work—but he's excited to meet you all.”

The house is exactly what I expected. Large windows, traditional decor, and a brand-new kitchen that looks like it's straight out of a magazine. It's similar to my parents' house, just a little bigger.

“Athelia can show you to your rooms,” Ruth says. “I'm almost done with dinner. I'm sure you boys are hungry.”

There's a rumble of agreement from us. I'm expecting Athelia to make a witty comment to her mother about also

being hungry, but she doesn't. In fact, she's been oddly quiet since we got here.

She leads us upstairs while Ruth stays in the kitchen. There are two guest rooms, which seems like overkill, but maybe Athelia has a lot of family. Wes and I immediately decide to share one so Cal can get the best sleep possible—it works well since one of the rooms has two twin beds in it.

“You're sure none of us can sleep with you?” I ask coyly, already knowing the answer.

Athelia elbows me in the ribs. “I'd prefer for my dad to not murder you in your sleep. According to my parents, I'm still a sweet, innocent virgin.”

Wes snorts. “I think they know better, Thelia.”

“Well, I certainly haven't told them anything about my sex life, and I plan to keep it that way.”

Cal laughs. “Whatever. I'm still planning on sneaking into your room one night.”

“Guys,” Athelia groans. “I need you all to be on your best behavior. *Better* than your best behavior. My parents can be a little judgmental, and I don't want to deal with all their opinions.”

“I'm *joking*,” Cal says, but I don't believe him, especially when he pulls her into a hug and winks at me over her shoulder.

“I want to see your room,” I say after I set my bag down next to my bed.

Athelia narrows her eyes. “I'm not sure I should show you where it is.”

I chuckle darkly. “Oh, *ma belle*, I'll find it even if you don't show me.”

She knows I'm right, so after she shows Cal which room is his, she leads us through the second floor. I notice that her room is as far away from ours as possible. It's not like it was intentionally done that way for us—the guest rooms are where they've been for years, I'm sure—but it's still annoying.

“Just... don’t judge all the pink,” Athelia says before opening her door.

Cal lets out a long whistle as he stares inside. “You weren’t kidding.”

The first word I’d use to describe Athelia’s bedroom is bright. Even though the sun has set so there’s no light coming in through the large windows, there’s just so much *white*.

It doesn’t compare to the amount of pink, though. Pink walls, a pink bedspread, a pink chair... It’s tastefully done, but it’s definitely not Athelia. Hers and Haven’s dorm is decorated very differently, as is Athelia’s room at our place.

“It’s what I wanted when I was a kid,” she explains as we all file inside. “And my mom got so sad any time I mentioned redoing it as a teen, so...” She shrugs. “I just lived with it.”

“I’ve never thought of you as a pink person,” Cal says as he scans over the photo frames and dolls on her dresser.

All the furniture is spotlessly white. The four of us are comically out of place in here.

“I don’t have anything against the color,” Athelia says. “I even still like it. Just not this much.”

Cal whips around, a frame in his hand. “Who’s this?” he demands.

Peering closer at the picture, Athelia says, “Oh, that’s Joey.”

“And who the fuck is Joey?”

“Why?” Athelia smirks. “Jealous?”

Cal’s expression hardens. He’s not usually one to get harsh with Athelia—or anyone, unless we’re working—but right now, he looks intimidating as hell. “When was this taken?”

Athelia’s cheeks tinge pink as she rolls her eyes. “Jesus, calm down. He’s my cousin. He lives in California, so I don’t get to see him often.”

For another second, Cal watches her closely, and then he sets the picture down. “Don’t fuck with me like that again, Athelia.”

That seems to make it click with her—that he was being one-hundred percent serious. No one else is allowed to touch her but us.

Athelia takes his hand in hers and brings it to her lips, kissing his knuckles tenderly. “I know I’m yours, Cal.”

“And that’s never changing,” he adds firmly.

With a glowing smile, she wraps a hand around his neck and tugs him downward into a kiss. “Good.”

After that, we have an uneventful meal with Ruth downstairs. Athelia is... tame when she’s around her mother. There’s no sarcasm, no joking, no *anything*. She’s quiet and agreeable and much more well-mannered than I’ve ever seen her.

We let Ruth in on some parts of our lives. Wes tells an endearing story of when he was a kid—from when his dad was still alive. I talk about my summers spent in France. Cal sticks to stories from high school and college, skillfully avoiding any mention of his parents.

“Oh, I should show you the photo albums I have of Athelia,” Ruth says. “She was such a sweet little girl.”

Sinking into her chair, Athelia groans. “Please don’t.”

Ruth winks at me. “She always thinks she can deny me of one of the best parts of being a parent—embarrassing my kid.”

“I for one am quite excited for that part,” I reply before taking a sip of the wine Ruth poured for me.

“Fuck you,” Athelia grumbles.

Ruth sighs. “I’d tell you to watch your language, but I suppose you’re an adult now, aren’t you?” She places a hand over her heart. “It feels like just yesterday that I was catching you after you took your very first steps.”

Athelia grins. “I wish I could say the same, but... you know. Don’t remember.”

The rest of the evening proceeds much like that. Ruth ends up showing us tons of photos of Athelia throughout her

childhood, and we soak it all up. I love getting a glimpse into who she was—and who she still is.

Cal is having trouble staying awake, so he heads to his room to take a quick nap until Bill comes home. Wes mutters something about a shower, and before Ruth can tell any more embarrassing tales of Athelia's childhood, Athelia suggests we take a walk.

"Just around the property," Athelia tells Ruth. "We'll stay away from the roads since it's dark."

With a knowing smile, Ruth shoos us out of the house. The evening air is refreshingly cold as we take a path that winds through a large garden. A lot of the trees are lit up, and I'm sure it's breathtaking in the summer.

"There's a little gazebo over here," Athelia says. Now that we're outside, her pace has slowed, and she seems more relaxed.

"You're not yourself around your mom."

"Are you?"

"Mmm. *Touché, ma belle.*"

Athelia sighs as we step up into the gazebo. "I adore my parents. They were some of my closest friends in high school—Mom especially. God, I know that sounds lame, but I love them."

"But?" I prod.

"But they have their own set of expectations of who they want me to be. Of who they think I am. I'll always cherish my relationships with them, but I don't want to disappoint them. I'm not as traditional, not nearly as conservative, and not as risk-averse as they are. I understand they just want to make sure I'm safe and secure, but it can feel restrictive. Sometimes I feel like I'm disappointing them, you know?"

"I do." Leaning against the railing of the gazebo, I draw Athelia into my arms. "My parents aren't that strict—never were, really. They want me to do well, but they don't much care what I do, as long as I'm happy. My grandparents try to

put a lot of pressure on me, though. I think they see me as lazy. Wasted potential.”

She makes a sad sound before resting her head against my chest. “I’m sorry, Kellan.”

“It doesn’t bug me as much as it used to. I’m slowly building a life for myself, much like you are. Their opinions don’t matter to me the way they did when I was a kid.”

Athelia sighs. “Maybe I’ll get there one day with my parents.”

“Maybe so.”

We stand there for a few minutes in silence, which I don’t mind. With classes, studying, and work, it’s hard to get alone time with Athelia unless she’s sleeping with me for the night. I was hoping for a few moments like this over break, and I’m glad we’re getting one so early on.

“You want to know what I realized while looking at all those photos of you?” I ask after a few minutes.

“What?” She looks up at me and narrows her eyes. “If you’re going to make some joke about how awkward I was as a teenager, shut it.”

“No,” I murmur. “Nothing like that. It made me realize I was wrong about you.”

Nervousness flashes in her eyes. “Oh?”

“You were worried that Kammes changed you for the worse, and I said you were wrong—that you hadn’t changed.”

She goes stiff. “You disagree now?”

“Not entirely, but some. You’re definitely still you—you’ve got the same smile, the same laugh, the same taste in music. You still hate waking up early, and you’re still infuriatingly stubborn. But you’re different, too.”

Athelia’s gaze drops, and her voice is heavy as she says, “So I was right.”

“No. I don’t think you’ve changed for the worse, Thelia. I think you’ve changed for the better.”



But she shakes her head. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does,” I tell her gently. “You have a lot of hurt to work through still—much of it caused by us, not him. But after hearing the stories your mom told, and after looking at all of the pictures of you... yeah. You’ve changed. You stand up for yourself more now. You’ve learned a lot. But you’re still *you*.”

“I don’t feel like myself.”

“I know,” I say gently, placing a bent knuckle under her chin and lifting so she’s looking at me. “But take it from someone with an outside perspective. Maybe Kammes changed you some, but you’re still foundationally the same person. And...”

“And what?” she whispers.

I smile. “I like who you’ve become.”

“You do?”

“Mmhmm. You’re growing up, Athelia. We all are. And you—well, you’re turning into a strong, independent woman who fights for what she wants and takes no shit.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, no, I definitely don’t feel that way.”

“Never said you’re all the way there yet.” I run my fingers through her hair. “But you’re getting there. Just look at where you were a month ago compared to now.”

She’s silent for a moment as she thinks. When she meets my gaze again, her eyes aren’t quite as sad as before. “I think you’re right. I *am* fighting for what I want. And... maybe Kammes didn’t change me as much as I thought he did.”

“I’d love you either way,” I murmur.

Athelia’s lips part in shock. The words slipped from my mouth without me fully thinking them through, but I mean them. I’ve known since the night with her on the overlook when she finally opened up to me.

“Say that again,” she whispers.

I brush my nose against hers. “I love you, Athelia Harper. No matter what.”

A small noise escapes her throat. I'm not sure if it's one of fear or happiness, but when she tugs my head down and seals her lips to mine, I figure it out pretty fast.

Even though it's cold outside, my body warms at her touch. When our lips part, I lean in for more, but she stops me.

"I love you, too," she says breathlessly. Her eyes are sparkling, and I don't think I've ever seen her look as beautiful as she does right now.

I grab her hips and tug her into me. Her arms come around my neck, and I capture her mouth in another kiss. This time, neither of us hold back. I'd be halfway through tearing her clothes off her body if it wasn't so cold out here.

Someone clears their throat behind me, and Athelia tenses before ripping herself away from me.

"Dad! Um, hi."

I turn, plastering on a friendly smile. The second I make eye contact with Athelia's father, I hold my hand out. "Mr. Harper, nice to finally meet you. My name is Kellan Ambrose."

"Call me Bill." He shakes my hand, his grip much firmer than it needs to be. "You're one of the boys who's dating my daughter, huh?"

"Yes, sir. One of three."

"Hmm." It's not an approving sound, but it's not entirely disapproving, either. "Where are the others?"

"Well, Cal is taking a nap," Athelia says. "Wes is in the shower."

Bill nods, his gaze flicking between me and Athelia. "And what exactly are your intentions with my daughter, Kellan?"

"Dad!" Athelia squeaks. Her cheeks turn even redder than they already were.

Bill, however, doesn't seem to notice his daughter's embarrassment. He watches me with an even, appraising gaze. "She's a treasure, you know. What makes you think you deserve her?"

“I never gave any indication that I do, sir,” I reply smoothly, sliding my hand into Athelia’s. “But I’ll work every day until I die to be able to.”

My answer seems to take him aback—like he actually thinks I didn’t have an answer ready to go.

What a fool.

“Let’s go inside,” Athelia blurts before Bill can ask any other prying questions. She grabs my hand and drags me toward the house, and Bill follows with a quiet chuckle.

I smile as she tightens her hold on my hand. If tonight is any indication of how the rest of break will go, then... well, we’re in for an interesting time.

# Chapter Forty-Six

## Athelia

Holy shit. *Holy fucking shit.*

As I lay in bed Wednesday night, a feeling of triumph washes over me. Kellan told me he loves me. *Loves me.*

I felt a little guilty saying it back when I didn't mean it, but that's faded for the most part. My plan is working so much better than I ever could've hoped for. *That's what matters.*

What Kellan told me earlier is still at the front of my mind. Maybe changing isn't as bad as I originally thought. Maybe, like he said, I'm growing.

He doesn't view me as broken—none of the guys do—and I think it's helping how I view myself. It took Kellan pointing out that I'm fighting so hard for what I want for me to realize he's right.

*More than he knows.*

I've fought them almost every step of the way in their process of making me theirs. I made sure I got my own bedroom, I put Wes through the wringer, and I never hesitate to put the guys in their place if they piss me off too much.

But what *really* makes the difference for me is my plan. Kellan is right—I *am* strong. Two years ago, there's no way I

would've followed through on this. I didn't have it in me back then.

Now, though? Now I'm ready to wreck their lives the way they wrecked mine. The best part is that they really, truly have no clue what's coming.

...

In the morning, my mom is already working on the turkey when I come downstairs. She doesn't have to do all the cooking, but she loves it—it's why my parents never hired anyone to help with meals.

"Hi, hon," she says. "There are bagels on the counter and cream cheese in the fridge."

"Thanks. Need help?"

"Only if you want to," she says as I hug her from behind. "I don't want to make you, not when you only have a couple days to relax."

"Is there anything... I dunno, easy to do?"

She laughs. "Why don't you focus on eating first? Then maybe you can cut and slice apples for pie. I meant to make them yesterday, but I ran out of time."

"Got it."

After I eat, I grab the apples. Of course I don't want to work on break, and normally I detest cooking and baking, but this feels different. I've always loved hanging out with my mom in the kitchen while we work on a new recipe together.

"So tell me about these boys," Mom says. "You've barely mentioned them in our calls."

"I... wasn't sure how you'd react. You know, since there's three of them."

She laughs. "All the more power to you, honey. I was a bit taken aback, but that's because I thought maybe you were dating Haven."

"Oh! No, I love her, but not like that."

Years ago, I told my mom I was bi, but I honestly thought she forgot. She and my dad didn't react poorly, but they've never brought it up. In a way, it was nice—my coming out didn't have to be a big deal. It was just another part of who I was.

“Wait,” I say. “Did you think the two of us have been dating this whole time?”

“Honestly, I didn't know. You and I don't talk as much—which is fine, honey, I'm not trying to guilt trip you or anything. So I thought maybe you were and you just didn't want to tell us yet? You haven't brought a boy home since high school.”

“I guess that's true.” My bagel threatens to make a second appearance at the reminder of *why* I didn't. Before I can think on it too much, my dad shuffles into the kitchen.

“Hey, sweetie.” He pulls me into a side hug and kisses the top of my head.

“Morning.” I grip the knife in my hand harder than I need to. I've been waiting for this moment. Even if I'm not planning on actually staying with the guys, there's no getting around hearing my parents' first impressions. “Well?”

My dad chuckles. “It's just like you to want to dive right in. I like them, Thelia. No worries there.”

“And you?” I turn to Mom.

“They seem nice, honey. I like how interested they were in hearing about your childhood. Shows they care.”

“I'd like to get to know them more,” my dad says, which I expected. “Cal was so tired I don't know if he'll even remember me when he gets up. Kellan seems like he'll fit right in with the family.”

“And Wes?” I ask.

“He was a little quiet, wasn't he?”

“Probably just adjusting to the new environment,” I say, surprising myself with how quickly I jump to his defense.

“Well, we’ll see how today goes, I guess.” My dad claps me on the shoulder. “But I’m happy for you, Thelia. You seem different than the last time we saw you.”

“Much happier,” my mom agrees.

It’s not for the reason they think, but I can’t tell them that. They’d never approve of what I’m doing, and if they knew the truth... I’m pretty sure my dad would call the cops on the guys without a second thought.

“I am happier,” I say softly, smiling at them.

Just then, the guys make their way into the kitchen. I wonder if they waited until all three of them were awake so they could come downstairs together. I would’ve woken them, but I wanted them to get some sleep.

Wes and Cal met my dad last night. It went well, although Cal was still half asleep from his nap. Thankfully, he looks much more alert now.

I set down the apple I’m peeling and head to the fridge. “There’s bagels on the counter, and cream cheese is—”

Wes catches me in his arms. “We can make ourselves breakfast. Don’t worry about us.”

“Oh. You’re sure?”

“Positive.” Kellan grabs the bag of bagels from the counter. “Just point me in the direction of the knives.”

Dad raises an eyebrow. “Are they always like this, or are they just on their best behavior while they’re here?”

“They’re always like this.” I give the guys a warm smile even as guilt slithers through my stomach. I don’t like lying to my parents about this shit. What if they get attached? “Usually, Cal makes breakfast for all of us.”

“Really?” Mom says with surprise. “A man who cooks. You got lucky, honey.”

I grin. “Yeah, I really did.”

Cal is blushing as he ducks his head down and kisses me on the cheek. “Morning, baby.”

I cling to his hoodie to keep him close. He smells good—light hints of juniper and cedarwood that I find myself craving whenever I’m not around him.

As my parents engage Wes and Kellan in conversation, I turn to get a better look at Cal. “You sleep okay?”

He nods. There are still bags under his eyes, but they’re not nearly as prominent. “That mattress is comfy as hell. I didn’t want to get up, but I wanted to see you. Well, and I was hungry.”

With a giggle, I push him toward Kellan. “Get yourself some breakfast, then.”

The rest of the morning goes well—almost too well. As everyone gets used to each other, our conversations become more relaxed, and I stop feeling like the guys are performing as much. Their interactions with my parents almost begin to feel natural.

While Mom and I keep working on dinner, Dad takes the guys into his den to show them all his model planes. They all offer to help in the kitchen first, but Mom shoos them away. I think she wants the alone time with me.

As we work, I catch Mom up on how college has been going—minus the truth in relation to the guys and Professor Kammes. I have to skip over a lot, which leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, but I don’t have much of a choice.

I lose track of time, and my mom and I lapse into a comfortable silence. I find myself thinking about Christmas, and then summer break, and then Thanksgiving next year. Haven can stay in my room, and the guys can have the same sleeping arrangement as this year. Or maybe my parents would be comfortable with me sleeping with the guys next year. Would *I* be comfortable with that?

My stomach drops when I realize what I’m doing. I can’t plan for next year! There won’t *be* a next year. The guys won’t even be here for Christmas, and that’s only a month away.

*Get it together,* I chide myself. *Don’t fall for your own plan. Remember, none of this is real.*



I feel a warm, firm hand on my back and glance up to find Wes giving me a concerned look. He seems to have ventured into the kitchen alone.

“You okay?” he asks quietly. “You don’t look too good.”

“Fine,” I say, giving him a smile. “Just a touch tired.”

That doesn’t seem to assuage his worries, so I lean into him and wrap my arms around his torso. Maybe I can distract him with physical affection.

“You’ve been working on pies all morning,” he says. “Do you need a break? I can take over.”

“Do you know what to do?”

“I can follow a recipe.”

“Um. Sure, I guess. I’ve just got the pumpkin pie left. You can do the filling while I deal with the crust.”

Wes’s lips feather over my forehead in a kiss that makes my stomach flip. “Got it.”

Behind Wes’s back, Mom gives me an impressed look. That guilty feeling expands inside me as I gather the ingredients for the pie. My plan is to get revenge on the guys. I want them to hurt the way they hurt me.

But what if I disappoint or hurt my parents in the process?

*Or myself?*

# Chapter Forty-Seven

## Wes

Thanksgiving dinner goes much more smoothly than I thought it would. Athelia's parents host their extended family for dinner, and the conversation stays cordial if not a touch boring.

Athelia's parents invite us to go Black Friday shopping with them the next day, but we politely decline, claiming we'd all like to have a quiet morning in. It's far from the case. Cal, Kellan, and I have plans for Athelia that are far from quiet.

She's in the shower when we sneak into her room. Her parents left a half hour ago, and it sounds like they'll be gone until after lunch. That gives us plenty of time.

I told the guys what Athelia told me—that she wants us to take away her ability to say no—and they both jumped on the idea. They're eager to catch her off guard with me. Cal only gave me one request—make sure Athelia has a safe word.

I should've thought of it beforehand, but I was too caught up in wanting to give Athelia what she needed that it completely slipped my mind. I'm glad he had the clarity of mind to bring it up.

When we hear the water shut off, we each get into our respective hiding places—me in the closet, Kellan under the bed, and Cal behind the door. We packed our masks without

Athelia knowing, and we're hoping we'll be able to scare the shit out of her.

Athelia is humming when she steps into her bedroom. She's only wrapped in a towel—a pink one, of course. As she takes it off and begins squeezing her dripping hair with it, Cal sneaks out from behind the door. She's facing away from him, so she has no idea he's there until he turns the light off.

With a gasp, Athelia whips around, only to be greeted with the pink glow of his mask. She screams and throws her towel at him. A gut reaction—she knows it's us—but her instincts kick in first.

“Cal!” she exclaims when he stalks toward her. “I told you, *not here*. My parents—”

“They're already long gone,” I say from behind her.

With a yelp, Athelia spins around. I step out of the closet just as Cal grabs her and tosses her onto the bed. She tries to throw herself off the other side of the bed, but Kellan is there, looming over her.

“Jesus!” she shouts, scrambling away from him.

“You can't hide from us, *ma belle*,” Kellan says, and I can hear the grin behind his mask. He pounces on her, grabbing her wrists when she tries to claw at him. “Is that all you've got?” He laughs. “So weak. So *helpless*.”

She's kicking and screaming as Cal and I climb onto the bed. Kellan wraps a hand around her throat and squeezes the sides of her neck, which only makes her fight back harder.

“Go ahead,” I tell her as I pull a knife from my pocket and flip it open. “We'll have our way with you whether you struggle or not. Up to you if you want to waste all your energy now.”

Athelia tries to shy away when I trace the blade down her cheek. It's a dull knife because the last thing I want is to accidentally hurt her while she struggles so wildly, but she doesn't know that. To her, this could slice through her skin with ease. She gasps and stills, her body vibrating with fear and arousal.

“Your safe word is red,” I tell her. “Say it, and everything stops.”

She nods her understanding as she arches into me.

“What should we do with her first?” Cal asks.

“I want to see how quickly she comes from three men holding her down and using her perfect little body,” Kellan says.

“No,” Athelia screeches. She claws at my arms while trying not to move too much.

“Looks like we’re gonna have to restrain her.” Cal sounds delighted as he says it. “Is having a knife to your throat not enough, you stupid slut? You still think you can get away from us?”

“P-please don’t hurt me,” she says, her voice shaking.

I chuckle. “I already told you, Athelia. I don’t make promises I can’t keep.”

We already set up her bed for restraining her, so all Kellan has to do is pull out the leather cuffs from where he tucked them away while Athelia was in the shower. They’re attached to ropes that are tied to the posts at the foot of her bed, and Kellan secures the cuffs to Athelia’s ankles.

I can feel her doing her best not to kick at him. With the knife pressed to her throat, it’s too dangerous.

“No,” she sobs as Kellan ties her wrists together. “Don’t—don’t do this. I don’t want it. *Stop.*”

We ignore her pleas. Once Athelia is restrained enough, I crawl onto the bed behind her, propping myself up with pillows. She tries to squirm away, but I grab her and haul her into me. Her back hits my chest as she makes a grab for the knife—probably to fling it across the room.

“Careful,” Cal says in a singsong voice. He grabs her wrists and yanks her hands away from her body. “You’re nothing but a helpless doll now, baby. The more you struggle, the harder we’ll be on you.”

“Someone has to tame you,” Kellan adds as he lowers himself to his stomach between her spread legs, “and we’re happy to take on the job.”

Keeping one arm locked around Athelia’s torso, I trace the dull knife up her chest lightly. She’s trembling against me, and her breaths are short and shallow.

“Are you scared, *ma belle*?” Kellan taunts.

“N-no.”

He chuckles. “You should be.” He’s taken off his mask, and he lightly blows on her pussy, making her squirm. “We plan on making you scream—and not just from pleasure.”

“Pl—” She catches herself just in time. “Don’t hurt me. I’ll do anything.”

“Such a silly girl,” Cal says as he strokes a hand down her cheek. “She thinks her begging will make a difference.”

Athelia stills as she feels the cool metal of my blade against her throat. “Wes,” she whimpers.

“Shhh,” I soothe, stroking my free hand down her face. “Just stay perfectly still, and you won’t get hurt. For now.”

Kellan spreads her pussy with his fingers. “Look at that. Her pretty cunt is already wet for us. Such a bad girl, getting turned on like this.”

“I—I’m not,” she protests weakly.

“Sure,” Kellan says, his voice dripping with amused disbelief. “Just like you’re not going to come from me holding you down while I eat you out.”

“No,” she cries.

Without another word, Kellan leans down and licks her pussy. Athelia whimpers helplessly.

“You’re not getting out of this,” I whisper in her ear. “You’re ours to do with as we please.”

Cal is on the bed beside us. He tilts his head to the side as he watches Athelia, his pink mask glowing in the semi-darkness.

“Your tears look so pretty, baby.”

Athelia tries to turn her head away from him. I didn't realize she was crying already. The thought makes me hard, especially when she squirms against me.

With a groan, Cal reaches out and squeezes one of Athelia's breasts. He keeps her bound wrists in his other hand while I press the dull knife against her throat. Kellan is moaning, his arms wrapped around Athelia's thighs as he sucks on her clit.

“God,” Athelia pants. “Don't—don't do this to me.”

“Shut her up,” Kellan snaps. “I can't concentrate with all her whining.”

Keeping the knife pressed to Athelia's neck, I clamp my free hand over her mouth. Cal pinches one of her nipples, and Athelia groans with pleasure.

“Yeah? You like that?” Cal pinches harder, causing Athelia's next breath to come out stuttered. “What about now? Awww, such a good girl, squeezing out more tears for me.”

“Don't stop,” I tell Cal, sliding my hand up an inch so it covers Athelia's mouth and nostrils. She screams as I cut off her airflow, but the sound is muffled. She doesn't move—not with the knife against her throat.

“Are you scared yet?” Cal taunts. “We're going to break you, baby.”

She gives the tiniest nod. After another couple seconds, I pull my hand away so she can breathe.

“Oh my god,” she gasps. “Kellan, that feels—”

I clamp my hand over her mouth and nostrils again. At her frustrated noise, Cal and I both laugh.

“He doesn't care if you like it,” I tell her. “You coming on his tongue? It gets him off. That's all he cares about.”

She whimpers, a helpless sound that has me smiling behind my mask.

We keep going just like that. Every once in a while, I let her breathe, feeling her body tense up every time. Cal keeps

playing with her nipples and Kellan continues eating her out until Athelia is close. Her body is trembling, and she's straining against my hand, trying to get air without cutting herself on the knife still pressed to her throat.

"You want to breathe, whore?"

Her response is muffled and weak. I ease my hand away from her face, and as she gasps, she comes so hard her body convulses. I pull the knife away from her neck just to be safe, watching as she drowns in wave after wave of her orgasm.

"Fuck yes," Cal groans as he rolls one of her nipples between his fingers. "Just like that, Athelia."

"S-stop," she gasps after a minute. Now that she doesn't have the threat of the blade against her skin, she squirms, trying to get out of Kellan's reach.

He lifts his head, grinning. "Are you going to be a good girl now and let us have what we want, or are you going to keep struggling?"

"I—I don't—"

"If you struggle," Cal says while he traces a finger down the side of her face, "just remember, there's three of us and one of you. We can hold you down and fuck you in multiple of your holes at the same time. That can be a pleasurable experience for you, or a painful one."

Athelia gulps. "I'll be good."

"Oh, you're going to regret that," I say as I reach around her and untie her wrists. "Undo her ankles. I'm gonna fuck her ass."

"Oh—god! Wes, no! I've never—"

"Too late. It's happening." Once we've released her ankles, I shove her onto her stomach and smack her ass. "Remember, you said you'd be a good girl for us."

Athelia groans in protest, but she doesn't call her safe word.

"Filthy little slut," Cal says as he tosses me the lube.

"Spread your cheeks," I tell Athelia.

She hesitates for a split second before she reaches behind her, grabs her ass cheeks, and pulls them apart. With a humiliated groan, she buries her face in the blankets.

“Now stay just like that.”

Cal and Kellan watch while I prep her, slowly stretching her with my fingers. She whines and moans while I push lube into her.

“I think you’re ready for me. Just give me one minute—and don’t move.”

I crawl off the bed and head into her bathroom to wash my hands. When I’m back, Cal and Kellan are still watching her, and she hasn’t dared to move. *Perfect.*

Grabbing the lube, I spread it over my cock. When Athelia feels me climb onto the bed behind her, she instinctively tries to close her legs, but I shove them open with my knees.

“Be good,” I remind her. “I’m going to fuck you like you’re a doll, and you’re going to stay perfectly still and take it.”

She nods, her hands still spreading her nice and wide for me. I line my cock up with her asshole and push inside slowly. Athelia gasps and tenses, so I stop.

“You’ve gotta relax, Thelia,” Kellan tells her. “Take a deep breath.”

She turns her head to the side and gasps in air. “Wes, it’s not going to fit. I can’t.”

“You can.” I stroke a hand down her ass. “Now do what Kellan says.”

Kellan kneels beside the bed so he’s at her eye level. His mask is still off, and he smiles at her fearful expression.

“Why Wes?” she whines. “He’s the biggest. Can’t it be—”

“No,” I snap, pushing in another half-inch. “I’m going to be your first.”

“Ohhhhhhh *fuck.*”



“Breathe in with me, *ma belle*,” Kellan says soothingly. As he inhales, so does Athelia.

As she exhales, her gaze caught in Kellan’s, I feel Athelia relax some. He keeps talking her through it, stroking his finger down her shoulder and praising her.

“Wes,” she chokes out when I’m halfway inside her. “Oh my god, *Wes*.”

I ease into her another inch, feeling her stretch to accommodate my size. “You’re doing so well, my soul. Just stay right like that.”

Athelia whimpers, doing her best to relax as I slide all the way into her.

“God, your ass is so *tight*.”

“So... big,” she chokes out.

“And you take every inch beautifully.” I slide out and then back in, groaning at the little sounds she makes. “And soon, you’ll take Cal’s cock in your perfect pussy at the same time you take mine in your ass.”

She tenses. “What?!”

“You heard him, *ma belle*,” Kellan says. “They’re both going to fuck you together. Maybe I’ll join them.”

“But—but I can’t—god, Wes, *fuck*.”

I’ve started thrusting into her harder, unable to stop myself. “If you want to come again, you’ll do as we say.”

Athelia screams into the blankets. She’s shaking and sweating, too lost in the sensations of having someone fuck her ass for the first time to protest any more.

“You’re doing so good, baby,” Cal says. “Now just stay still and let him use you.”

Athelia moans. She’s shaking and panting, but she doesn’t move.

“You like this, huh?” I say as I drive into her. “You always need more, don’t you? Dirty girl.”

“Yes,” she groans. “I’m your greedy, filthy whore.”

*Fuck.* I never thought hearing Athelia degrade herself would turn me on, but it’s hot as hell.

I pull out of her. “Cal, get on the bed.”

He doesn’t need to be told twice. Once he’s on his back, we situate Athelia on top of him. They both moan as his cock slides into her pussy.

“What if it’s too much?” Athelia asks as I push her down so her front is pressed into Cal’s chest.

“That’s what your safe word is for,” Cal tells her. “But you’ll like it.”

Athelia gasps when I slide into her ass again. “Oh—oh my god. So much. So full.”

I grab onto her hips and thrust into her. It’s even tighter than before, and I can feel Cal’s cock as he moves inside her. *Fuck*, it feels good.

“I think we should fuck all of her holes,” Kellan says. “Stuff her so full of cocks she can’t do anything but take it.”

Athelia buries her face in Cal’s neck. “I *caaaaan*’t.”

“Fine,” Kellan says with a grin. “We’ll just have to make you.”

He gets on the bed, but not before grabbing an open-mouth gag he brought in with us. Once he’s in front of Athelia, he grabs her hair and yanks her head up.

“No! No, not a gag. Kellan, please.”

“Beg all you want. It only makes my dick harder.” Kellan holds the gag up to her mouth. “Now open wide unless you want me to force you.”

With a grudging whimper, Athelia opens her mouth, and Kellan secures the O-ring behind her teeth. As he fastens the buckle behind her head, she sobs.

“Don’t let her come,” I say, driving into her ass. “She said please. She doesn’t get to come if she says that.”

Athelia makes a sound of protest that's cut off by Kellan thrusting into her mouth. He groans and grabs onto her head.

"Tap twice if you need me to stop," Kellan says. He doesn't wait for confirmation before he starts fucking her face mercilessly.

As I pound into Athelia, she gags on Kellan's cock. Cal is thrusting into Athelia from below, his hands gripping her waist.

"That's it," Kellan praises. "Use your tongue to please your master. Such a good girl."

As Athelia struggles to keep up with his punishing pace, I watch myself sliding in and out of her. Kellan and Cal will fuck her here too someday, but I'm her first. *She's fucking mine.*

"Such a good toy," Cal says as he thrusts into her. "Letting us use you like this"

Athelia is too busy trying to catch her breath in between Kellan's thrusts to respond.

"Pinch her nose shut," I tell Kellan. "Don't let her breathe until I say so."

Despite Athelia's noise of fear, Kellan does it. He shoves his cock all the way into her throat and holds her there. God, I wish I could see her face right now. I bet her cheeks are wet with tears and her eyes are wide and pleading.

"Oh, fuck," I groan. The mental image shoves me into an unexpected orgasm. I slow my movements, coming in her ass while she gags on Kellan's dick.

Once I've finished, I pull out of her slowly. Cal grabs her ass to get her at a slightly different angle and starts thrusting up into her harder.

*What a sight.* They stay like that until Kellan comes down her throat with a groan. He undoes the gag and tosses it onto the bed.

Athelia massages her jaw with one hand and holds herself up with the other. While she wipes at her mouth, Cal stills,

stroking her thighs.

“You good?” he asks.

She nods, looking up at Kellan. “Did I please you, master?”

With a smile, Kellan strokes a hand down her face. “You did. Now make Cal finish like the obedient slut you are.”

“Can I come again?” she asks. “I’ve been good.”

“You know the rules, *ma belle*. You say please, you don’t get to come.”

“But Kellan! I—”

He slaps her across the face, making her yelp in surprise.

“Hey!” Instantly, Cal shoves Athelia off him. He gets to his knees so he’s facing Kellan and acting as a barrier between him and Athelia. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing? Don’t hit her like that.”

*Shit.* Athelia likes it when we slap her, but I’ve always made a point not to do it in front of Cal. I meant to tell Kellan that he probably shouldn’t either, but I forgot.

“It’s okay.” Athelia wraps her hands around Cal’s arm and tugs him back so he’s not in between her and Kellan. “I like it when he does it.”

“Well, I don’t.” Cal’s voice is shaking. He caresses Athelia’s cheek, frowning at how red it is.

“Shit. I’m sorry, man,” Kellan says. “I wasn’t thinking.”

Athelia looks between the two of them questioningly, but she doesn’t say anything.

“Just don’t do it in front of me.” Cal takes Athelia into his arms. “I don’t want to see that.”

“We won’t,” I say firmly.

Athelia looks up at him, a soft smile on her lips. “I’m okay.”

He nods silently, watching her, his thumb stroking over her cheek. She reaches up and tugs his mask off so she can kiss him. It starts out gentle and sweet, but it quickly grows heated when Athelia reaches in between them to stroke Cal’s dick.

“Please use me,” she whispers. “Use my body to make yourself come.”

“Stop saying please,” I grit out. At this rate, she’s earned herself at least three more fuckings without getting to come. I’ll enjoy watching her get worked up and turned on only to be denied, and so will she, but I like making her come, too, dammit.

Athelia’s eyes widen when she realizes I’m keeping count. She glances at me, but Cal turns her face back to him.

“Get on your back, baby.”

She obeys wordlessly, watching as Cal situates himself between her spread legs. As he slides into her, she keeps herself propped up on her elbows so she can watch his dick as it disappears inside her.

“Cal,” she moans.

“I know.” He leans down and kisses her. “Next time, remember the rules, and we’ll let you come.”

She whimpers as he picks up his pace. Cal grabs her ankles to keep her spread open, and after a couple minutes, it looks like he’s getting close. He pounds into her harder, making her breasts bounce with every thrust.

“Tell me who you belong to,” Cal growls.

“You,” Athelia cries. “All of you.”

“Tell him what that means, Thelia,” I say.

“It means you can do whatever you want to me,” she chokes out. “It means I live to please you. To—to serve you.”

“That’s it,” Cal grits out. “Nothing but a toy to use and toss to the side once we’ve had our way with you.”

“Goddd, Cal, yes,” Athelia groans. “I want you to come inside me.”

“Fuck,” he shouts. He slams into her one more time before dropping to his elbows and slamming his lips to hers. He kisses her fiercely as he comes.

“I meant it,” Athelia whispers once Cal pulls back. “I’m yours. Forever.”

I smile. “Damn right you are.”

# Chapter Forty-Eight

## Cal

The rest of break goes smoothly. On Sunday, I volunteer to drive Athelia's car back to Pemberton. She seems like she has a lot on her mind, and if I can take something off her plate, I want to.

I like taking care of her.

The two of us haven't had a chance to talk about what happened the other day when Kellan slapped her. Athelia has wanted to ask—I've seen it on her face over the past couple days—but she's been respectful about my request to not get into it.

She deserves to know, though. It's probably not fair for me to request things of her because of my past without explanation. Thankfully, she doesn't seem to mind.

A couple minutes into the drive, one of my hands leaves the wheel, and I place it on her thigh. Her fingers trace over my knuckles lightly.

"What's on your mind?" I ask.

It takes Athelia a moment before she says, "What would you do if you had to do something, but you're afraid it'll backfire?"

Dread settles over my chest, cold and restrictive. “What are you talking about?”

“I... it’s complica—”

“Are you in trouble or something? Because if one more person touches a single goddamn hair on your head, Athelia, they’re dead. Fucking dead.”

“No,” she says quietly. “Nothing like that. I’d prefer not to get into specifics if you don’t mind. Eventually, I’ll explain, just... not right now.”

“Okay. I can respect that.” I squeeze her thigh. “Whatever it is—do you want to do it?”

“Yes,” she replies. “I... I think so.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. “I’ve been in a situation like that. With my...”

*Shit.* Athelia needs to hear what happened between me and my parents at some point, and all of a sudden, it’s kinda relevant. I hate talking about it, but if it’ll help her, I can do it.

“With me and my parents,” I say thickly. “I needed to get away from them, but I wasn’t sure what would happen to me if I did. I’d lose any stability I had.”

“Oh,” she whispers.

“They were... abusive,” I say, gripping the steering wheel tighter with my hand. “My mom emotionally, and my dad...”

“He hurt you?” Athelia asks softly.

I nod.

“Cal, I’m so sorry.” Her hand covers mine, squeezing. “That’s awful.”

“I stuck around until I was eighteen,” I say. “By then, I was old enough and big enough that I could fight back, but it was still miserable. I couldn’t stay.

“I had no clue how I was going to make things work. I knew the second I left my parents, they’d pull any financial support.



I lost my extended family, too—I knew most of them wouldn't believe me or would say I was exaggerating, and I was right.

“But Wes and Kellan were there for me through it all. I didn't have access to any cash, but it didn't matter. They covered everything for me. Mainly Kellan, since Kammes had control over Wes's trust fund, but he helped when he could. I owe them everything.”

“I'm glad you have them.” There's something reluctant about the way Athelia says it, but maybe I'm imagining it.

“So am I. They're my family now. I haven't seen my parents since before I started at Pemberton. Last year, I heard from my aunt that they moved to Virginia. I was relieved—it meant I could stop worrying about running into them around town.”

“And you feel... peace about your decision?” she asks me.

“I do. I have for years. At first, I thought I'd regret it. My extended family tried to tell me that I was blowing things out of proportion. That they're my parents, that I should forgive them, that I should try putting myself in their shoes.

“For a while, I started to believe them, but Wes and Kellan set me straight. It was hard, but it was the best for me. I couldn't let them back into my life—not when they'd only keep hurting me.”

“The best for you,” Athelia echoes, her voice distant.

When I glance over at her, she's staring out the windshield. Her eyes are unfocused, and she's biting her bottom lip.

“All this to say that if you're afraid of the consequences of the decision you have to make, we'll be there for you in whatever way you need us to be. I said Wes and Kellan are my family. You're my family, too, Thelia.”

In my peripheral vision, I see her turn her head to look at me.

“Our relationship is a messy one,” I say, not sure I can stop myself from where this is headed. Kellan already told her. I know it's not a competition, but I don't like holding back now that one of us has made the leap. “God, Thelia, we hurt you so

badly, and I'm so sorry. But we've gotten to the point we're at, and I'll never stop being grateful for that."

Athelia goes stiff. I rub my thumb back and forth on her thigh, hoping to soothe her.

"I've thought about you every day since the moment I laid eyes on you," I go on. "I know we still haven't fully made up for what we did to you, but I promise we will. I want to. I *need* to, Thelia, because I love you. I can't stand the fact that I caused you pain."

When Athelia snuffles, I glance at her again, only to see tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Thelia—"

"I love you, too," she says. Her voice is wobbly, and her fingers are wrapped so tightly around mine that it's painful.

We're about to pass an exit on the interstate, but I take it and pull into a gas station just off the road. The second the car is in park, I jump out and sprint to the passenger side.

Athelia is full-on sobbing by the time I'm opening her door and pulling her out and into my arms. She holds onto me tightly as she cries.

Doubt creeps into my mind—not of what she said, but of my timing. She's seemed off all day, and she obviously has a lot weighing on her right now. Maybe I should've waited.

"I—I'm sorry," she says.

"Don't apologize." I smooth a hand over her hair and smile down at her. "You're allowed to feel whatever you need to."

Athelia's eyes scrunch shut, and she buries her face in my chest. As she sobs, a few people give us lingering looks, so I glare back at them. It does the trick and makes them hurry away, ducking their heads to avoid my gaze. Athelia doesn't need people staring at her right now.

"I should've waited to tell you," I murmur. "I'm sorry, baby."

For some reason, that only makes Athelia cry harder. She clings to my soaked hoodie as she tries to collect herself.

“Hey, it’s okay. Just let it out. I’m here.”

“It’s just too much,” she sobs. “I don’t know what to feel, or—or what to think.”

“I know.”

“I wish the last three years were different,” she mumbles.

“I know. So do I.”

We would’ve cherished her—given her everything she wanted. We would’ve *protected* her, dammit. But instead, we turned into the monsters lurking in the shadows, waiting for the perfect opportunity to play with our prey before we devoured her whole.

It takes Athelia a couple more minutes to calm herself down. Eventually, she wipes at her cheeks with the sleeve of her jacket. Her eyes are red and still glassy, but she seems a little better.

“Can you not tell Wes or Kellan about this?” Athelia says in between snuffles. “I trust you to let me wait to talk about this until I’m ready, but they’ll try to force it out of me.”

“Of course, baby. I’ve got you. I always will.”

Her wince is barely perceptible. I’m not sure what it means, but it only makes me worry more.

“Thelia—”

“Thank you,” she says shakily before clasping my hand in hers. “Let’s just forget about this for now, okay? I can’t think about it.” She pauses, biting her lip, before saying, “Not the part about me saying I love you, though. Never forget that.”

I smile, kissing her on the cheek tenderly. “I couldn’t, Thelia. Not in a million years.”

# Chapter Forty-Nine

## Athelia

December is a war with myself. Guilt and anger, confusion and need. Everything else blends together in a blur of gray hues and eventual snow.

There are good moments, of course, but even those are tainted. Every time one of the boys does something nice for me, I doubt my plan a little bit more. And every time they fuck me to within an inch of my life, I can't help but wonder if I'll ever find someone else who understands what I need the way they do.

But I can't give up now—not when I'm so close. As long as I follow through, my plan is basically guaranteed to work. Kellan told me he loves me, and I know he meant it with his whole heart. Cal told me too, which almost broke me. He called me his *family*, and I'm planning on ripping him to shreds during a time of year that's already painful for him.

The worst part is that there was a sick, wretched part of me that meant it when I said I love them. My plan when they forced me to move in with them was to embed myself into every possible aspect of their lives. To make it impossible for them to untangle themselves from me, even after I'm gone.

I didn't realize they'd do the same to me.

I feel so *stupid*. I wanted to get revenge, not fall in love.

It'll take a long time to wash myself clean of them once I leave. But I have to do it. *I have to*.

It's what the boys deserve. That's what I keep telling myself, at least. I start a running list in one of my notebooks detailing all the horrible things they did to me, and whenever my resolve weakens, I read through it. It refuels the anger that's always simmering inside me, making it burn bright again.

The week before Christmas break, I find myself returning to my notebook daily—sometimes multiple times a day. They truly seem regretful of all they did to me. They've apologized countless times, and they're doing their best to pay for what they've done.

But it isn't enough. It never will be—not until they've felt the pain I did.

At least, that's what I tell myself the night after finals while I lay in bed with Cal. He fell asleep almost as soon as I shut the light off, but I've been wide awake for almost an hour. It's been an issue over the past month or so. For some reason, I just can't sleep well anymore.

Wes and Kellan are out working a job—the last one before winter break begins—but they should be back soon. Thankfully, since Cal opened up to me, he hasn't been working himself so hard. He's found other outlets—two, specifically. The first is talking to me about his childhood, and the second is fucking me until we're both so exhausted we fall asleep.

Both are equally painful for me. Even though I know I have every right to hurt Cal, I find myself inching closer and closer to the realization that I don't want to. Maybe if it was at a different time of year, but I'll be doing this a couple days before Christmas. According to Wes and Kellan, that's when he's always at his lowest.

Sex isn't any better. It's amazing, but that just makes me wonder if I'm making the biggest mistake of my life. I never thought I could find myself attached to these boys, but I am.

And god, they know exactly how to treat me in bed. What lines not to cross, when to push me—all of it. They gave me a safe word, but any time I've gotten close to using it, somehow they knew, and they backed off.

It's such an uncanny contrast to how they treated me earlier this semester. There was no respect for my boundaries, my needs, or my wants. They only wanted to break me down until I was at my lowest, only to somehow drag me down further.

But now...

Now, everything is so confusingly different, and a secret part deep inside of me aches for it to be enough.

"I didn't want to fall in love with you," I whisper, gently tracing the lines of Cal's face with my fingers.

He doesn't move, so I sigh and close my eyes. Finals are over, and I'm so tired I can't even think straight anymore. I have to try to get some sleep.

Unfortunately, not even two minutes later, I hear the front door banging open. The sound of Wes yelling fills the house, and Cal jolts awake.

"Cal," Wes hollers. "Get down here!"

"Fuck." Cal jumps out of bed, fully alert in a split second. He throws on pants before dashing out of the room.

*"Cal!"*

Cold dread closes around my chest. The way Wes sounds as he keeps yelling for Cal...

He's scared.

My stomach drops as I realize I haven't heard Kellan's voice at all. Tearing the covers back, I grab one of Cal's hoodies and run after him.

As I fly down the stairs, the boys come into view in the foyer. Kellan is covered in blood, and Wes has some smeared on his skin. They're both soaked from the rain.

"Kellan got stabbed," Wes says, holding out Kellan's arm for Cal to see. There's a large gash in his jacket, and blood

stains the cut skin of his upper arm.

“Not *stabbed*.” Kellan rolls his eyes. “Just... nicked.”

Based on the amount of blood, he’s obviously lying.

Cal immediately grabs Kellan’s arm and puts pressure on the wound. “Where’s the weapon? If it gets found with his blood on it—”

“I stole it from the guy,” Wes says. “We were outside, and it’s raining hard, so any blood has already been washed away.”

“I’m fine,” Kellan says, but when he tries to pull away, Cal doesn’t let him. “Dude, seriously. I put pressure on it during the drive, but I don’t know how much good it did. It’s not even that deep of a cut.”

“Get into the kitchen.” Cal starts walking down the hallway, dragging Kellan with him. “I need better lighting.”

Kellan protests, but I don’t catch whatever he says. My mind is spiraling out of control, and it feels like someone has wrapped their hand around my heart and is squeezing painfully.

“Hey.” Wes steps up to me, and even though it absolutely shouldn’t, the familiar scent of leather and pine soothes me.

“Did he almost die?” I hear myself ask, but I don’t feel my mouth form the words.

“Not even close.” Wes pushes my hair out of my face. “He’ll be okay.”

“What about you?” I search him, but the only blood on him seems to be Kellan’s.

“I’m fine, Thelia. Hey—hey, look at me.” Wes grabs my face and tilts it upward until I’m staring into his eyes. Such a deep brown, and right now, they’re so full of concern. “You don’t have to worry about us, my soul.”

I realize with startling clarity that I *am* worrying—that I have been. That the nights I have trouble sleeping and the nights the guys are working have almost a one-hundred percent overlap.

*No. No, I can't think like this.*

I tear away from Wes, and then I all but run into the kitchen.

“Were there any witnesses?” Cal is asking as he rips Kellan’s jacket off.

“Not any who’re still alive,” Kellan answers.

“This was supposed to be an easy job,” Cal says. “What the fuck happened?”

“Char’s intel was off,” Wes replies. “I called her on the way home. She was shocked, said she’ll look into it. Sounds like she has an informant who went rogue or something.”

“Fucking Christ,” Cal grumbles. “I should’ve come with you guys.”

“No.” Wes shakes his head. “We’ve gotten to the point where we can handle doing jobs two at a time. This isn’t your \_\_\_”

“Not anymore,” I snap, whipping around to face Wes. I shouldn’t be getting involved—shouldn’t be acting on the fact that I stupidly care—but it’s too late.

I *do* care. Too much.

“Athelia, it was a simple mistake. We’re not going to make it again.” Wes pulls me into his arms, and even though I’m worried and upset and *so fucking pissed*, I can’t stop myself from placing my hands on his chest so I can feel his steady heartbeat. “We’ll be *fine*.”

“No. No! What if it’s worse next time? What if—Wes, what if one of you—”

“That’s not happening.” Wes’s tone is hard and firm, and his eyes turn stony, even though he’s still holding me gently.

I breathe deeply, focusing on his heart, which is beating strongly under my palm. Kellan seems fine for the most part. His cheeks are even pink, probably from being out in the cold, which means he hasn’t lost a lot of blood—I hope.

“You need stitches,” Cal says.



“Well I’m sure as fuck not going to a hospital,” Kellan says. “Not worth the risk.”

“That’s why we got that med kit,” Cal says. “Can one of you grab it? It’s under the sink.”

“Sure,” I mumble, but Wes stops me.

“I’ve got it. Just relax.”

“No,” Cal says. “Thelia, come over here.”

I step across the kitchen to them. Kellan is sitting on the counter next to the sink, and Cal has a wad of paper towels pressed to Kellan’s arm.

“Put pressure here.” Cal grabs my hand and guides it to the paper towels. “I need to wash my hands and get ready.”

“Ready for what?” I ask shakily, pressing against Kellan’s wound.

“I already said. He needs stitches.”

*Right.* Cal knows what he’s doing, at least to some extent. He won’t let anything happen to Kellan tonight.

*But what about next time? What if there are more mistakes? Wes’s dad died doing this shit. How many others have? What’ll happen when they die? Will there be a cover-up? Will I even get to say goodbye?*

Before I realize it, I’m hyperventilating and blinking back tears. Wes pushes me out of the way and puts pressure against Kellan’s cut, and I realize I must’ve stopped somewhere in the middle of my downspiral.

Kellan grabs me with his free hand. “Stay close.”

All I want to do is fling my arms around his neck and beg him never to leave again, but I don’t want to get in the way. I intertwine my fingers with Kellan’s as I watch Cal finish washing his hands and grab supplies from the med kit that Wes left open on the counter.

“I don’t have any numbing agents,” Cal says as he steps up to Kellan. “Doubt it’ll hurt more than when it happened, though.”

“I can take it.” Locking eyes with me, Kellan lifts my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles. “Especially when I’ve got the world’s most beautiful woman to keep me company.”

For some reason, that does me in, and tears flood my eyes again. Kellan is so calm, so *collected*, like he’s out getting ice cream and not about to have an open wound sewn shut. I should be *his* emotional support right now, not the other way.

“Hey, there’s no need to cry,” Kellan says gently. “I’ll be okay.”

“I don’t want you to die,” I whisper, and I hate the way my bottom lip trembles.

“I won’t, *ma belle*.” Kellan winces as Cal pours something on his wound, but he plasters a pained smile onto his face. “We’ll be more careful. I’m not leaving you before I’ve barely had any time to enjoy being with you.”

He kisses me then, which is probably for the best, because it gives me a reason to close my eyes. It hides the guilt that I can’t push down any longer.

*How can I hurt them when they’re so gentle with me now?*

“Fuck, Cal,” Kellan hisses, pulling away with a grimace.

“I told you it’d hurt.”

“Yeah, but—Jesus! Can’t you be a little gentler?”

“Sure,” Cal says dryly.

“HEY! That was *harder*.”

“Yeah, and I’d stop making stupid fucking requests, or I’ll find ways to make this as painful as possible for you.”

“Seriously? You have horrible bedside manners, Dr. Graham. Maybe I’ll sue.”

“Maybe you should just try not to get stabbed again,” Cal grouses.

I cover my mouth with my hand to hide my tearful smile. This is terrifying for me, but grumpy Cal is kinda cute.

“There it is,” Kellan says, and I realize he’s still watching me. “Don’t hide your smile, *ma belle*. Let me see.”

Dropping my hand, I do my best to keep up my smile. But when Kellan grits his teeth and stifles a grunt, it falls.

“I’m okay,” he says thickly. “I can handle pain. Sometimes I even like it.”

He’s trying to make me laugh again, but the best he gets is an eye roll. He keeps trying the whole time Cal stitches him up even though his jokes get worse and worse.

By the time Cal is finished with Kellan and we’ve cleaned up the kitchen, I’ve at least stopped shaking. Kellan slides off the counter and wraps his uninjured arm around my waist.

“See?” he murmurs. “Good as new.”

“Get some sleep,” Cal says, “And do your best not to use that arm as much as possible so you don’t slow the healing process.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I’m serious,” Cal snaps. “You’re treating this like it isn’t a big deal, but you need to take it easy.”

“Fine. Jesus, sorry. I won’t use my arm.”

That seems to make Cal relax. He turns around to wash his hands in the sink again.

“I’m gonna have to start eating more apples,” Kellan whispers to me with a glint in his eyes.

“Why?” I whisper back.

“Well, how does the saying go? An apple a day keeps the doctor away?”

“I’m gonna fucking kill you,” Cal growls.

“Sure you will.” Kellan snickers before kissing me gently. “Now can we please go to bed? I’m exhausted.”

Cal glances between Wes and Kellan. “Just as long as we’re in the clear. There’s no way to trace this back to him?”

“None,” Wes says. “We’re good. Char even said she’d send in a cleanup team instead of waiting for someone to find the bodies and call the authorities.”

Kellan grins. “She said it’d fuck with her plans, which means that apparently, we’re not just pawns to her. I think she’s got a soft spot for us.”

Wes rolls his eyes. “Yeah, you need to sleep. You’re fucking delusional.”

In bed, Cal spoons me and keeps my body nestled against his. I must stay still for long enough that he thinks I’m asleep, because he speaks to me so softly that I almost don’t hear.

“I heard you earlier. I know you didn’t want to fall for us, but I’m glad you did. I don’t know what I’d do without you, Thelia.”

# Chapter Fifty

## Kellan

“I’ll miss you,” Athelia says as she wraps her arms around Haven. “Christmas won’t be the same without you there.”

“I’ll miss you, too,” Haven replies. “Maybe next year.”

“God, I hope so.”

Winter break began yesterday. However much we want to keep Athelia here for Christmas, we won’t force her. She wants to spend some time with her parents. Besides, she promised she’ll come back home early so we have some of break together.

“And you’ll drive safe?” Haven asks. “The roads are probably icy.”

“Yeah, some,” Athelia says, “but it’s nothing I haven’t driven in before. I’ll text you updates.”

“But not while you’re driving.”

With a smile, Athelia nods. “Not while I’m driving.”

Something passes between the two girls then. I’m not sure what it is, but it looks like a question and an answer, even though it’s just a glance. Almost as quickly as it came, it’s gone, and Haven and Athelia embrace one last time.

“Have fun with Julie and Ben,” Athelia says before Haven steps outside onto our front porch.

“I will. Tell your parents I said hi.”

When Athelia closes the door, she takes a deep breath. Haven has spent a lot of time here over the past month. The two of them are so close that sometimes I forget they didn’t grow up together.

“It’s only for a week,” Athelia says when she sees Cal’s pout. “I’ll be back for New Year’s.”

“I just wish you didn’t have to go at all,” Cal says on a sad sigh. “Having you for Christmas would be so much more fun.”

I jab him in the ribs. “You saying my parents aren’t fun?”

“Hey! Watch it with that arm. You still need to be careful.” Cal glares at me. “And your parents are fine. They’re just not Athelia.”

With a smile, she kisses Cal. “I’ll meet them some other time.”

“We’re spending next Christmas together,” Wes says firmly. “I don’t like you being gone for so long.”

Wes has it the worst out of all of us—he has to spend this Christmas with his mourning mother. If he didn’t dislike her so much, it wouldn’t be a problem, but he resents her a lot. Rightfully so.

“I think that sounds nice,” Athelia says. She kisses Wes next, running her hands through his hair. “I want to go home for a bit, but I’ll miss you guys, too.”

“Not as much as we’ll miss you, *ma belle*.” I draw her into my arms and press my lips to hers. Before she pulls away, I breathe in her honeysuckle perfume one last time.

We all walk her out to her car. It’s packed to the brim. She seems to be taking a lot home for winter break, but she said she’s planning on getting rid of most of it, and there’s a nice charity shop back home she wants to drop it off at.

“I’ll text you guys updates, too,” Athelia says as she opens her car door. “And we can do a group call tonight.”

“Every night,” Cal says.

She smiles. “Every night.”

Athelia seems reluctant to go. Something is burning in her eyes, and it looks suspiciously like regret. I was wondering if this would happen. She loves her parents, but I can tell she doesn’t want to leave. A quiet Christmas here at the house sounds like exactly what we need, but it’s too late to change her plans.

“I’ll talk to you later, then,” Athelia says quietly. She gives us all one more glance before sliding into her car.

We all watch her drive off until she turns and her car is no longer in sight.

“Did she seem off to you?” Wes asks. “She didn’t want to get out of bed this morning.”

Cal shrugs. “She always likes morning cuddles with me.”

“That’s not what this was,” Wes says. “I practically had to drag her to her feet, and then she clung to me like a koala or something.”

With a shrug, I start moving back toward the house. “I think she’s regretting her decision. She doesn’t want to leave, even if she does, you know?”

“Maybe so,” Wes muses. “I’m just worried, I guess.”

“Should we go to her parents’ and surprise her?” Cal asks hopefully.

“No,” I say gently, opening the front door. “I don’t think we should crowd her.”

“Right,” Cal mutters.

I know he’s disappointed, but I also know he agrees with me. Athelia could’ve invited us to spend Christmas with her family, but she didn’t. She needs her space, and that’s okay. It gives us a chance to show her that we’ll respect her boundaries.

We can wait a week. She'll come back to us.

And when she does, we're never letting her go anywhere without us again.



# Chapter Fifty-One

## Athelia

It takes me an hour longer than normal to get home. Two times, I have to pull over to bawl my eyes out. I put my notebook on my front seat so I could flip through it and read my list, but it barely helps.

*Can't I just forgive them? Can't that be enough?*

*You know it can't be.*

Even if I were to try to give the guys my all as-is, it'd never work. How could I look past the blatant imbalance of power? Not because there are three of them, but because of all the pain they caused me. Mind-blowing sex and caring gestures only go so far. The resentment would bleed in eventually, and by then, it'd be too late.

By the time I'm walking in my parents' front door, all I want to do is eat a big bowl of ice cream and sleep for at least twelve hours. My parents notice something is off the second they see me.

"I'm okay," I say before the oncoming deluge of questions. "The drive was just really stressful because of the snow."

Not entirely untrue, although the interstate was perfectly clear.

“Glad you made it home safe.” Mom pulls me into a hug, and it feels so good I almost start crying again.

“You sure there’s not something more bugging you?” Dad asks as he takes my bag from me.

“Positive.” I give him what I’m sure is an unconvincing smile. “Do we have ice cream?”

Mom beams at me. “Of course. Got your favorite.”

“Oh, thank god,” I groan.

“Why don’t you get yourself some,” Dad suggests. “I’ll grab your stuff.”

“Thanks.”

In the kitchen, I dish myself a large helping of chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream and practically cover it with chocolate syrup. After what I’ve been through, I deserve it.

While Mom does the dishes, I text Haven and the guys. All four of them respond almost immediately, but I only message Haven back. Now that the guys know I’ve made it, they won’t think I died in a car crash or something.

“So,” Dad says once he’s brought all my stuff in. “Why are you *really* moving back home for spring semester? I thought you liked it at Pemberton.”

I started the process of transferring to Pemberton’s online program almost as soon as I made up my mind, but I waited until after Thanksgiving break to talk to my parents about it. I didn’t want them letting anything slip to the guys.

When I told my parents I wanted to move back, I told them about one of my professors dying and that it felt weird to be there now. It’s barely the truth, and neither of them bought it, but I thought they were going to let it slide.

Apparently not.

Sighing, I stab at my ice cream with my spoon. “I just got really overwhelmed. Professor Kammes’s death hit harder than I thought it would, too. I think a change of scenery will help.”

“What about the boys?” Mom asks. “And Haven?”

“I’ll miss them,” I say, “but they all understand.”

My parents try to pry more out of me, but I’m not sure I’m ready to tell them that I’m going to end things with the guys. They’ll ask so many questions, and I haven’t come up with a story yet.

Dad is exhausted from work, as usual, so he heads to bed early. I curl up on the couch with Mom, and we start scrolling through Christmas rom-coms, but nothing interests me.

I contemplate getting another bowl of ice cream just to feel something, but my stomach is too full.

“What’s wrong?” Mom asks again.

“Nothing,” I insist. “I’m just tired. Senior year has taken a lot out of me.”

As she crosses her arms, she gives me a long, hard look. Even while she’s frowning, I’m struck by how beautiful my mother is. Her dark hair is graying, and some strands have fallen from her loose ponytail to frame her face. I’ve always been told that I look the most like her, and I hope I’ll look even half as pretty as she does when I’m her age.

“Honey,” she says. “You forget how similar we are—how well I know you.”

“Maybe I’ve changed,” I say, looking away.

Her laugh is soft as she angles her body to look at me. Over the years, she’s learned to give me space, so she doesn’t sit too close. “Of course you’ve changed. I’ve watched you grow in maturity and beauty so much since you started at Pemberton. But some things, Thelia... some things tend to stay the same.”

“Like?”

“Like your tells when you lie,” she says with mild amusement. Not mocking, just... her. Always so gentle and kind. “You think, after twenty-one years, I haven’t figured them out yet?”

Groaning, I bring my knees to my chest and rest my cheek against them. When my eyes meet hers, her lips are still turned up, but her eyes are crinkled with worry.

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” she says, “but I want you to know that I’m still here for you. Being an adult is *hard*. You’ve been trying to manage on your own, and I’m proud of you for that. But... well, you’ve always been one to process your pain out loud.”

I bristle.

“I don’t mean it as an insult, honey,” she assures. “Just an observation. If you have someone else you work through your emotions with now, that’s good. But if you don’t—or even if it’s only for winter break—I’ll happily be that person for you again.”

My chest aches. Even if her and Dad have always been overprotective, it’s only ever been because they care so deeply about me. For most of high school, I counted them as some of my best friends. We did almost everything together, and there were almost no secrets I kept from my mom.

It’s not common for most kids, I don’t think, but I trusted my parents wholeheartedly. Still do. I just needed some time on my own to figure out how to be an adult without having to wear metaphorical safety pads the whole time.

Now, though, I’ve discovered how cold and harsh the world outside of my parents’ protective circle can be. It eats you alive, breaks your heart, and spits you out without a second thought.

My phone buzzes on the couch next to me, a notification popping up on the screen.

*Kellan: Love you, ma belle. I hope you’re having a good evening.*

Hurt ripples through me. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Do what, hon?”

Again, my phone buzzes.

*Cal: Is everything okay?*

Can I do this? Can I follow through with my plan, knowing that I’m going to be hurting myself in the process? I wasn’t

supposed to develop feelings for them. It wasn't supposed to get this complicated.

"Oh, Athelia," Mom murmurs, and I realize my face is scrunched up, and tears are streaming down my face.

"I missed you," I sob as I fling myself into her arms. "And I don't know what to do anymore."

Mom locks her arms around me, and I cry harder at her familiar lavender scent and the comforting sounds she makes. How did I think I could survive without her? Why did I ever try?

The thought to be embarrassed doesn't even cross my mind as my mom holds me in her lap while I cry and cry and cry. Eventually, my tears subside enough for me to get a coherent sentence out.

And, before I can think better of it, I curl up with my head in her lap and tell her far more than I should.

...

"They did *what*?" Dad asks in the morning.

I shift uncomfortably, staring at the dining room table. We just finished eating breakfast together while Mom and I explained everything I told her last night.

I left out a lot—the guys' jobs, anything to do with Professor Kammes, and most of Halloween night. Still, the bullying alone is enough to enrage my father to the point where he's raising his voice, which is something he rarely does.

"Please don't tell me it was stupid to date them," I mumble.

"You told us your laptop crashed," he states flatly.

"I'm sorry I lied," I whisper.

*Please don't be angry with me. Please, please, please—*

"Athelia." My dad's voice is gentle as he reaches across the table and covers my hand with his. "Why didn't you tell us?"

“I wanted to prove that I could handle it on my own.” With a hollow laugh, I look up at my parents. “I didn’t want you guys to worry or tell me to come home. It was stupid, I know.”

“Honey,” Mom says soothingly, “we’re not judging you. This isn’t your fault. It’s theirs.”

“I wish you’d told us over Thanksgiving break,” Dad says darkly. “I would’ve beaten the shit out of them.”

My father has always been a gentle man. I don’t think he’s ever hit someone, but I know he would for me or Mom. He’d never stand a chance against the guys, though—not with what they do for work.

“You told me last night that you’re still feeling conflicted,” Mom says. “You’re not sure you’re making the right choice in cutting them off?”

“They apologized,” I say weakly. “And they’ve been so caring over the past two months. They’ve helped me—”

*They’ve helped me heal.* Not just by supporting me and encouraging me, although the guys have done plenty of that. But they’ve shown me that sex can be good again. That I can experience my fantasies consensually—healthily. My relationship with the guys has been toxic for years, but they’re working to change that.

“They’ve helped you what?” Dad asks.

*What am I supposed to say?* If I tell my parents the boys helped me heal, they’ll ask from what, and I don’t want to talk about Professor Kammes with them. There’s nothing they can do, anyway.

“They’ve helped me grow,” I say. “It’s like they’re completely different than who they were three years ago—three months ago.”

“Yeah,” Dad says, “because they want something from you now.”

*Oh.* Is that true? Could it be? Is it possible that they’re only treating me well now so that I’ll stay with them?

No—no, that can't be it. They forced me into living with them. They could've forced me into everything else.

"It just feels like they've changed," I whisper.

"Whether they have or not, you're worth finding someone who'd be horrified at the thought of hurting you." Mom gives me a sad look. "I know you're unsure of what step to take, but honey... can you truly forgive them?"

"I don't know," I mumble.

My parents exchange a glance, and I brace myself for whatever is about to come my way. A lecture? Are they going to try to control me? Take my phone away and never let me leave the house again?

"We understand you're an adult now," Dad starts off slowly. "It's not like we can tell you what to do anymore. But Thelia... I strongly suggest you never speak to them ever again."

I stare at my phone, which is sitting on the table next to my empty plate. I woke up to a flood of texts and calls from the guys. It hasn't even been a day since I last messaged them, but they're already worried out of their minds.

I can't deny that it feels good. Even though I don't want to hurt them, I really, *really* do.

"Let them go," Mom says. "At least for now. Give yourself some time and space away from them so you can get a more objective view on things."

"No, not just for now." Dad crosses his arms. "They don't deserve you, and no matter how hard they try, they'll never be able to make up for this. How do you know you can trust them? Thelia, please. There are others out there who will treat you with love and respect from day one. You're worth that. I promise."

My phone goes off with a notification.

**Wes:** *Talk to me.*

"Athelia," Dad says. "*Please.* You at least owe it to yourself to see other people. You have a chance at happiness—a chance

at a relationship built on trust. Don't throw that away for three boys who've bullied you for most of your college career."

The message from Wes disappears as my screen shuts itself off. I blink, surprised I'm not close to tears.

Ripping my eyes from my phone, I meet Dad's gaze. "Okay. I'll cut them off."



# Chapter Fifty-Two

## Kellan

Christmas is miserable.

In the last three days, Athelia hasn't answered a single text or call from us. We try to get in contact with Haven, but she's not at her dorm, and she's not answering her phone.

We have the rest of December off from work. When Char found out I'd been injured, I think she wanted us to all have a little break. I was frustrated at first, but now, I'm grateful for the time off. I can't think straight like this.

As usual, Cal spends Christmas Eve with me at my parents' house. Neither of us sleep much. How could we?

Christmas dinner with my extended family is torture. The conversation is dull, and everyone asks me and Cal about our futures and our plans. I give the same generic answer I always do, coasting through the dinner on autopilot. My grandparents' disapproval doesn't even bother me.

My only thoughts are of *her*.

Once everyone has gone and my parents are in bed, Wes comes over. He looks as shitty as I feel.

Cal and I have run through every possible scenario. Athelia said her parents were protective. Maybe they were acting over

Thanksgiving break, and they convinced her to drop us. Maybe they took her phone away. Maybe it died or she lost it.

But I keep coming back around to one reason for Athelia ghosting us. When she left, she took most of her stuff back home with her. She said it was to donate it, but...

“I don’t think she’s planning on coming back,” Wes says.

We’re all gathered in the living room. The gas fireplace is lit, and we’ve kept most of the lights off.

“Why’d she do that?” Cal asks. He’s taken it the hardest out of the three of us. Of course he has.

“Maybe she decided she doesn’t want to be with us after all,” Wes says tiredly.

It’s unlike him to be so passive. I was expecting anger. Hurt. For him to suggest that we kidnap her and bring her back here regardless of what she wants. But he’s quiet, a shell of his usual self.

“No,” Cal says. “She wouldn’t do that. Not like this. She told me she loved me.”

“Obviously, something changed.” Wes has been staring into the fireplace blankly, but now he moves his gaze to us. “Do you think it was her parents?”

I cross my arms. “I think we need to find out.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Wes asks.

“I already told her the other day. I’m not letting her go when I only just got a chance to be with her again.”

“What if this is a test of some kind?” Cal asks. “What if she wants us to prove that we’ll always fight for her?”

I look to Wes. “What do you think?”

He sighs. “God knows she has every right to test us. It’s a possibility.”

“Then we’ll fight for her.” I stand. “Obviously, texting and calling isn’t enough. We’ll have to do this in person.”

With a nod, Wes says, “I agree. We’ll leave in the morning.”

...

When we arrive at the Harper residence, Athelia's car is parked in the driveway. At least she's here. I was worried she'd be out with friends or something.

My heart is in my throat as we walk up the front porch's steps together. I ring the doorbell before shoving my hands in my leather jacket's pockets.

There's movement in the door's window before we hear it unlocking. My heart sinks as Bill opens it. His face is hard, his eyes cold.

"What are you boys doing here?" he asks without an ounce of warmth.

"Can we talk to Athelia?" Cal asks.

"No. She doesn't want to speak to you or even see you."

"Bill, please," I say. "We just want an explanation."

"She owes you *nothing*," he spits out. "After the way you three have treated her over the past few years, I'm surprised she even gave you the time of day. Now get the fuck off my property. If you ever come back, I'm calling the cops on you."

He slams the door in our faces.

Pain twists through me. She told her parents about us? Last I checked, she seemed reluctant to.

*What changed?*

"Wait," Cal calls. He raises his hand to knock, but I grab his hand.

"No. Let's just go."

"But—but she..." Cal trails off as he stares at the closed door.

"We can find another way," I say quietly. "But right now, we need to get off the Harper's front porch before Bill calls the cops on us."

Wes and I practically have to drag Cal to the car. I shove him into the back before sliding into the driver's seat. Wes

slams the passenger side door much harder than he needs to. When I turn to face him, he's glowering.

"I'm not leaving without talking to her."

...

We watch the house from a distance for a few hours. I'm not sure what we're waiting for, exactly—Athelia to leave, or her parents to.

Cal has barely said a single word since Bill told us off. Fuck, none of us have. None of us saw this coming.

Before Athelia left, we were talking about spending next Christmas together. She promised she'd come back home so she could celebrate New Year's with us. So why is she doing this?

I think back over the past two months, going through every memory with a fine-tooth comb. It really seemed like she cared about us. Not to mention, when she realized I was hurt the other week, she freaked out. She was terrified of losing me.

Even now, the memory of her tear-stained cheeks tugs at my heartstrings. There's no way she was faking her fear that night.

*What happened?*

"Hey." Wes nudges my arm. "She's leaving."

My gaze sharpens on the silhouette of Athelia leaving her parents' house. She climbs into her car without even glancing around.

Like she actually thinks we'd leave.

Once she's on the road, we follow at a safe distance. Unsurprisingly, she heads to the cafe she said she loves. We park a block or two away and hurry along the sidewalk.

The cafe is mostly empty except for a young couple up front. Athelia is sitting at a table in the back with a book in her hand.

"Order for Athelia," the barista calls as we walk past the counter.

Wes grabs the mug just as Athelia looks up. When she lays eyes on us, her face falls.

“What are you doing here?” she asks as Wes places the mug on her table.

“We need to talk.” I slide over an extra chair as Wes and Cal take the two available ones at her table.

“N-no.” She closes her book and moves to stand, but she must realize we have her cornered, because she doesn’t get up. “I don’t want anything to do with you three.”

“You don’t sound very convinced.” Wes crosses his arms and leans back in his chair. He’s masked his hurt well, only showing Athelia the cold, disinterested stare he used to give her.

He’s already put his walls back up, and realizing it is like a stab to the gut.

“I...” Athelia swallows audibly. Her eyes are darting between the three of us as she tries to figure out what to say.

“Just tell us why,” I say. “You at least owe us that.”

That seems to flip a switch inside her. She glares at me, her hands forming fists on the table. “Excuse me? I owe you *nothing*.”

“Thelia,” Cal says quietly. There’s no hiding the hurt in his voice—the betrayal in his brown eyes. “Why?”

“Because it’s what you deserve,” she says flatly. “And what I deserve, too.”

“You can’t just ghost us like this,” Wes says. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Whatever I want,” Athelia replies coolly.

Wes winces.

“So you’re throwing everything away,” I say. “Everything we’ve built.”

“The only thing I built was a ledge high enough to shove you off of so I could watch you fall.” She says it without

emotion. When we first walked in, we caught her off guard, and I saw her regret. I know I did. But now it's gone.

"No," Wes grits out. "You can't do this, Athelia. You manipulated us for months, all for what? For you to hurt us?"

"How does it feel?" The words are quiet as they leave her lips, but her gaze is razor-sharp.

My heart sinks.

*Fuck.*

"But you... you said you love me." Cal's voice almost breaks. He's close to crying, and I haven't seen him do that since high school.

"I lied."

Wes's gaze slides to Cal as he tries to keep it together. The two of us have become protective of Cal over the years—of course we have. His own fucking family abused him.

"We're leaving," Wes says.

Cal shakes his head, but Wes stands, and I follow suit.

"I'm not letting her hurt you more." Wes pulls Cal up and pushes him away from the table. "We're done here."

Before I follow them, I turn to face Athelia one last time. "It was really all a lie?"

She nods.

*"All of it, ma belle?"*

She winces at the nickname, and her defenses fall just enough for a second of longing to slip through. "All of it," she whispers.

But I have my confirmation. It doesn't matter if this was Athelia's plan all along. She's not entirely on board.

"Kellan," Wes says. "Let's go."

I give Athelia another moment, praying she'll change her mind, but her expression has hardened again. My hopes crash to the ground as she turns away and opens her book.

Did I imagine that look in her eyes? Was it just wishful thinking? *No*. It was there, I know it was.

But as Athelia continues to ignore me, I realize it doesn't matter. Even if she's at war with herself, she's chosen her path.

And it leads her far, far away from us.

# Chapter Fifty-Three

## Cal

I never thought I'd experience a part of my life that's darker than my teenage years, but after Athelia dismisses us like we were fucking dogs, that changes.

My will to live slips from my grasp, and I can't even do the bare minimum. January comes and goes. By Valentine's Day, I'm failing every single one of my classes. Kellan helps me through the process of dropping out when I realize there's no way I could possibly catch up.

In every aspect of life, I've failed.

My parents.

Pemberton.

Athelia.

Possibly the worst part is realizing that this is how things should be. I was never supposed to exist—an accident that turned into a burden that turned into someone's worst nightmare.

The world would've been a much better place if I'd never existed.



By the end of February, I haven't left the house in weeks. Wes and Kellan have tried to get me to do literally anything, but I can't. Just laying in bed drains all my energy.

Hearing the guys come and go throughout the day only pulls me further into my depression. Why can they continue on but I can't? Why can't I be like them?

*They probably hate you for laying around like a useless lump.*

Tonight, hearing someone in the kitchen only makes everything worse. Usually, I'm the one who cooks for everyone. I love doing it, but lately, making a meal is just too much.

Everything is too much.

*Worthless. A waste of space that's been draining my bank account since before you were even born.*

I haven't heard my mother's voice in my head in a long time. I thought I banished it, but it's come back full force. It's like she's here with me. Like I'm a kid again.

Her taunts echo in my head until they're all I can think of. What would she tell me about Athelia? That I was never good enough for her? That I was a fool for thinking she could forgive me? Love me?

*I thought she was my family.*

Somewhere between darkness creeping into my bedroom and my tears drying, I reach for relief, for peace, for anything to end this. I can't keep living like this. I can't keep *living*.

It's better if I'm not here, anyway. I'm a mistake. A monster. A naive boy who thought he could fix his mistakes but has never been so wrong in his short life.

My heart aches as I sit up in bed. I barely realize my hand is moving until it closes around the knife I keep on my nightstand. Vaguely, I realize I should move to the tub to make cleanup easier for whoever finds me.

*Are you really going to do this to them? You're really going to make them be the ones who find you? Selfish. So goddamn*

*selfish.*

But it's not enough to stop me. I need the pain in my chest to stop. I need everything to stop.

I know just what it takes to wring the life out of someone's body. I haven't contemplated doing it to my own in years, but here I am, holding the sharp blade to my wrist.

In my last moments, I think of Athelia. Her soft brown eyes, her dark green hair, the love that took over her features whenever she looked at me. *No*—not love. Manipulation.

*What would she think if she saw me right now? Would she be happy?*

The question fills my mind, consuming me so much that I don't notice the footsteps in the hallway.

Don't register my door opening.

Don't comprehend what Wes says to me.

Don't truly see his shadow cross over my bedroom floor.

"Cal. CAL!" Wes knocks the knife away from me, and it clatters to the floor. "What the fuck are you doing?"

I reach for the knife wordlessly. Wes grabs my hand and wrenches it away.

"Don't," I yell. "Just let me, okay?"

"Let you? Are you fucking kidding me? You think I'm just going to stand by and let you die?" Wes snatches the knife from the ground, closing it and sliding it into his pocket.

*Oh well.* I have more. Once he's gone—

"Where are your other weapons? Fuck, I'm searching your room." Wes turns toward my desk and starts opening drawers. "Kellan!"

"Just let me go. I can't do this, Wes. It's not worth it."

Wes whips around. He looks furious, but the anger dies when he gets a good look at me. Fear swirls in his eyes, mixed with an ache that matches my own. As he kneels in front of me, he grabs my hands. "It is, Cal. Everything hurts right now,

I know, but it'll get better with time. I promise, okay? Just stay with us."

"I was never supposed to be here." A new wave of tears flood my eyes. "Why stay?"

"What's wrong?" Kellan asks from my open door. His brows furrow as he takes us in. "Cal?"

"I came up to see what he wanted for dinner, and he..." Wes's grip on my hands tightens.

"He *what?*" Kellan asks impatiently.

"He was gonna kill himself," Wes says softly.

Kellan swears under his breath before stepping into the room. "Cal..."

"Why did you have to come in?" I whisper, dropping my head.

*Couldn't even kill yourself. Fucking idiot.*

"There's more to life than her," Wes tells me.

But that's not it. She's only a small piece of a much larger picture. The nail in my coffin, I suppose, since she's the one who finally pushed me to my breaking point.

"Cal," Kellan says quietly. "We can't lose you, too."

Slumping onto my bed, I watch silently as Wes starts going through my room. He throws anything that I could hurt myself with into the hallway.

At some point, Kellan leaves, storming down the stairs and slamming the front door. The sound is like a stab to the heart, and I scrunch my eyes, hoping to shut it out.

*You shouldn't have hesitated.*

*Now you've failed them, too.*

# Chapter Fifty-Four

## Athelia

I stare at the to-go cup on my dresser. It's been empty since this morning, not even a half hour after it showed up, but I haven't thrown it out yet. I always struggle to throw them out.

Since I cut the guys off, I've gotten a delivery every single morning—a hot apple cider from the cafe downtown. I never order them, but I don't need to ask who they're from. I know.

I can't tell if they're doing it as an apology or as a way to make sure I'll never forget them. Every time I look at the damn to-go cups, all the pain comes back, just as fresh as if it was yesterday.

It's been a little over two months, and the regret still lingers. I thought by now, I'd be happy with the choice I made. With distance, I'd gain clarity, right? I'd realize that I was delusional—that they manipulated me.

Instead, doubt prods at me with everything I do. My grades have suffered, but only enough to bring me down to a temporary B in certain classes. I'll get them up again.

*I wonder how the guys are doing.*

Have they moved on to other girls already? Do they still think of me as often as I think of them? Are they okay?

I roll my eyes. I should be happy I hurt them, not worrying about them. They're my *bullies*, for fuck's sake.

*And you love them.*

"No," I grit out, "I don't."

The sound of someone pulling into the driveway piques my interest. My parents are at a party, and they said it'd run late. I wasn't expecting them back until around midnight, but maybe they decided to come home early.

"Athelia," someone yells just as a car door slams shut.

Someone male.

Someone who sounds like...

*No.*

"Athelia," he shouts again. "Athelia, get down here."

Half of me wants to ignore him, but I can't. I need to see him, if only to assuage my worries.

Downstairs, Kellan is pounding on the front door and ringing the doorbell nonstop. When he sees me in the window, he finally stops.

"What?" I ask.

"Open the damn door," he yells.

My fingers hover over the lock. "Why?"

"Just listen to me. *Please.*"

Against my better judgment, I unlock the door. Something about the way Kellan said that has more worry pricking at my heart. He sounds scared—desperate, even. I've never seen him get anywhere close to either of those.

"You have five minutes," I say after letting him in.

He doesn't waste a single second. "It's Cal. He's... not doing well."

Unease spreads through my stomach. Out of all the guys, Cal is the one I've been worried about the most. I left him right in the middle of the hardest time of year for him. I knew

it'd hurt more—knew it could possibly make him downspiral—but I had to.

Even if I let my feelings for them develop, we were always destined to crash and burn.

*You're worth finding a man who'd be horrified at the thought of hurting you, no matter what.*

“Well, I’m not doing too great, either,” I say bitterly. Is that seriously it? That’s what he came down here for? I reach for the door to kick him out, but he grabs my arm.

“He almost killed himself, Thelia.”

“What?” I stare at him in disbelief, waiting for a cruel smile to take over his face.

*He can't be telling the truth. Cal wouldn't do that.*

*He would after what you did to him.*

Kellan’s expression doesn’t change. This isn’t some prank or a ruse to get me to come back.

My heart stops.

“Kellan,” I whisper. “I never meant for him to...”

“Wes managed to stop him,” Kellan says. He sounds so tired. “Thelia, I... I know we hurt you. We don’t deserve a second chance, and we never did. But I don’t know what to do. We can’t leave him alone, and I don’t know how to make this better. Except...”

He won’t look at me as I realize what he can’t say.

*Except you.*

“Are you trying to manipulate me?” I ask. Can’t help it. “If you’re lying to me about this, I’ll never forgive you. *Never, Kellan.*”

“I’m not lying. I was done with you, Athelia. You paid us back for what we did to you, and you made your point. I’ll always want you—I’ll always *need* you. But I won’t force you into something you don’t want. That would hurt me more than being apart from you.”

I search Kellan's face, looking for any hint that he's fucking with me. If they've gone back to their old ways, it'll break me all over again, but he doesn't look happy to see the heartbreak on my face.

He looks terrified.

"All right," I say. "I'll come back."

I'm not sure how I'll explain this to my parents, but I'll come up with something during the drive. It only takes me a minute to pack a bag. I grab enough clothes for a week, and Kellan helps carry my laptop and textbooks out to his car.

Even as I step outside and lock the front door behind me, I feel like I'm making a mistake.

*Is this what my life is destined for? One bad decision after another?*

But I've been ignoring the invisible pull on my heart for the past two months. It's been tugging, begging me to head back to Pemberton. I've been beginning to realize that it's never going to go away.

"When did it happen?" I ask Kellan as he backs out of my parents' driveway.

"This evening. Wes was with him when I left."

*This evening.* It's half past nine right now.

"You left right away."

"It was the only thing I could do, okay? I've tried everything since Christmas. It's like he's locked himself away, Thelia, and neither Wes nor I can get him to come out again."

My heart aches at the pain laced into Kellan's words. He's truly at his wit's end. "What do you mean you've tried everything?"

"Everything! We can barely get him out of bed. Getting him to eat is twice as hard. He dropped out of school, he barely talks, he's—"

"He dropped out of school?"

Kellan doesn't answer right away, and the silence almost suffocates me. "He was failing all his classes," he says quietly. "He hasn't been working, either. His will to live is just... gone. Wes and I tried to be there for him, but he shut us out. We were hoping with time, he'd get better."

*Oh my god.*

"Maybe we should've known this is where things would lead," Kellan continues, his voice thick with regret. "I think neither of us wanted to admit it. We should've gotten him help weeks ago, but when we asked about therapy, he refused."

"It's not your fault," I say softly. *It's mine.*

My chest feels tight, like something is pressing against it, threatening to crush me. I got my revenge. This is exactly what I wanted—to make them feel the way they made me feel.

So why am I heartbroken?

*I never wanted them to hurt themselves.*

"I..." Kellan stops and takes a deep breath. "Is this what we put you through? This level of depression?"

I turn my head so I'm looking out the window. Why is he asking that now?

"Before," he says, "I thought I got it. When you said you were suicidal, I thought I fully grasped what you meant. But this... God, Thelia, I wouldn't wish this on anyone. We're all hurting, but Cal... he's almost unrecognizable."

I close my eyes and lean my head against the window. The glass is cool, and I try to focus on that instead of my growing worry for Cal.

"Thelia. Is that how we made you feel?"

"Yes," I whisper.

Kellan doesn't speak after that, and neither do I. There's too much to say but no right way to say it.

The drive back to Pemberton is the longest four hours of my life.



...

“He’s probably sleeping,” Kellan says as he unlocks and opens the front door quietly. “If you want, you can sleep in my bed, and I can crash on the couch down here.”

“I’m not stealing your bed from you.”

As I step inside, an unexpected feeling settles over me. Being back in this house feels strangely like coming home. I’ve missed it here. I’ve missed *them*.

Kellan shuts the door behind us. “I don’t mind, Thelia. I’m the one who dragged you all the way out here in the middle of the night.”

“Is my couch still in my room?”

“We haven’t touched it.”

“Then I’ll sleep—”

“What the fuck is she doing here?”

Wes’s voice startles me, and my gaze snaps to where he’s standing at the top of the stairs. His glare is murderous, and with his arms crossed, he looks every bit as intimidating as he actually is.

“She can help him,” Kellan says.

“No. She’ll only break him more. Get her out of here before he hears her voice.”

“He’s still awake?” Kellan asks.

“He’s been in and out. We’ve been talking.”

Hope fills my heart. There’s no way I’ll be able to sleep without seeing him first.

“I don’t want to break him,” I say.

Wes clenches his jaw. Seeing him again brings so many feelings to the forefront of my mind. I want to touch him, to be wrapped up in his arms again and feel his lips against mine. But at the same time, I want to recoil and hide behind Kellan to shield myself from the way Wes is looking at me.

*Why do I always have to be at war with myself?*

“Something needs to change.” Kellan crosses his arms and matches Wes’s glare. “We can’t watch Cal around the clock. Give her a chance.”

“Absolutely not.”

*Oh, fuck this.*

I march up the stairs. “Listen, I know I fucked you all up, but I gave you a chance. The least you can do—”

“Did you? I thought it was all fake.” Wes arches a brow. His gaze is sharp with a mocking challenge.

“I—whatever!” I try to push past Wes, but he shoves me back, keeping a firm hold on me so I don’t tumble down the stairs. “Just let me see him.”

“No.”

“*Wes.* I want to help him. He’s like this because of me. Let me try and fix this.”

It doesn’t seem like he’s going to budge, but then he says, “On one condition.”

“What?”

“Tell the goddamn truth.”

My breath catches in my throat. “W-what?”

“Tell me it wasn’t all a lie.”

“Seriously?” I grit out.

Wes shrugs. “Your choice, Harper.”

I don’t want to go back to this place with Wes—the constant power struggle. Knowing that he’s reverted to it without a second thought makes my heart ache even though it makes sense. I hurt him—I hurt all of them. It doesn’t matter that it was in retaliation. The logical thing for him to do is put his walls back up.

But if this is what I have to do to get to Cal, then so be it.

Raising my gaze to meet Wes’s hard, dark eyes, I say, “It wasn’t all a lie.”

I've never really, truly admitted it to myself. In bits and pieces, sure, but I've always found ways to deny it. I was delusional, I confused sex for love, I was working through my trauma, I wasn't thinking clearly—whatever it took for me to justify the feelings I didn't want to acknowledge.

Now, Wes is forcing me to. I was expecting the admission to be a burden, but instead, I feel fifty pounds lighter.

“I wasn't supposed to fall for you three,” I continue. “All I wanted was to hurt you. But... that changed.”

Still at the bottom of the stairs, Kellan releases a long, audible breath. I want to turn, to tell him that I meant what I said—that I love him, and I can't get myself to stop. But I'm caught in Wes's gaze.

Conflicting emotions cross his face as he watches me. His hand moves, reaching toward me, but he shoves it into his pocket at the last second.

“Please, Wes. Just let me see Cal.”

“Fine. But don't you dare hurt him more,” Wes says, his voice low and threatening.

A shiver runs through me. “I won't.”

Wes's eyes soften, but they harden just as quickly. He wants to believe me, but he can't. Part of me feels vindicated by his pain, but at this point, I don't care about revenge anymore.

When Wes steps to the side, I give him a thankful yet uneasy smile and pass by him. I've walked down this hallway so many times, but this feels different.

Downstairs, the house felt like home, but after seeing Wes, I feel like I don't belong. Like I'm an intruder.

*Am I about to make everything worse?* I wonder as I push Cal's door open.

His room is dark, and it's a wreck, like someone tore through the entire thing. The knife he normally keeps on his nightstand is gone.

“Cal?” I say quietly, shutting the door behind me. I can barely make out his body curled up on his bed.

“I’d prefer not to be haunted,” he mumbles.

I can’t help my amused breath as I step up to his bed and turn on his lamp. “I’m not haunting you. Look at me.”

Slowly, Cal rolls over. When he sees me, he narrows his eyes.

“Hey,” I whisper.

But Cal just blinks a couple times, like he thinks I’ll disappear when his vision clears. He waves his hand in front of me before finally poking me. When his finger hits something solid, he shoots up. “Thelia?”

“The one and only.” I smile even as tears prick my eyes.

Cal is a *mess*. He’s paler than normal, his hair needs trimmed, and I don’t think he’s changed his sheets since I left. Not to mention the usual spark that’s missing from his eyes.

“*Thelia.*” Cal stumbles to his feet and throws his arms around me. He crushes me to his chest and buries his face in my neck, inhaling deeply.

“Let me breathe,” I wheeze when he only holds me tighter.

“You came back.” His voice breaks as he grabs onto my shoulders to hold me at arms’ length. In an instant, his smile falls, and doubt creeps onto his features. “Wait. Why did you come back?”

“I...”

*I don’t know.*

Cal lets go of me and steps back. “Why are you here?”

The words are on the tip of my tongue, but I’m not sure if I should say. Does he know Kellan came and got me? It doesn’t seem like it.

“Are you back for good?” The hope in his voice is like an icy stab to the heart.

*Fuck.* What am I doing? My only thought earlier was that I don't want Cal to die. But if I'm not planning on staying, am I only shoving him further into his downspiral by showing up and then leaving again?

"I'm not sure," I say unsteadily. "I just..."

*Shit. Shit, shit, shit. What am I supposed to say?*

"You just what?" he asks, his eyes turning cold as stone in an instant. "If you're here to toy with me, then get the fuck out."

"I don't want you to die," I blurt. "But I don't know if I can stay, either."

He looks away, his shoulders sagging. "Kellan told you."

I nod.

"So you're not here because you missed us." His words are steeped with disappointment. "You're just here to assuage your guilt."

"What? No! I'm here because I care about you."

"Don't lie to me," he mutters, turning away and getting back into bed. "Just leave."

"Cal! I *did* miss you. Is that what you want to hear? That I've been fucking miserable? That I can't focus on school, that I'm terrified I made the worst mistake of my life, that I can't even sleep anymore?"

He stares at the wall, but I watch him clench his jaw at the last part. Hurt or not, he still cares.

"Cal, I'm so—"

"Don't," he says, his voice strained. "Please don't apologize."

"Why?"

"Because maybe if you don't, it'll finally feel like enough."

*What?*

"Enough to what, Cal?"

“To deserve you again.” Dropping his head, Cal stares into his lap, and his next words are so quiet I almost miss them. “To deserve to live.”

“Cal... Cal, what do you mean?”

“You can’t tell me I deserve it,” he mumbles. “Not after what I’ve done. Who I’ve become.”

“What? No.” I fall onto the bed next to him and grab his hands, thankful when he doesn’t yank them away. “Your existence is enough. You deserve to live simply because you *are*.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it.”

“It’s not,” I whisper. Despite my better judgment, I run my fingers through his hair. It’s greasy and longer than I’m used to, but I don’t care. I need to feel him, to know that he’s still alive. “Cal, I promise it’s not.”

“All I’ve done is wreck things,” he mumbles.

“What? Wreck things? Cal, what are you talking about?”

“My family. You. *Us*. Fuck, Thelia, I kill people for a living.”

“You didn’t wreck your family. Oh my god, Cal.” I frame his face with my hands and lift his head so he’s looking at me. When he told me about his family, he never once blamed himself. “You were a kid.”

“A kid who was never supposed to be born. Face it, Thelia. My life is a sorry accident that I should’ve ended years ago.”

“No. No! Cal, absolutely not. I don’t want to live in a world where you don’t exist. You—”

“You just don’t want to have me around, that’s all.”

“That’s... not true.”

“Yes, it is,” he yells, finally ripping away from me. “You said you lied. You said you never loved me, that it was all fake.”

“My lie was a lie,” I say weakly. *How is he ever going to believe that?* “I know that sounds stupid, but—”

Wes throws open the door and storms in. “Enough. I gave you a chance, Harper, but you’re done. Get the fuck out.”

My stomach sinks. He must’ve heard Cal yelling.

“No!” Cal grabs me and throws me farther on the bed, placing himself in between me and Wes. “You’re not taking her away from me.” He turns, his expression hopeful but scared. “What do you mean, your lie was a lie?”

My voice quivers as I say, “I mean I love you. When I said I didn’t, I lied.”

“To hurt us?”

I nod. “Cal, I’m sor—”

He claps his hand over my mouth. “Don’t you dare apologize. You and I both know that what you did is nothing compared to what we did to you.”

Kellan appears in the doorway. When he sees Cal up, relief fills his eyes. “C’mon, Wes. They’re fine.” He tugs on Wes’s arm, but he doesn’t budge.

“Cal,” Wes says, “you’re sure you’re okay?”

“Yes.” Cal is already gathering me up in his arms and pressing my body into his. “And you’re not taking her.”

With a sigh, Wes turns to leave, and Kellan shuts the door behind them.

“Say it again,” Cal mutters. His lips are against my neck, his hands on my torso, moving over my body.

“I love you,” I whisper, tears filling my eyes.

“And you mean it?” His voice wobbles.

“I do,” I tell him. “I love you so much, and I never should’ve said otherwise.”

“If you’re lying again...” He takes in a shaky breath. “Thelia, tell me you’re not lying again.”

“I’m not.” My arms come around his neck, and I lean my forehead against his.

He relaxes into me, and my mind whirs. What am I doing? Telling these things to Cal... how am I supposed to leave after this?

But deep down, I know I don’t want to. I know the reason I haven’t been able to sleep is because I’ve been worried about them. I know the reason my grades are down is because my mind is too preoccupied by *them*.

I want them.

Very possibly *need* them.

Life without these three is more painful than I ever thought it would be. As I hold Cal, I realize my love for them runs deeper than I knew. I’ve been doing my best to fool myself into thinking otherwise, but this is where I belong. Maybe it’s fucked up, but it’s the goddamn truth.

“Why don’t you get in the shower,” I tell him gently. “I’ll join you in a couple minutes.”

He runs a hand through my hair. “You’re not gonna disappear on me again, are you?”

“No,” I whisper before pressing a quick, reassuring kiss to his chapped lips. “I promise.”

*I hope.*

Cal crawls out of bed. His movements are slow and unmotivated, but at least he’s up.

Once he’s closed himself in the bathroom and I hear the water turn on, I change his sheets. It’s only a small step to getting his room back to normal, but I think it’ll help some.

By the time I get into the bathroom, it’s already beginning to fill with steam. I step into the shower to find Cal standing numbly under the water. It doesn’t look like he’s touched the soap or anything yet.

“Hey.” I place a careful hand on his back. “Look at me.”



When he turns to me, his face is scrunched up. I can't tell his tears from the water, but I know they're there.

"Cal—"

"I missed you so much," he sobs. His arms envelop my body, and he leans into me with more weight than I can hold. His breath smells like toothpaste, and I have the faint realization that he must've brushed his teeth while the water was warming up. "Thelia, I couldn't stop thinking about you. About what we did to you, about how we made you feel. How all of this could've been avoided if we'd been different. *Better.*"

"It's—"

"All I want is for you to be happy," he continues, ignoring my efforts to stop him. "Happy and with us. I know we don't deserve it. I know you don't—"

"Cal!" My shout echoes around the bathroom. I don't think I've ever raised my voice at him before.

He blinks, startled, unsure of what to do or say.

"Stop," I whisper as I place both hands on my chest. "One thing at a time, okay? I'm here now. I don't know what's going to happen from here on out, but for right now, my first priority is making sure you're okay. Stop thinking about me, all right?"

"How? You're the only thing that matters to me."

"That's not true. No matter what, you'll always have the guys."

His face falls at what I leave unsaid. My return happened so fast, and our emotions are running high. I don't think I can go back home—not after Wes forced me to admit the truth to him *and* myself—but I need to think. False promises would only tear Cal apart more.

"Let me help you," I murmur, reaching for the soap.

"I can do it." He grabs his shampoo before I can and squirts some into his palm.

While he washes his hair, I use the soap on his body. It feels good to touch him again—undeniably *right*.

My hands run over his tattoos, and my gaze lingers on the one that stands out. When the tips of my fingers brush over it, I ask, “Why did you get this one?”

Cal stares down at the lotus flower on his bicep. “To remind...” He closes his mouth, and I watch the muscles in his jaw clench.

“You don’t have to tell me,” I whisper.

He sighs. “It’s just like you to do this, isn’t it?”

“W-what?”

With a shake of his head, Cal closes his eyes, but not before I see how pained he looks. “I never told you this. Didn’t really let myself think it, either. But you reminded me how strong I can be. You always looked to me for protection, and as I opened up to you about my parents, it... it helped me process it all some. I realized I’ve been through a lot. *A lot*. And I was proud of myself. *You* reminded me that I’m proud of myself for my strength. But then...”

I swallow hard. *But then I left*.

Cal doesn’t say it, so neither do I.

“One of the things the lotus stands for is resilience,” he continues after a beat of silence. “I got it to remind myself that even though my childhood was hell on earth, I made it out. I started healing, and I learned how to stand on my own.” His fingers brush across the tree on his chest.

“You still can,” I whisper.

“I know,” he says quietly. “Somewhere in me, I know that. I just... I don’t feel it.”

It feels like someone has reached their hand into my chest and is squeezing my heart. The ache intensifies when Cal meets my gaze. His eyes soften, and he runs his knuckles along my jawbone.

*I’ve missed him so much.*

“How long are you staying?” he asks, probably wanting to change the subject.

“I packed enough clothes for a week. But...”

He tenses.

“Do you want me to be honest with you?” My stomach feels like it’s in knots. “I’m afraid the truth will hurt you more.”

“I don’t want you to lie to me again,” he replies, even as he braces himself. He steps under the water to rinse off.

“I don’t think I can go home,” I whisper. “I thought I got what I wanted, but I’ve felt so lost without you three. Cal, I... there isn’t a single part of me that wants to leave you again.”

“But?” he asks, his voice scratchy and hesitant.

My lips part, my body assuming there’s something stopping me from coming back to them. But no words leave my mouth, and I frown, thinking.

Before, I was worried that I’d grow to resent the boys. I think that would’ve happened if I hadn’t followed through with my plan. Now, though, it feels like the playing field is more even. They hurt me, but I hurt them back. I made them feel *exactly* the way they made me feel.

God, it sounds so stupid, but my doubts fall away as I realize *this* is what I needed to be able to be with them. I got my revenge. I stole my power back. I don’t feel like I’m at their mercy anymore.

So why can’t I have the boys I’ve fallen in love with? Bullies or not—ex-bullies, I suppose—they’re who I want.

“Thelia,” Cal whispers, trepidation etched into his features.

My smile is watery as I look up at him. “There is no *but*.”

# Chapter Fifty-Five

## Cal

Athelia gasps as I grab her shoulders and slam my lips to hers. My body dwarfs hers as I back her up into the shower wall.

It's all I needed to hear her say. She's back. She's *ours* again.

As I kiss her, my hands palm her breasts. So soft, so luscious. "Thelia. Thelia, I need you."

"I think we should wait," she breathes out even as her fingers trail over my body. "You're still upset—"

"Absolutely not." My lips fall to her shoulder, where I pepper dozens of tiny kisses over her wet skin. "You're not depriving me of this for another goddamn second, baby."

She moans as my fingers slip in between her legs. I plunge two fingers inside of her, needing to feel her warmth wrapped around me. The moment I do, she clenches around my fingers, all the air rushing from her lungs.

"Promise me you won't leave again," I demand as my thumb finds her clit.

"Cal," she chokes out.

“Say it, Thelia.” I press my fingers against her g-spot, not bothering to be gentle. That’s not what either of us need right now.

“I won’t leave again.” Her hand is clasping the back of my neck as the water beats down on us. “I want you, Cal. I—I need you, too.”

Again, I capture her mouth in a desperate kiss. My tongue plunges into her mouth, and she whimpers and stretches upward into my hold.

*Fuck.* I need to be inside her. I need to fuck her so hard she’ll feel me for weeks. But more than that, I need the reassurance that she’s telling the truth. Maybe if I can feel her body against mine, have my skin sliding over hers, have her tight pussy come around my cock—maybe then this will sink in.

I shut the water off and lift Athelia into my arms. Gasping in shock, Athelia clings to me as I step out of the shower. I grab a clean towel from the bathroom closet and dry us both off quickly.

“Cal, are you sure?” Athelia asks. “If it’s too soon—”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.” Picking her up again, I carry her into my bedroom. She’s perfectly capable of walking, but I want her touching me in as many places as possible.

*I can’t believe she’s here.*

For the past two months, my chest has felt empty—hollow in the worst, most painful way. Having her here again, I can feel the ache easing.

After dropping her onto the bed, I crawl on top of her. My lips latch onto her neck immediately, sucking hard. Athelia moans. As her legs lock around my body, she arches into me.

I pull back, smiling at the beginnings of a bruise that’s already forming on her skin. “Beautiful. So fucking beautiful.”

Grabbing onto me, Athelia pulls me down into a long, heated kiss. Our tongues tangle with each other’s as her arms

wrap around my neck. She's clinging to me like she's afraid to let go, and it's exactly what I need from her.

"Fuck me, Cal," she whispers. "Make me yours again."

Getting onto my knees, I slide my cock into her pussy, just a couple inches. "You're ready for me?"

"I don't care if I am. Fuck me."

I watch her for a moment, frozen in indecision. There's a part of me that wants to be rough with her, even though I know it'll probably hurt her. But another part wants to be gentle with her—to hold her gently and cherish her.

"*Now*, Cal," she says.

Rough it is. I can be sweet and caring later.

Slamming into her, I grab onto her throat. Athelia cries out, pain flashing over her features, but she nods, egging me on. My other hand grabs at the headboard for balance as I slide out and then thrust back in.

"God," she chokes out.

I squeeze the sides of her neck lightly. "Did you bite off more than you could chew? Greedy fucking slut."

Her eyes roll back into her head as she reaches down to play with her clit.

"Look at me, baby. I want your eyes on me while I'm balls-deep inside you."

With a gasp, Athelia's eyes snap open. Her gaze lands on me as her fingers move faster over her clit.

"That's it. Such a good girl." I squeeze her neck just the slightest bit more, focusing on the sides, not her windpipe.

"So... *big*," she whines.

"And look at you, taking every inch of me." I press into her as deep as I can. "Your body was made for this."

"It hurts," she moans.

"Call your safe word if it's too much."

Athelia groans and shakes her head, just as I figured she would. My girl likes the pain.

I spit on her face, earning a hard glare. It only makes me ram into her harder. Everything feels more real now with her pulsing around my cock. The more I degrade her, the more I feel like I own her.

Like she won't leave again.

"Cal, I'm coming," she gasps after a minute. She slaps a hand over her mouth to muffle her cries as I feel her pussy clamp down on my cock.

"Thelia," I groan. Watching her come shoves me over the edge, so I thrust into her once more, wanting to finish as deep inside her as possible. I drop to my elbows and bury my face in her neck. "God, Thelia."

She whimpers. Her hands stroke up and down my back as I catch my breath. "Cal, I've missed you so much."

When I pull back, her eyes are glistening. "Thelia, baby."

"I had to do it," she sobs. "I know it's awful, but I couldn't have stayed with you guys the way we were. I would've lost myself, Cal."

Gently, I drop a kiss to her forehead. "I know."

"I love you," she whispers. "And I promise I won't leave you again."

Athelia tangles her fingers in my hair, and my body relaxes into hers. Exhaustion crashes over me even though I've done nothing but stay in bed all day.

"Tell me one more time," I mutter, my eyes closing, my dick still inside her.

"I'm yours," she says, her voice soft in my ear. "Forever, Cal."

# Chapter Fifty-Six

## Kellan

Athelia spends the night with Cal, which is what I expected when we realized he was still awake. In the morning, I'm halfway through making breakfast when she comes downstairs. Wes and Cal are still sleeping as far as I know.

When Athelia steps into the kitchen, she gives me a hesitant smile. Normally upon seeing me in the mornings, she'd wrap her arms around me and kiss me until my only thoughts were of stripping her down and fucking her over the nearest piece of furniture.

Now, though, she doesn't touch me. She just pours herself a mug of coffee before grabbing the sugar.

I barely slept last night. Goddammit, how could I with her in the house again? It was all I could do to not crawl into bed with her and Cal.

"Good morning," I say as I slice up some banana bread.

"Morning," she says quietly.

She's pouring half and half into her mug when I reach over her to grab a plate. I only meant to lightly touch her, but my hips end up pressing into her back. With a startled gasp,



Athelia jumps, the carton of cream falling from her hand and spilling everywhere.

We both reach for it at the same time, and our fingers brush before I right the carton.

“I—I’m sorry,” she says, already rushing to grab a towel. “I just... I don’t know what happened.”

Her cheeks are pink as she sops up the spilled half and half. With a sigh, I lean against the counter and watch her. She’s in leggings and a T-shirt I gave to her before she left. The image pulls at the possessive side of me. I like seeing my clothes on her, even now.

“Athelia,” I say once she’s rinsed out the towel.

When she turns to me, I realize her hands are shaking. It seems like her and Cal made up, but maybe I’m wrong. Maybe I put her in an impossible and unfair situation by asking her to come and talk to him.

*No, I tell myself when I remember what she said to Wes last night. No, she wants to be here. She belongs here, and she knows it.*

“Are you back?” I ask softly.

Her eyes widen then, a doubtful expression appearing on her face. Doubtful of *what?* She has to know that what she did doesn’t change anything for me. But as I stare at her, waiting for an answer, I realize that’s not true. She looks scared as she licks her lips and softly clears her throat.

“Do you want me to be back?”

“You actually think I don’t?” I ask incredulously.

“I think my goal was to hurt you, and I succeeded,” she says slowly, “and that might... change how you feel about me.”

I shake my head. “I don’t care.”

“There’s no way you mean that.”

“I’ve had a lot of time to think, Thelia.” I tuck some of her dark green hair behind her ear, needing to touch her in any way I can. “Our relationship is far from traditional. We bullied

you for years. If you had to hurt us so we could be on even footing, then so be it. I'd suffer for an eternity if it meant I get to have a single lifetime with you."

"Kellan," she whispers. "Kellan, I..."

"If you're not staying, don't say it yet." Leaning down, I let my lips brush against her cheek. "Let me pretend, even if it's just for a couple minutes."

"I want to stay." She places a hand on my chest and stares up at me with those warm brown eyes that've captivated me since the first moment I looked into them. "I want to come back to you, Kellan."

"You mean it?"

"Yes. Yes, I promise I mean it. I missed you so much." Her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me down until our lips are almost touching. She closes her eyes and whispers, "I can't bear the thought of leaving again."

"If you come back," I say lowly, "we're never letting you go again. Never, you hear me? We won't give you another chance to run."

"I'll never run from you. Never again."

At that, I fuse my mouth to hers. My hips press her into the counter, and I grab at her waist, needing to feel her against me.

"Kellan," she gasps.

Wes clears his throat behind us, and I pull away. Athelia blinks up at me before her eyes lock with his. Her face pales at his emotionless expression.

"What're you doing?" He keeps his tone even, and even though I know he's just as hurt as I am, he manages to stay calm. Even if he doesn't know what to think anymore, he still wants Athelia back. He just needs her to say she wants it, too.

"I..." Athelia wraps her arms around herself. "I was..."

"You told me last night that it wasn't all a lie," Wes says.

Wordlessly, Athelia nods.

He glances between the two of us carefully. “So what does that mean? Because if you think you can fuck Cal and then kiss Kellan like that, just to leave again, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“I’m not leaving again.” Athelia squares her shoulders and matches Wes’s intense stare. “Nor do I want to. I can’t say it was a mistake to leave—this couldn’t have worked any other way. But I know it’ll be a mistake to leave again.”

Wes nods. I know he understands where she’s coming from. Deep down, he’s broken up over the way we treated her, even if he tries to hide it from me and Cal. More than any of us, he knows he deserved every ounce of pain Athelia has dished out.

“So you want to come back,” he says.

She’s twisting her fingers together nervously. “Yes. As long as you...” She trails off.

The corner of Wes’s mouth tips up. “Don’t forget, my soul. I promised I’d give you anything.”

She presses her fingers to her lips for a brief moment before running to him and flinging her arms around his neck. His eyes closing with relief, Wes holds her tightly.

“Please don’t punish me for this,” she whispers.

“I won’t. I understand.” But then he pulls away, his lips forming a full smile. “But you said please, Thelia. You know what comes with that.”

She groans. “Can’t you let it slide? Just this once?”

His lips feather over her forehead. “Never.”

Cal walks into the kitchen. His blond hair is mussed, and his face is still relaxed from sleep. But... he’s up. He’s down here. It’s been too long since that was the case.

He smiles when he sees Athelia in Wes’s arms before heading straight for the coffee pot. I’m not a fool—I know Athelia being back won’t solve all of Cal’s problems. We still need to get him help—therapy, preferably. But this is a start. Improvement.

Hopefully, it's only up from here.

# Chapter Fifty-Seven

## Wes

I keep Athelia on my lap during breakfast. She doesn't protest, although even if she did, I wouldn't let her off. I need her close to me.

After we clean up, I step onto the front porch to get some air. I spent so much of last night staying up with Cal, and the rest of it was spent pacing my bedroom worrying. Worrying Athelia would leave, worrying Cal would get worse, worrying he'd never recover—that *I* would never recover.

It was all for nothing. She's here. She's *staying*. For good this time.

The cold morning air hits my face, and I welcome it. My head is muddled and tired, too confused by the sudden turn of events to process anything.

When the porch door opens and closes, I don't turn to see who it is. Part of me was hoping she'd follow.

Her arms come around my waist from behind, and she rests her head on my back. God, I've missed this.

Inside, she begged me not to punish her for what she did. I can't deny that there was a part of me that wanted to last night.

I was so angry, so afraid she'd hurt Cal more. But before I even gave punishing her a full thought, I pushed the idea away.

That's not who I am anymore—not when it comes to Athelia. What she did to us? We had it coming. Honestly, we deserve worse, and I'm happy she's willing to leave it at this.

Today starts a new chapter for us. From this point on, there's no more intentional hurt. No more punishments or revenge—unless they're the fun kind. I want to love her in a way that would make my father proud if he was still with us.

When I turn around, she's smiling up at me. Her dark green hair frames her face, blowing slightly in the breeze. I lean down and kiss her, and Athelia slips her arms around my neck. She's still only in leggings and a T-shirt, so I figure she's freezing. I pull her into my body, hoping to keep her at least somewhat warm.

"I missed you," I murmur in her ear. "Even when I thought we'd lost you forever, my heart never stopped beating for you."

"I thought about you a lot." She lets out a small laugh. "More than I should've, considering I wasn't planning on coming back."

"What did you think about?"

"If you all were okay. If you'd... moved on already."

I snort out a laugh of disbelief. "Moved on? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I figured—"

"Athelia, we never moved on from you the first time. You think we've been with anyone since you? You're wrong. Since the moment we met, it's always been you, my soul. *Only* been you."

Athelia blinks up at me, her lips parted in shock. "W... *what?*"

"I've never touched another woman since you," I tell her. "Never wanted to. The thought didn't even cross my mind."

You're it for me, Athelia Harper. Even when I hated you, I think I somehow loved you."

"Wes," she whispers.

"And now I promise you that I'll always treat you the way I should've from the start. I wanted to ruin you, but not anymore. You're mine—to love, to treasure, to take care of. I'm never taking you for granted again."

Her eyes are sparkling as she pulls me down into a kiss. Just before our lips meet, she pauses and whispers, "I love you, too, Wesley Carver."

I sigh contentedly against her mouth, grabbing onto her waist and pulling her into me even more. For months, I waited to say those words, partially because I was in denial that I could fall so fast. But... well, there was a part of me that wanted to hear her say it first.

Obviously, I don't care anymore.

As our kiss deepens, a feeling of peace settles over me. I'm not worried that this is part two of Athelia's revenge plan. I know her, and I know she'd never intentionally push Cal further into despair like that. She came back because she loves him, and she's staying because she loves all of us.

Athelia gasps when I pick her up and set her on the porch's railing. Her grip on me tightens, but she's not at a risk of falling.

"I've got you, my soul."

"Always?" she whispers.

I smile, and the remaining weight on my shoulders dissipates at the light in her eyes. "Always."

# Chapter Fifty-Eight

## Athelia

*One month later*

Impatient hope sparks in me when I hear the front door open and slam shut. I wiggle in my restraints even though I know I can't get free.

It's been *hours*. All three of the guys left for a job after dinner, but they couldn't just let me have the evening to myself. No, they gagged me, secured a collar around my neck, and tied me spread eagle to Wes's bed.

As their footsteps sound on the stairs, I do my best to look as flustered and frustrated as I actually am. The boys may be sadists, but they've taken pity on me before, and I'd quite like for right now to be one of those times.

But when Wes opens the door, he heads straight to the bathroom without even glancing at me. I hear him turn the shower on a couple seconds later, and then he steps back into his bedroom.

He clicks his tongue as his hungry gaze rakes over me. "You don't look nearly as desperate as I was hoping you would."

*Oh, for fuck's sake.*



I try to say something, but the panties Kellan stuffed in my mouth before they left keep my protest from being coherent. I would've spit them out by now, but they tied a bandana around my head, so it's acting like a second gag.

As Wes sheds his clothes, his smirk widens. It's not until he's down to just his briefs that he leans over me and licks one of my nipples. My responding whimper is pathetic, and I try to beg him with my eyes to give me more.

"Not yet, my soul. You're being so good. I want to see just how long I can make you wait before you start crying."

I groan into my gag. I love how cruel they can be, but goddammit, sometimes I *hate* it.

Wes heads into the shower, and I'm pretty sure I can hear Cal and Kellan doing the same. Now that they're home, the ache in between my legs has intensified by a thousand. I can *feel* myself getting wetter, and my nipples harden at the thought of them finally touching me. At this point, I don't care how long they use me for. I just need *something*.

As I wait, I feel the tension bleeding out of my muscles. Now that they're home, I don't have to worry about their safety. They're always extra careful, but it doesn't stop my anxiety from running wild.

Cal is the first to finish his shower. His gaze is eager as he takes me in, and he's hiding something in one of his fists. I crane my neck upward to see, but he keeps his fingers tightly closed around it.

"You'll see soon enough, baby. Just keep being patient."

I groan and shoot him an annoyed glare even though my heart swells at the sight of him. The color has returned to his face, his hair is trimmed, and the usual sparkle is back in his eyes.

"Fucking gorgeous," he mutters, perching on the edge of the bed. One of his hands trails down my leg.

"Please," I try to say. I'm pretty sure he gets the idea because he shakes his head. The ache in between my legs only grows.

*At least he can't prove that I actually said please. I've been punished for that enough.*

“Can you feel how wet you are, baby? Goddamn.”

Kellan saunters in next. His hair is damp, and heat ignites in his eyes when he sees me. “I couldn't stop thinking about what you'd look like when we got back, *ma belle*. This is so much better than what I pictured.”

I kick my feet, although my restraints don't give enough for it to be anything other than pathetic. The boys snicker.

When Wes strides into the room, my eyes lock onto his bare chest. He's got his towel knotted around his hips, just low enough that I can see that delicious V that leads down to his cock. *God*, I want him. All of them.

“Warm?” Wes asks, and when I nod, he turns off his space heater. He brought it in here earlier so I wouldn't get too cold with all my clothes off.

“You ready?” Kellan asks Cal.

“God, yes.” Cal climbs in between my spread legs, making sure to keep whatever he's holding out of my line of vision. “Take off the gag. I want to hear her.”

*Fucking finally.*

Wes places a tender kiss to my forehead while he unties the bandana and pulls my panties from my mouth. “Did you miss us, Thelia?”

“Yes,” I groan, stretching upward in hopes of a kiss. I'm so distracted that I almost miss the sound of Cal opening the bottle of lube. He pulls apart my ass cheeks the best he can since I'm on my back, and Kellan helps him.

*What's he going to do?*

Just as I feel the cool liquid against my asshole, Wes fits his mouth to mine. I whimper against his lips, automatically tensing when I feel something hard pressing against my back entrance.

“You can take it, baby,” Cal says soothingly. “Let me in.”

As Wes's tongue slips into my mouth, I do my best to relax my muscles. Whatever Cal has in his hand, he presses it into my ass slowly. The farther in it goes, the wider it gets, although it stays a manageable size.

"Cal," I gasp.

"Almost there," he says, and just as I'm worried it'll be too much, he pushes it the rest of the way in, and my asshole clenches around a thinner part.

*A butt plug?*

Cal fiddles with it, and I cry out when it starts vibrating.

"Fuck! Cal, what—CAL!"

He's already rubbing my clit, and he's not starting off gently. It's too much—*way* too much—especially with the unexpected vibrations in my ass.

When I try to squirm away, Kellan holds me down. Wes is still kissing me, and I'm barely managing to do anything back. My brain is short-circuiting, and I completely lose it when Wes rolls one of my nipples between his fingers.

"Now the other one," Kellan says. "I want to see how fast she can come."

*What? What's he talking about?*

"Wes, I need—" But I lose the ability to speak when even *more* sensations vibrate through me, this time settling over my clit.

With a smirk, Wes pulls back, but I barely notice his expression. I look in between my legs, and Cal is holding one of those rose toys against me.

I've thought about getting one, but I never got around to it. Everyone I've seen talking about it hypes it up so much that it felt fake. But... oh my *god*.

The vibrations go deep, and the little toy has already sucked the air out of my lungs. It's so *intense*, and then Cal hits the button on the side, and it whirs faster.

*Holy shit. That was the lowest setting?*

*Oh fuck. Oh FUCK.*

“I’m coming,” I gasp. And then I’m screaming and writhing on the bed as my clit turns extra sensitive. Between the rose and the butt plug, everything is so much more potent. My screams turn to desperate pleas as Cal refuses to give me a break.

It feels like I’m going to explode. The pleasure morphs into discomfort, and tears spring to my eyes. I’m shaking my head back and forth and yanking at the restraints in a desperate attempt to get free.

“Red,” I cry in between sobs. “Red, red, red!”

Immediately, Cal pulls the rose off, and the tension vanishes from my body. He turns the butt plug off as quickly as he can while I gasp for air.

Wes strokes a hand down my face. “Talk to us.”

“Too... much.” I can feel the tears trailing down the sides of my face. “So good, but then...” I shake my head. “I thought I was going to explode.”

“We can take it easier,” Cal says.

“Just... take the rose off after I come. It goes too hard.” I sound embarrassingly breathless considering three minutes ago, none of them even had their hands on me. *Holy shit*, that thing is magic.

“Do you need a break?” Kellan asks. “Do you want to stop completely?”

“Keep going,” I whisper. I want to know what else they have planned.

“Such a good girl.” Wes’s lips feather across my hairline.

“Always so eager to please,” Kellan adds.

Wes lowers his head until his lips are right by my ear. “I want to watch them use you like a doll,” Wes murmurs. “And then I want you all to myself.”

*Oh fuck yes.*

When he pulls back, he watches me carefully, waiting for me to nod. It may not have been at the start, but my consent is important to them. *I'm* important to them, and there isn't a thing in this world that'll make me doubt it again.

Wes stands, and Kellan straddles my chest. He squeezes my breasts, letting his thumbs brush over my nipples.

“Open those pretty lips of yours, *ma belle*.”

As I obey, Kellan scooches up my body farther. He's not wearing any clothes, and I greedily take in his tattoos while he strokes his cock in front of my face.

Cal places the rose over my clit again and turns it on. Immediately, tension floods my body, and I moan. This thing feels fucking amazing.

“Look at her,” Kellan says on a chuckle. “She's gonna come super fast again, just watch. Pathetic little slut.”

Before I'm able to retort, Kellan shoves his dick into my waiting mouth. I cry out, but the sound is muffled and garbled. I was expecting him to give me a heads up, but that doesn't seem to be their plan for today at all.

Kellan grabs onto my head and yanks me forward and then back. As he does, he thrusts into my mouth, effectively doing what Wes said and using me like a human toy. By now, I know exactly what's expected of me, so I cradle his cock with my tongue and do my best to suck.

The sound of more vibrations is quickly followed by my whimpers as Cal turns the butt plug back on. It's so overwhelming, especially now that I have my airway partially obstructed. I have to focus on taking strategic breaths as Kellan fucks my mouth without mercy.

Like this, I can't say my safe word, but we've come up with a non-verbal signal. All I have to do is tap twice on any surface, and they'll stop. With my wrists cuffed to the bedposts, it'll be a little awkward, but I can do it if I need to.

My toes curl as Cal picks up the speed on the rose vibrator. Kellan was right—I'm gonna come again, so fast even I'm

surprised. They've been able to shove me over the edge quickly before, but never like this.

When I buck my hips, Cal lets the rose fall to the bed and gently rubs my clit with his fingers. I scream around Kellan's dick, but he doesn't let up as my vision blacks out from the intensity of the orgasm.

Drool drips from my chin, and I feel it hit my chest as Kellan wraps his arms around my head and forces his cock as deep into my mouth as he can go. The angle isn't right for him to get into my throat, but he's trying anyway.

Choking, I try to turn my head away, and he pulls out to let me catch my breath. He stares down at me with that sadistic light in his eyes that both scares and thrills me. Those bright blue eyes steal any remaining thoughts from my head.

"So pretty like this." He wipes away my tears before turning my head so I'm looking at Wes. "This what you wanted? Ruined makeup and covered in tears and drool?"

Wes smirks. "Add your cum to the mix, and she'll look perfect."

"Couldn't agree more."

Cal slips a finger into me, and I whimper. His thumb is still rubbing my clit, and only two orgasms in, I already feel worn out.

"Undo her ankles," Cal tells Wes. "She's not gonna put up a fight."

Kellan turns my head back so I'm looking at him, and I open my mouth automatically. Cal is right—there's no fight in me. Not that I *want* to fight.

When I stick out my tongue, Kellan spits onto it. Then he plunges his dick inside, his grip on my hair tightening. As he does, Wes undoes the restraints on my ankles, giving Cal the ability to push my legs up so he can get closer to me.

"So fucking wet. I can't wait to be inside you, baby," he says.

I whimper as Kellan picks up his pace. When I start stroking his cock with my tongue the best I can, he groans.

“Such a good little toy. You’re going to let me come wherever I want, aren’t you?”

With the way he’s pounding into my mouth, there’s no way for me to respond, so I just stare up at him. Cal pushes inside me and places the rose against my clit again. I’m sure it’s an awkward fit, but he’s making it work. When he turns it on, I feel myself clamping down on his dick harder than I ever have.

“Fuuuck, Thelia.” Cal slides all the way in and then out again. “So fucking tight.”

Kellan gives me another break to breathe, and I scream as Cal sets a steady pace. Between the plug, the rose, and his cock, I’m drowning in sensations.

“Don’t stop,” Kellan says to Cal. “God, she can barely take it.”

I suck on the tip of his dick, desperate for more. I’ve had enough of a break.

“That’s it,” Kellan murmurs. “Give me all you’ve got.”

And I do. It’s all I want, to give them everything. Some people would find this offensive or wrong—unhealthy, maybe. But we’ve found what works for us. I’ve craved this feeling of being owned for so long, and the way they use me forces my brain to acknowledge it.

And by *it*, I mean being theirs.

“Fuck,” Kellan grunts.

He pulls out of my mouth and strokes his cock, hovering right over my face. As his cum falls onto my cheeks, Cal wrenches another orgasm from me. I cry out, and my eyes fall shut as it knocks the breath from my lungs.

“Now she looks perfect,” Wes says.

Cal is rubbing my clit now instead of using the rose. He’s slowed his thrusts enough that I can regain the ability to use

my brain. Cautiously, I blink my eyes open to find both Kellan and Wes staring down at me. My mind is foggy, too pleasure-filled to completely comprehend the admiration on their faces.

“I want her to swallow it.” Leaning down, Kellan licks his cum off my face and then grabs my jaw, forcing it open. He spits into my mouth, then shuts my mouth and watches me swallow. “Good whore. Now make Cal come inside you.”

Kellan crawls off me, and my gaze settles on Cal. My body has calmed down as much as it can considering the butt plug is still vibrating. But when Cal repositions the rose over my clit, I tense in anticipation.

“Can you handle more, baby?”

I nod. At this point, I’m exhausted. Using that thing has made my orgasms more intense than they’ve ever been before. It’s draining, but it’s addictive, too.

Cal turns it on, and I gasp. Pleasure courses through my veins, threatening to overwhelm me.

“Cal,” I whimper as he picks up his pace.

“Just give me one more.” He slams into me, his cock hitting the perfect spot inside me, the feeling amplified by the vibrations in my ass. “Come for me one more time.”

My body is trembling, and I can barely breathe. Cal’s eyes are locked on my breasts as they bounce with every thrust. There’s something so satisfying about the way they stare at me with that ravenous look in their eyes. And now, it shoves me over the edge into the most mind-numbing, powerful orgasm yet.

My screams fill the room, almost completely drowning out Cal’s breathless moan as he comes. His movements slow, and he drops the rose, not even bothering to turn it off.

“Thelia,” Cal groans. “Oh my fucking god.”

Tugging at my restraints, I whimper again. I want to hold him in my arms while he comes down from the high, but I can’t.



Still inside me, Cal collapses on top of me. His lips meet mine, moving sloppily as he catches his breath. Warmth floods me at his moan as I slide my tongue into his mouth.

“Fuck,” Cal grunts, finally pulling out of me. “That damn plug.” He moves to turn it off, but Wes stops him.

“Keep it on. I want to feel it while I fuck her.”

While Cal climbs off the bed, Wes frees my wrists. He rubs them gently before lifting me into his arms and settling on the bed. With his back to the headboard, he positions me on his lap so I’m straddling him.

Cal’s cum drips onto Wes’s cock as I lower myself onto it. Heat sparks in Wes’s eyes at the sight, which takes me by surprise—I didn’t think he’d be into something like that.

As I sink down, I can feel myself stretching around him as my body works to accommodate his size. He lets me take my time, and I run my fingers through his slightly damp hair.

“Perfect fit,” he murmurs once I’ve taken all of him in. “You feel so good, my soul.”

“Wes,” I groan as I begin moving up and down. Lowering my gaze, I watch his cock slide in and out of me. I didn’t think I’d be able to come again, but this angle is perfect.

Cupping my breasts with his hands, Wes dips his head down and captures one of my nipples in his mouth. He sucks it while rolling the other one in between his thumb and forefinger. It makes me gasp. Tiny explosions go off underneath my skin, detonated by his fingers and tongue.

I slip one hand in between my legs and gently massage my swollen clit. It’s extra sensitive given how much Cal used the rose, but it still feels good.

“Fuck,” Wes groans. He grabs onto my hips and thrusts up into me. “Those damn vibrations.”

“They feel fantastic, don’t they?” Cal says.

“We’re doing this to you more often,” Wes tells me before going back to sucking on my nipples.

I keep working up and down his dick, feeling myself getting closer and closer to another orgasm. But right as I'm about to come, Wes rips my hand away so I can't rub my clit.

“Wes! What—”

“We come together,” he growls. “Keep yourself on the edge, but don't let yourself come until I tell you to.”

With a whimper, I nod and go back to stroking my clit. I keep my touch light, trying to do what he says, but I don't think I can last for much longer.

Thankfully, the vibrations must heighten everything for Wes because he comes faster than he normally does. Just before, he nods, giving me permission to fall with him. Rubbing my clit harder, I release all the built-up tension inside me. My orgasm feels like an explosion inside my body that only gets more intense as Wes pumps into me. It practically knocks the life out of me, and after the first wave, my body slumps into Wes's.

He wraps his arms around me, slowly sliding in and out of me one last time before he shudders. I can feel the heat of his cum joining Cal's, and it satisfies something within me I didn't even realize I was craving.

“Such a good girl,” Wes murmurs in my ear. Pulling back, he takes my right hand and turns it so he can see the inside of my wrist. A month-old tattoo sits there now, with the initials *W.C.K.* Mere days after I came back, we settled on a design, and they all took me to a shop to get it done.

Gently, Wes presses a kiss to the initials. “I'll never stop being grateful that we have you again, my soul.”

I smile down at him. “Always.”

Cal and Kellan climb back onto the bed, and the three of them shower me with kisses. Now, they always make sure I know that I'm loved and appreciated after the intense pain and degradation they put me through.

Relaxing, I lean into them, kissing each of them back. Our relationship may be unconventional to some and fucked up to others, but it works for us. We fought—against each other *and*

outside forces—to get to where we are now. I belong to them in a way I never thought possible. They have a hold on my fucking *soul*, and I have theirs, too.

And we're never, ever letting each other go again.

THE END.

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*Stay tuned for Haven's book, Redeemed, coming sometime in 2024.*

*Follow me on Instagram [@e.bishop.author](#) and TikTok [@ebishop](#) for updates.*

# About the Author

E. Bishop is a secret pen name for an author who wanted to write and explore some of zer darker story ideas without zer in-real-life family and friends finding out. Ze has plans for many more dark romances, so stay tuned for those!

E identifies as agender and is fine with she/her and ze/zer pronouns. (Ze is used like he/she, and zer is used like him/her. Ze is pronounced like “zee” and zer is pronounced like “her” but with a z at the front.)