



WALL STREET JOURNAL AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LANI LYNN VALE

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WALL STREET JOURNAL AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LANI LYNN VALE

Hannibal and Hades

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Sometimes I try to think about who I haven't dedicated a book to, and then I realize that I've written so freakin' many that nearly everyone I like has already had 3 dedicated to them.

It's funny when you grow up and you finally stop giving a fuck about what people think, that your friend group dwindles down to a very select few who mean the world to you.

Anyway, maybe this one should be dedicated to the people that fucked me over. Without you, I wouldn't have anywhere near as much to write about.

Acknowledgments

Golden Czermak—Photographer

My Brother's Editor & Ink It Out Editing—My editors

Alyssa Garcia—My PA

My mom—Thank you for reading this book eight million six hundred eighty-seven times.

My betas. Seriously, I don't know what I would do without you.

Other titles by Lani Lynn Vale

The Freebirds

Boomtown
Highway Don't Care
Another One Bites the Dust
Last Day of My Life
Texas Tornado
I Don't Dance

The Heroes of The Dixie Wardens MC

Lights To My Siren
Halligan To My Axe
Kevlar To My Vest
Keys To My Cuffs
Life To My Flight
Charge To My Line
Counter To My Intelligence
Right To My Wrong

Code 11- KPD SWAT

Center Mass
Double Tap
Bang Switch
Execution Style
Charlie Foxtrot
Kill Shot
Coup De Grace

The Uncertain Saints

Whiskey Neat
Jack & Coke
Vodka On The Rocks
Bad Apple
Dirty Mother
Rusty Nail

The Kilgore Fire Series

Shock Advised
Flash Point
Oxygen Deprived

Controlled Burn

Put Out

I Like Big Dragons Series

I Like Big Dragons and I Cannot Lie

Dragons Need Love, Too

Oh, My Dragon

The Dixie Warden Rejects

Beard Mode

Fear the Beard

Son of a Beard

I'm Only Here for the Beard

The Beard Made Me Do It

Beard Up

For the Love of Beard

Law & Beard

There's No Crying in Baseball

Pitch Please

Quit Your Pitchin'

Listen, Pitch

The Hail Raisers

Hail No

Go to Hail

Burn in Hail

What the Hail

The Hail You Say

Hail Mary

The Simple Man Series

Kinda Don't Care

Maybe Don't Wanna

Get You Some

Ain't Doin' It

Too Bad So Sad

Bear Bottom Guardians MC

Mess Me Up

Talkin' Trash

How About No

My Bad

One Chance, Fancy
It Happens
Keep It Classy
Snitches Get Stitches
F-Bomb

The Southern Gentleman Series

Hissy Fit
Lord Have Mercy
KPD Motorcycle Patrol
Hide Your Crazy
It Wasn't Me
I'd Rather Not
Make Me
Sinners are Winners
If You Say So
SWAT 2.0

Just Kidding
Fries Before Guys
Maybe Swearing Will Help
Ask Me If I Care
May Contain Wine
Joke's on You
Join the Club
Any Day Now
Say it Ain't So
Officially Over It
Nobody Knows
Depends Who's Asking

Valentine Boys

Herd That
Crazy Heifer
Chute Yeah
Get Bucked

Souls Chapel Revenants

Repeat Offender
Conjugal Visits
Jailbait

Doin' A Dime
Kitty, Kitty
Gen Pop
Inmate of the Month
Madd CrossFit Series
No Rep
Jerk It
Chalk Dirty to Me
Battle Crows MC
Always Someone's Monster
Make Me Your Villain
Rattle Some Cages
Not A Role Model
Get Tragic
Strange and Unusual
Never Trust The Living
Gator Bait MC
Nobody Cares Unless You're Pretty
Good Trouble
Cute But Psycho
Annoyed At First Sight
The Voices Are Back
Special Kind of Twisted
I'll Just Date Myself
Clown World
Fun House
Freak Show
Show Off
Clown Motel
Sold To The Circus
Killing Booth
The Fool

Blurb

Seventy shades of messed up.

That was what she'd been told about herself for nearly her entire life.

From a young age, she knew what it was like to be hated. To be loathed so much by a person that they literally resented the air you breathed.

For her entire childhood, she fought to live, despite her father's constant effort to make her life a living hell.

Her sisters and brother have no clue what kind of closet psychopath their father really was, and she'll die before she ruins their picture-perfect view of him.

Why? Because she's already broken. There's no fixing this kind of damaged. But there's no reason everyone else needs to suffer, too.

From the moment Hannibal Peters laid eyes on Hades Singh, he knew she was the one.

That was why he ran.

That was why, when he saw her suffering, he couldn't stay away.

PROLOGUE

*Raise your hand if you're a little bit of an asshole.
-Hades, age 12*

HADES

15 years ago

“You’re going to have to find a healthy way to deal with this,” I heard Dad say to me.

I looked at him and felt my stomach pitching at the idea of my mother leaving.

“What does that mean?” I asked, unable to stop myself.

I knew he hated when we asked questions.

In fact, I knew better than to ask him anything.

Yet, he’d just won full custody of us. Or my mom had given us away. I didn’t really know.

What I did know was that we were alone, Caristonia and me.

Well, not alone.

We had a brother and sisters, of course.

But we didn’t have our mom anymore, and our dad hated us, or me at least.

I wasn’t sure why.

Well, I had my guesses. I had a feeling he absolutely hated my mom.

As in, he was glad to be rid of her.

He’d done everything he could to make it to where she had no other choice.

“You,” he pointed at Caristonia. “Leave.”

Caristonia—Tony for short—got up and walked out without a backwards glance.

The traitor.

My dad waited until the door closed before he said, “I don’t want you here.”

My stomach once again rolled.

“In fact, if I had a choice, you would be a bad memory,” he continued.

I looked down at my hands.

“I’ve done nothing but support you for the last few years when all I wanted to do was kick you and your mother out and never look back. But that wouldn’t get me your sister,” he said.

I’d heard this before.

In fact, it was one of the most normal things in the world to hear—him telling me I wasn’t good enough.

Today was no different.

“In fact, I would go as far to say that I tried finding a way to get Caristonia and not you, but she would’ve thrown a little fit, and we both know it.” He narrowed his eyes. “What she sees in you, I’ll never know.”

It was like a slap to the face. He really knew how to choose just what to say to get the most meaning across.

My mom had said the same thing to me once.

Sadly, it was a rare thing to hear my parents tell me they actually wanted me in their lives.

Strike that. They’d never once said they wanted me there. I was the burden. The extra. The one they didn’t plan on having.

Caristonia really was it for me. She was the only one that truly loved me.

At least, that was the way it seemed sometimes.

The thing about living the circus life was it was sort of survival of the fittest.

The last freakin’ thing I wanted to do was live here where we would be forced to work, have absolutely zero social life, and ultimately be Dad’s bitch.

“The best thing you can do right now is keep yourself skinny, dress in sparkly numbers, and do your fucking job,” Ansel Singh muttered darkly. “And if you get in my way, you’ll regret it.”

I knew that.

I’d experienced it a lot in my short life.

There I was, twelve years old, and I already knew what it was like to be hated by everyone that was supposed to love you.

If I got in my dad’s way, he would make sure I would regret it. He wasn’t

lying about that.

One time, I'd tripped and fallen on stage in front of his ringmaster skit, and he'd kicked me in the face so hard that I'd rolled off the stage out of sight.

I knew that was what he was trying to accomplish—he was embarrassed by my homeliness—but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

I would do what I had to do to keep my head above water, and when it was time, and I could survive in this world on my own, I'd be gone and never look back.

• • •

12 years ago

He backhanded me so hard that I saw stars.

“Stay out of my fuckin’ way,” he ordered harshly.

I stretched my jaw out and winced, feeling the already tightening muscles protest the movement.

God. Dammit.

“And,” he pointed at me, his finger getting so close that I could see the dirt in the fingerprint lines on his pointer finger. “Wear some fuckin’ makeup. You’re butt ugly when you don’t.”

Then he was gone, leaving me staring at him with my jaw and eye socket smarting.

I resisted the urge to scream ‘I wear a fucking mask, douchebag!’ at him. Barely.

I was staring daggers at his retreating back, my eye and my cheekbone tingling as I did.

“What happened to your face?” Keene asked, sounding not even a little bit concerned.

None of them ever were.

This was a dog-eat-dog world, and all of us were just trying to survive.

Keene was the closest one of us all to getting out of here, though.

He had one more year to go, then he would be gone.

His plan was to join the military and never look back.

I didn't think any of them got the same treatment as I did, however.

I wasn't sure why I was the special one...

Well, I kind of knew why.

The rest of the Singh kids? They were all gorgeously beautiful. Every last one of them, even Keene, our big brother.

Then there was me.

The one Singh kid that could very well pass for the picture under the definition 'bottom of the barrel.'

That was one of my dad's favorite terms to use.

He liked to tell me that if anyone ever found me attractive, they were scraping the bottom of the barrel and had no other options.

Needless to say, I had a few self-esteem issues.

I also had a chip on my shoulder a mile wide.

"Why do you care?" I asked, shouldering past him.

He caught my hand as I was leaving and pulled me back. "Why do you hate us?"

I didn't 'hate' them.

In fact, I envied them. I wanted to be them. I wanted to know what it felt like to not be berated and degraded all day every day.

I wanted their lives.

Well, maybe I *did* hate them a little.

I tilted my head and stared at him.

He liked to call it my thousand-yard stare, because when I did it, it felt like he was having his soul examined.

I didn't know why he felt that way, because really all I was doing was trying to compose myself enough to answer. But that didn't change the fact that they were winning at life compared to me.

"I don't hate y'all," I finally said. "And I said 'why do you care' because honestly the only time you ever address me is to tell me to do something for you, or instruct me on what Dad wanted me to do. So yeah, I asked why do

you care. Because if you did, you'd know why I 'hate you.'"

He didn't know what to say to that so I said, "Why did you come in here?"

He opened his mouth to say something, but closed it.

Because I was right.

He'd come in here because he knew he could get me to do something for him.

I was everyone's bitch girl.

I got everyone's cast off work.

Oh, the cats need a bath. Go do that, Hades.

Oh, Simi's sick and can't do her aerial yoga act, why don't you get on that, Hades?

Oh, Hades. The cook is sick. Why don't you cook food for thirty-five people?

Here was the thing.

I had to know everyone's routine in case someone needed me somewhere. That was hours and hours of work a week trying to make sure that I didn't look like a complete fool in the middle of thousands of people.

That, and if I didn't know the routine, my dad would literally kick my ass after the show.

Because 'nobody embarrasses Ansel Singh.' Not even his daughter.

"What was it you wanted?" I asked forcefully.

He scratched the back of his head. "Dad told me to tell you earlier that you needed to be ready for the show at four-thirty."

I looked at my watch. It was four-fifteen.

"When did he tell you this?" I asked.

"About three hours ago." He winced. "But I got busy with my own chores, and I forgot."

He forgot, and Dad came in here and slapped me across the face because I was supposed to be getting ready and wasn't. Getting ready for a show that I didn't know I was covering.

A couple of months ago, my sister had been performing a tight rope routine and she'd fallen and caught her throat with the wire on her way down.

We'd almost lost her, and she was still recovering from the ordeal.

Dad had hired someone else, but that someone else liked to get drunk on random Tuesdays and sometimes call in from her trailer in the back and say she wasn't coming in.

Which was where I entered into play.

I knew the routine. I'd actually been the one performing the tight rope walking first.

But Dad thought that I wasn't 'beautiful enough' for the routine, and it was too boring if the person wasn't ungodly attractive.

Hence Caristonia entering the picture and taking over for me.

But, once again, I was back and getting punished for something I didn't know about.

I cupped my cheek and said, "Thanks, bro. Appreciate that."

He frowned, his eyes taking in my hand over my face.

But before he could ask again what happened to my face, I left. Not looking back.

• • •

7 years ago

I stared in shock at my boyfriend.

Well, ex-boyfriend now.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm in love with your sister." He repeated his earlier words.

Yeah, that's what I thought I'd heard him say.

There was nothing quite like falling in love with a man and finding out he was in love with your sister.

How was your Tuesday going?

"It's nothing against you as a person," Benji continued. "It's just that... well...she's just so beautiful."

I felt my heart sink.

If I never heard that Tony was more beautiful than me ever again, it would be too soon.

“And not that you’re not, you know, pretty.” He looked like he’d just lied through his teeth. “It’s just that I think I originally fell in love with you because of her.”

Well, it was official.

I felt like I was going to break.

It might be official this time.

This would be when I realized that I was never going to be able to find another man without worrying about him falling in love with my sister.

“So, I know that it’s a problem and all, but do you think she’d take my number?” he babbled, halfway not making sense.

I clenched my jaw and stared at him, wondering if I could get away with punching him in the throat, or if he’d actually grow a pair of balls and fight back.

My luck he’d remember he had them and swing and I wouldn’t be able to get away in time.

I wasn’t a fighter.

My dad had seen to that.

I was more of a lie there in a ball and hope that I didn’t get too many broken ribs kind of person.

“No?” Benji asked, getting annoyed now that I hadn’t answered him.

I counted to ten in my head, then calmly got up, grabbed my bag, and headed for the door.

“You’re going to leave?” Benji asked. “I thought you were going to order dinner?”

I was.

But there would be no way in hell I would buy his food for him now.

I didn’t care if I did promise him dinner for his birthday.

I also didn’t care that he was a broke college kid and had no money.

What I did care about was the fact that he’d just shattered my heart.

I should’ve seen it coming, I guess.

Nothing good ever happened to me.

•••

6 ½ years ago

“So you’re telling me, the reason that you stalked him is because he was stalking your sister first?” the psychologist said warily.

I shrugged. “When you put it like that, it sounds really bad. But my God. He needs to get a hint. He calls every other day to ask me for my sister’s number. I block him, he gets a new phone number, and tries again the next day. It was getting on my nerves, so I decided to do the same thing right back to him.”

“Oh,” she shook her head. “Surely you can tell the rest of the family, though, right?”

I thought about that for a few long seconds, then shrugged. “I could, yeah. But I kind of like being the outcast of the family. If I tell them that I’ve been protecting my sister, then they’ll question themselves on whether or not they can trust their instincts when it comes to me. It’s best that they continue thinking that I’m self-absorbed and a little bit crazy.”

That way when they screw me over or upset my feelings, it won’t hurt as bad.

I’d learned that the hard way, too.

Everyone for themselves, and all that jazz.

“So what would you like me to tell them when they ask about you?” she asked.

Was she actually going along with this?

“Tell them I have obsessive love disorder,” I suggested. “I don’t care. As long as they don’t realize the real reason I’ve been calling him and ‘stalking’ him so much.”

I didn’t know if that was even a thing or not, but I could’ve sworn I’d heard it somewhere.

“Generally I wouldn’t condone this,” she gave me a pointed look. “But

after everything you just told me about your childhood, if anyone deserved a break, it would be you.”

When she put it like that, I sounded like a victim.

I wasn't a freakin' victim.

• • •

1 year ago

“You're sure Dad is dead?” I asked, sounding breathless.

I wasn't sad, though.

I was somewhat ecstatic.

It wasn't every day your abuser died.

“We found him in his motor home this morning. Sometime last night after we shut everything down for the night, he dropped dead of what the coroner thinks is a heart attack,” Zip murmured.

I had five sisters and one brother.

Zip, Simi, Tony, Val, Crimson and Keene.

All of them loved our dad, and were likely fairly broken up about this.

I shouldn't be smiling right now, actually.

This would upset everything.

Would I have to come back?

“What now?” I asked. “Do we have to give it a few weeks to sell the circus?”

God, that would be so nice.

The idea of being away from Singh Circus permanently sounded like the best thing in the world.

“Ah, no.” Zip paused. “We have to meet in South Carolina to hear his will read. From there...I don't know.”

One could only hope. “I'll meet you in South Carolina then.”

And I did a day later.

The lawyer's words made me so freakin' angry I could scream.

“So let me get this straight,” I said carefully. “We have to work there for five years, or we won’t get any money.”

“True.”

“And we all have to be there, or we don’t get the money,” I continued.

“Yes, ma’am,” the lawyer confirmed.

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

What a nightmare.

“Well, I guess that solves that.” Zip smiled as she stared at the papers in front of her. “What do we do now?”

“Now, we wait for Keene to get home,” Simi murmured quietly.

I had a feeling she wasn’t any happier about this than I was.

Freakin’ great.

“And then what?” Val asked.

I gritted my teeth before I said ‘let’s burn it all to the ground.’

“Then we work the circus like he always wanted us to,” Zip declared.

I wanted to punch her in the throat.

Even from the grave, he was still making my life miserable.

I had that confirmed a few moments later when the lawyer called out to have me stay behind.

My sisters left the room, looking at me curiously, and I dropped back down into my seat.

“What else did he have to say?” I asked.

“He, uh...” he hesitated.

“Just say it,” I ordered, knowing I wasn’t going to like what he had to say, but needing to hear it anyway.

“He, uh, said that you aren’t inheriting anything,” he explained quickly. “But the only way that they’ll inherit is if you cooperate and work with them.”

Well, wasn’t that something.

Great.

Just freakin’ great.

All this work for nothing.

How...fitting.

“Is that it?” I asked.

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. “That's it.”

I left without another word.

“Did you get more money than the rest of us?” Tony teased.

I looked at her and felt my jaw clench.

Then, because I couldn't stop myself, I shouldered past her and left without another word, causing her to curse.

I'd bumped her harder than I'd intended.

But I didn't really care.

I didn't care about anything anymore.

CHAPTER 1

Moving in with a woman is pretty much saying 'this pussy is good enough to risk having my shit set on fire.'

-Text from Hades to Hannibal

HADES

Present day

I wouldn't say that I had the best coping mechanisms.

I also tested people to the point where they either gave up on me, or pushed me away and didn't want me in their lives anymore.

That was what I'd done to my sister, after all.

I wouldn't say that I was the worst sister in the world—I mean, I didn't try to kill her or anything—but I wasn't the greatest in the world, either.

I liked to test boundaries.

I liked to bug the holy hell out of them all—I mean, what were sisters for?

But also, sometimes they just deserved it.

“Why are you the way that you are?” Keene asked.

I didn't bother answering him.

He wouldn't understand why I was the way I was.

None of them would.

So why bother explaining?

“This has to stop,” Crimson murmured.

I looked over at her.

Her eyes made contact with mine, and I sighed.

“You do realize, right, that there are about a thousand lifeguards down there?” I asked.

Crimson's mouth went into a tight line.

“Here's my thinking on the matter,” I said stiffly.

“Oh, please enlighten us,” Val murmured.

I'd sent Tony down a water slide that was 'scary.' And, since she had issues with being surprised or scared—IE she did either of those things and she might very well pass smooth out due to her narcolepsy—she might've passed out on the way down it.

Should I have done it? *Probably not.*

But Jesus Christ, I was tired of my sister not living her life because she was too scared to do something because she might pass out.

It was...heartbreaking.

I didn't like seeing her barely live.

Did I do things that were a little bit mean to get her to step out of her comfort zone? *Yes.*

Should I maybe have gone about that in a different way? *Also, yes.*

Should I stop pushing her to live her life? *I didn't think so.*

"She's never going to live her life if we don't force her out of her comfort zone," I told them all. "You know how she is. She just sits on the bus and hides away from life because she's too scared that she's going to pass out and die. That's no way to live. And if you think that it is, you're part of the problem."

They had no response to that, because they knew I was right.

The thing was, Tony wanted to live. She wanted to experience life.

I was the reason that she took two weeks off regularly and experienced the world.

Sure, it might be from the safety of a beach chair, but she still did it.

But that wasn't all there was to life.

I wanted her to get out and meet new people.

Like she'd done with the football player.

"Do you think that she's going on vacation with him?" Zip asked, taking a bite of her donut.

'Him' being Slone Day, a professional football player who'd come to the circus with Coffey's friend, Banner.

I'd known the moment that I'd seen them look at each other that they would be perfect for each other.

Someone big and strong—because my God, was he huge—to protect my little sister from life and herself. Someone that would help her live her life and not waste it.

"Yep," Coffey, Simi's husband, said. "I also think that y'all should tell her that your sister isn't crazy."

I rolled my eyes. “We’re not hiding it. We’re helping the lie along so she’ll live.”

Coffey’s eyes turned to me. “Don’t you think that, just maybe, it’s her decision?”

I thought about his question for a long moment before saying, “If I left it up to her, she’d stay holed up in her bunk in the tour bus and never leave it. If I left it up to her, she’d hide behind her condition, and never find the love she always reads about in her dirty books. If I left it up to her, she’d waste her life and never have those kids she desperately wants, but is too afraid to hope for.”

Coffey didn’t have anything to say to that. Whether it was because he thought I was right, or he was agreeing to disagree, I didn’t know.

But I’d go with whatever I needed to do to make my head feel better.

“We need to talk about those packages again,” I said. “She got another one.”

My twin had a stalker.

My twin had a stalker that liked to send all kinds of fucked up things.

The most recent package was an AI generated porn movie that starred a man and a woman—the woman looking almost identical to Tony in a sickeningly horrible way.

“I already called Folsom,” Keene murmured. “She has the tape and is trying to get what she can off of it as we speak.”

Folsom was a woman that had lived and worked with us for a while. She was crazy good at computer stuff—as in, break into the most secure government databases and never get caught kind of good.

Though she didn’t work for us anymore, we’d all made great friends with her and she helped us get stuff figured out if we needed it.

Though, this was one case she wasn’t able to crack.

It was driving her crazy that she couldn’t help.

But usually, the person that was stalking and leaving packages for Tony stayed away from the internet.

He was also crazy good at slipping through the security measures we’d put in place.

And they were no slouch security measures, either.

Keene had a friend help with the design of them, so they'd work absolutely anywhere.

Keene was ex-military.

His friend was ex-military and owned a business that specialized in security.

The friend was a man named Hannibal that I was fairly sure was God's gift to the universe.

Hannibal was...wow.

Really, when I thought of him in my head, I couldn't quite focus on a single thing that I loved more about him.

He was tall, graying, and handsome.

He had black hair that, every time I saw him, or saw a picture of him, seemed to get grayer and grayer.

He was tall, probably around six foot three or four, and had the biggest hands I'd ever seen.

Nine times out of ten he had a beard, too. One that varied in length from five o'clock shadow, to 'you should've shaved six weeks ago.'

"Have you thought about asking Hannibal?" I wondered.

Keene's eyes narrowed.

He didn't like Hannibal.

Something had happened and the two of them had a falling out.

A falling out that Keene didn't want to talk about, no matter how hard I tried to get him to open up.

Which was a bummer, because I loved hearing about Hannibal.

Though, just sayin', but sometimes when we ran into Hannibal, it seemed very possible that Hannibal couldn't stand the sight of me.

Not that I'd asked him or anything.

I mean, I barely saw the guy.

I did go out of my way to check up on him through his brother's social media, though.

His brother was none other than Hancock "Parts" Peters, the retired

catcher for Longview Texas's baseball team. For the life of me, I couldn't remember what that particular team's name was.

But I did know he was kind of a big deal.

And every once in a while, he shared about his brother. Or his wife, Sway, did.

Hannibal was America's hero.

Everyone loved hearing about him. Especially me.

"I suppose I could," he grumbled. "I guess, maybe, I just thought this might one day fix itself."

I scoffed. "It's been going on for over a year, Keenie Weenie," I told him. "It's time to face the facts. It's not going to fix itself, and we're in over our heads. Even Folsom can't find hide nor hair of him."

Keene whispered something under his breath.

"I could ask some of my friends," Coffey muttered. "They're not cops or anything, but they could ask around."

"I'll ask Hannibal," Keene grumbled.

CHAPTER 2

*Call me super glue, because my ass gets attached.
-Hades' secret thoughts*

HADES

Filling in for not one, but two people, was downright exhausting.

Since Simi got pregnant, I'd taken over her act.

I couldn't say it was my favorite thing in the world, and I couldn't say I was especially good at it, but I got the job done.

After Zip's act was finished, I did a performance with the cats, and then followed Crimson's act up with my own tight rope walking act.

Needless to say, by the end of the night, the last thing I wanted to do was get stuck with doing some work.

But that was the problem with living in and running a circus. There was always something to do.

Feet dragging, I walked around the circus and picked up trash, since our usual man was out with the flu.

And though it was a never-ending, thankless job, I actually enjoyed this one more than others.

The wee hours of the morning, when the ground was just starting to get wet due to the dew forming, was my favorite time of day.

I didn't have anything to do for hours. I didn't have to talk to anyone, or play nice. I could get lost in the act of cleaning up, and no one would bother me.

Usually.

Sometimes I was asked to do something by my sisters, but usually they left me alone because they hated picking up trash.

I'd just gotten to the part of the park that would lead to the staff's personal quarters, when I heard talking.

Keene.

Not quite paying attention to what was being said, I continued to head in his direction.

That was until I recognized the voice.

When I heard it, I stopped cold and strained my ears so I could soak in

every word that was said.

“I’ve stayed away, bro,” Hannibal murmured over the phone.

If Keene hadn’t been listening to this on speaker, I wouldn’t have heard the next part.

“Not to mention, I didn’t have to. This was, by far, a fuck up on your part,” Hannibal continued.

“Asking you to stay away from my fucked-up sister isn’t a fuck up on my part,” Keene grumbled.

My insides tightened.

Asking you to stay away from my fucked-up sister...

“I wasn’t even going to make a play,” Hannibal said. “I don’t have time, nor the desire, to have a woman right now. That doesn’t mean that you didn’t jump to conclusions.”

That yawning hole inside me just kept getting bigger and bigger.

One day, it would be so big that it’d swallow me whole.

“You’re right,” Keene admitted. “But the way you were looking at her... the only kind of men that find her attractive are the ones that are just looking for a quick lay. And trust me when I say, that’s not something she can give you.”

Tears threatened to fill my eyes, but I willed them down.

It wasn’t a secret that I wasn’t the prettiest Singh.

That was the problem, I might’ve been attractive in most situations, but being compared to one of the Singh family members, I was an absolute troll.

“I think that it’s possible you might be overly sensitive where your sister is concerned,” Hannibal murmured. “Do you have issues with her that you’d like to talk about?”

I’d like you to go ahead and get everything out in the open, was my inner monologue.

But, of course, Keene’s swift temper was legendary, and before he could think better of his words, he whipped them out, totally disregarding the fact that we needed help when it came to Tony.

“Never mind,” Keene grumbled. “I don’t fuckin’ care, nor do I need your help.”

My hands clenched into fists.

This bitch...

Angry and to the point that I was about to say things I didn't mean, I headed in the direction of the dumpster. When I dumped my huge bag of trash—why were people so gross?—I headed to the bus.

Coffey and Simi were on the picnic table when I rolled up.

“Hey, we saved you some dinner,” Coffey stated as he saw me.

I showed him my disgusting hands and clothes. “I appreciate you saving me some, but I have so much trash juice on me that I don't think I could eat past the smell.”

Coffey's lips twitched. “I'll wrap it up for you and put it in the fridge.”

I wouldn't be eating it.

“Thanks.”

Sadly, my appetite was non-existent.

I was the one sister that didn't have trouble keeping my weight down, mostly because when I got stressed I got ulcers. And ever since Tony started getting packages, I'd done nothing but stress.

My thoughts on my unusual diet, I yanked the handle on the bus door and went inside.

When my father had been alive, this entire bus had been his.

He hadn't allowed any of us on it, and we'd been relegated to a small motor coach that'd definitely seen better days.

When Dad died, we threw all of his stuff into a dumpster and moved in. Then we totally destroyed the bedroom and made it into one huge walk-in closet to store all of our clothes and outfits.

Val and Crimson were on the bus, eating at the kitchen table.

I walked past them without a word and immediately went to wash my hands.

They were chattering about how so many people were out with the flu.

I wished I would go out with the flu.

When I turned to grab a dish towel, I found it sitting next to a non-descript cardboard box with no mailing address and a single word on it: Caristonia.

Son of a bitch.

The package had arrived somewhere between the start of the circus and the end of the circus.

How this guy kept getting past security, I didn't know. But it was time to figure it out.

Clenching my hands into fists, I decided to text Folsom to ask her where Hannibal was currently located.

It wasn't like Keene would give me access to his phone to give me his number.

Keene was a private guy, and he hated when people invaded his personal space.

Even though I liked messing with my family, I didn't cross their lines.

And that was Keene's line.

"I'm not opening it, you're opening it," I heard Crimson say.

I felt my eyelid start to twitch, something that usually only happened when I got super tired and stressed.

Rubbing my fingers over my eyes aggressively, I walked to the knife drawer, pulled out a kitchen knife, then ripped the box open.

Like always, there was a note inside addressed to Tony.

This time the note said:

Saw this and thought of you. You'd be beautiful in it. If you don't wear it, I'll get mad.

I gagged at the panties that were crotchless, then picked through the rest of the contents with the tip of the knife.

A very distinct smell—one that no one would miss if they'd ever had sex before—wafted up from the box as I sifted through the contents.

I groaned when I saw the puddle of dried fluid stuck to the plastic at the bottom of the box.

"So gross," I grumbled as I stared at it. "So fuckin' gross."

Jaw now set in a hard line, I pulled a trash bag from under the counter and dumped all of the box's contents into it.

Dropping it on the ground next to the front door of the bus, I went to the sink and washed my hands all over again. Twice.

“Why do you look so murderous today?” Keene asked as he came in through the door.

I tossed him a dismissive glance and walked past him to the bunk that was mine.

Once there, I plugged my phone in to charge, then went into the shared room to grab a change of clothes.

The next stop was the bathhouse that we usually made sure to have at each stop.

Turning the water up to scald, I stood under the spray and wondered what I’d done in my previous life to deserve the one I had now.

CHAPTER 3

As the proud owner of a big heart and a fat ass, my life should not be this hard.

-T-shirt

HADES

“Are you sure Coco was poisoned?” I heard said.

My eyes flicked open at the sound of voices outside the bus, and I groaned and rolled over at hearing Coco’s name mentioned.

Coco was one of two tigers that we had with the circus. One was a white tiger, and the other was a normal Bengal one with a rich orange coat.

I hadn’t gotten to bed until well after four this morning, and the last thing I was able to do right then was come up with cognitive brain power to form coherent thoughts.

“Yes, fairly sure,” I heard some new male voice say. “It’s more than obvious due to the symptoms the tiger is showing.”

I rubbed my eyes in hopes it would clear the sleep, and pushed my way out of the bunk.

The first stop was to get dressed fully and brush my teeth.

I needed to have a certain level of balance in my world, and those were two things I could fully control.

When I was done, I went out the back entrance to escape to the bathrooms—because there were just some things you didn’t do in the bus’s bathroom if you could help it.

That was why, when I came back around, purse, phone and overnight essential bag in hand, and heard what they had to say next, it froze me in my tracks.

“Do you think this could have been Hades?” Slone asked, making me pause mid-stride on my way around the bus.

“Hades would know that radiator fluid would be enticing to an animal, sure,” I heard my sister reply.

My stomach clenched.

“Did they say whether they thought Coco would make it?” I heard Keene ask.

“Not that I know of,” Slone replied. “But Coco wasn’t looking too good. There’s every possibility that she could die.”

“So do you think it was her? Because you left?” Slone asked.

“Maybe,” I heard Tony reply.

I’m sorry, but what?

Were they saying they thought I’d poisoned Coco?

Really?

How could they think it was me?

When had I ever hurt another living being?

Sure, I’d been a little rowdy with them, but I hadn’t physically hurt them in any way.

And the cats?

I loved those beasts.

And fuck them for not immediately telling Slone it wasn’t me.

I fisted my hands, then thought...fuck it.

I was tired of playing the good daughter while being treated like absolute shit.

It was time for me to be who I wanted to be.

And that definitely wasn’t the obedient little Hades that took over all shifts for those that couldn’t get it done.

Pulling out my phone, I sent a request for an Uber, then started walking.

Time to go find someone that would help me solve a problem. Oh, and blow this popsicle stand.

Once I figured out Tony’s stalker situation, I was done.

CHAPTER 4

*I pee in pools.
-Yeti Cup*

HANNIBAL

“Listen, Mom,” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I won’t be home. I’m sorry.”

Fucking holiday weekends and my mom always expecting me to be home when I hadn’t attended a family function in years.

Not because I didn’t like them—though they were stressful—but I was just too damn busy. Starting your own business was a bitch, and when everything took off on me before I was ready, I’d had no other choice but to throw myself in headfirst.

If any of my family happened to be within the vicinity of me when I was in town, we’d go eat and hang out. If they weren’t, then we didn’t. Easy as that.

My mom had five boys, Harrison, Holden, Hunter, Hancock and then me. She had us all one right after the other, starting with Harrison and ending with Hancock and me. Hancock was my identical twin brother. Though, at this stage in our lives, we didn’t necessarily look identical anymore.

I was way more graying than he was, though I was fairly convinced Hancock colored his hair like the little diva he was.

I mean, why else would his still be almost all the way black, and mine took on this chrome look?

“You’re not even listening to me, are you, Hannibal Peters?” my mother snapped.

Actually, I wasn’t.

Not that I would tell her that.

“Mom,” I tried to be nice, but the patience was thinning with each second I stayed on this phone call and listened to her bitch. “I’m literally in the middle of a meeting.”

She sighed. “Then why did you answer?”

I felt my eyelid twitch. “Because the last time I didn’t answer, you yelled at me the next three times I answered your calls, saying that you and Dad were getting old, and what if one day you were calling to tell me that my dad

was in the hospital and dying, and I'd ignored it...so now I fuckin' answer."

My mother sighed. "I don't know why you boys insist on talking like criminals."

Because we were all raised on a cattle ranch, and Dad didn't give one flying fuck how his kids talked as long as they could wrangle a calf when it escaped its mom.

"Mom, are we done?" I questioned.

My mom's sighs were getting heavier and heavier.

"I suppose we can be."

"All right. I'll try calling you back after we get done here. But it may be a while," I stated.

"Fine," my mother said. "I love you."

And, to make sure that she didn't get me a shitty Easter basket like Hancock got last year after he'd failed to say it, I said, "I love you, too."

When I hung up I looked at my newest client.

Currently, I was at a circus of all places.

Even weirder, I was contacted by a friend who owned a rival circus to the one I was working with. What were the odds that two circuses would contact me within a week of each other?

"So tell me what you think you need," I suggested. "Then I can make recommendations based on what you tell me."

The man currently sitting in front of me was named Crew. His parents had started Vegas Royale Circus back in nineteen fifty-five. Now, Crew owned all stock in the company after his parents' deaths a few weeks ago.

And he was trying to beef up security and hire people he could trust to run the damn thing since he had no desire to make this his life.

Which was funny because it sounded like my friend, Keene, who'd just called about his circus that he co-owned with family.

Speaking of Keene's family, the dark-headed woman that continuously caught my attention came to mind, and I shook the thoughts off.

Yeah, best not to go there at this moment in time.

"Well, to be completely honest, there's absolutely no security here, whatsoever. And since this is a more...risqué...circus, a lot of the women are

treated like shit. When I first got here, I had two attacked in the parking lot on two separate nights.”

“Ahh,” I nodded.

I’d done my research on the circus Crew now owned.

Years and years ago when his father had founded the circus, it’d been a traveling one. However, over time, they’d realized that crew retention was near impossible for the kind of shows they were wanting to put on without being in a fixed position where the crew could get there every night without having to travel with them.

Hence them starting the permanent circus.

It was a mixture between Cirque De Solei and a strip club.

Though there was no actual nudity, there was quite a bit of flesh breaking out all over the place.

And the entire event was eighteen plus.

They also did fifteen shows a year in various locations around the country, but they didn’t have another of those coming up for two weeks.

“Then, a few nights ago, we had a couple of drunk guys try to storm the stage.” He rubbed between his eyes as if there was a headache that’d formed there that got bigger the longer he talked about his issues. “They grabbed a dancer and sexually assaulted her on stage. Though it didn’t get much further than groping, it was enough that she quit and refused to come back until we have proper security. Something that my dad was lax about because he felt like it gave people a better experience when they weren’t constantly watched over by people that kept them in line.”

“Wow,” I replied. “Your dad didn’t care about the safety of his people?”

“My dad cared about money, pure and simple. Hell, that was why I left and joined the military. I was tired of the traveling circus life. Tired of the constant ‘fill in here’ or ‘do that until I can find a replacement’ there. I don’t like being free labor. And honestly, I’d shut this whole damn thing down if so many families didn’t depend on it.”

I respected him more for that.

“You got out?” I asked.

Crew scrubbed his hands down his face. “Not really.”

Crew Vegas was a Navy SEAL. He'd been a SEAL for only four years when the news of his father's death had come to him. Now he was facing two possibilities. Fixing what was wrong with his father's business in his allotted ten days, or get out.

Which likely also put him in a bad mood.

You didn't get out of the military when you loved it that much unless there was no other option or you were forced to.

And Crew was definitely being forced to, if my background checks were anything to go by.

"You care if we take a look around?" I asked. "Familiarize the place to me? Then tonight, I'll come back for a show, and then you can let me observe for myself where I think things need to be fixed."

Crew nodded. "Thanks, man."

He showed me around the area, and it was surprisingly way nicer than I'd expected of a risqué circus.

When we were done, we parted in the parking lot, and Crew's eyes went behind me.

And, as if she was conjured by my thoughts, when I walked out to the parking lot toward my bike, I saw her sitting on my seat with her arms crossed.

"Who's that?" Crew asked.

Considering I'd told him I was single and had no immediate plans of remedying that, seeing a girl leaning against my bike like she owned it was surprising.

"That," I said softly, "is trouble."

CHAPTER 5

*She makes me melt like a popsicle on the Fourth of July.
-Hannibal's secret thoughts*

HANNIBAL

I didn't know what it was about Hades Singh that had me so interested in her, but I knew when it started.

When I was overseas doing what I did best—recovery work—I'd met Keene Singh.

Keene had been in the military for about ten years, meanwhile I'd been there so long I felt like I was one promotion away from being desk-bound.

Luckily, at the time, I'd been on the way out, ready and willing to do anything not to be sidelined like the upper brass had in store for me.

Anyway, I'd been focused on me at that time, and I'd been lost in thought when I'd walked up on Keene talking about his sisters.

I'm not quite sure what made me stay there and look at the photos he was passing around, but I had.

And it hadn't been any of the other exotic beauties that'd caught my eyes. And, just sayin', but my God, every last one of them were captivatingly beautiful—well, all but one.

Though, I'd like to point out that the 'one' wasn't ugly.

In fact, she was pretty, but in a non-conventional way.

She was regular sized for a woman, skinny with regular breasts and regular ass. She had long black hair that wasn't glossy, but wasn't dull either. She had regular blue eyes, regular length hair, regular everything, really.

But all that regular had fit into one perfectly formed person.

A person that, for some reason, had been the first to draw my eye.

From that moment on, I'd found myself befriending Keene just to get more info on his sister.

And I had.

But Keene wasn't a dumbass, and he'd totally caught on to what I was doing.

Though we'd become friendly, it hadn't taken him long to blow me off, mostly because he really loved his family. He was super protective of them.

At first, he'd thought I was interested in one of his sisters that wasn't Hades.

But then, when he found out it was Hades that had drawn my eye, he'd gotten even more distant from me. More or less, he'd told me to fuck off, and don't talk to him again.

So I hadn't.

But we had run into each other from time to time, and one of those times had been when I'd gone with my twin brother to the circus.

Sure, I'd been the one to recommend we all go.

And sure, I probably should've mentioned to my brother that I might be causing a little bit of trouble.

But I hadn't.

What I had done was make sure to find Hades just so I could see her in person.

And her captivation of me hadn't reduced with time. In fact, seeing her in person had only solidified my desire to meet her. To get to know her. To want her.

We'd met for a handful of seconds that night before Keene had thrown a fuckin' fit and kicked me, my brother and his kids from the circus.

But it was worth it.

Even Keene all but telling me if I came around her again, I'd pay for it in lashings from his ringmaster whip didn't deter me.

I still wanted her.

And seeing her now, standing in front of me...let's just say it was a dream come true.

"She yours?" Crew asked, sounding somewhat interested.

I flashed him a glare. "She's mine."

"I thought you said you didn't have anyone," he pointed out.

I shrugged. "I didn't until she got here."

Crew chuckled as he said, "She's coming this way."

She sure was.

I watched her walk toward me, her hands in the back pockets of her jeans.

She was wearing short shorts that showed off her incredible legs, combat boots that came up over her ankle, and a black tank top that was just showing a hint of midriff.

She came to a stop directly in front of us, and didn't spare Crew a single word as she said, "You remember me, right, Hannibal?"

I nodded.

What was she doing here?

"I'm Crew," Crew drawled, bringing Hades' attention to him.

"I need a job, Drew," Hades murmured. "Can I have one?"

"Crew," Crew corrected her. "And I am always looking for workers. Have you worked in a circus before?"

Hades snorted as she said, "More than I'm willing to admit."

Crew tilted his head and said, "Why do I know you?"

"Because you literally just met me like a month ago," she pointed out. "Your friend, Banner, and y'all's entire crew came to spend a little time with Coffey."

Crew narrowed his eyes. "I don't think I met you."

Hades sighed. "That's because I'm easily dismissible."

No, no she fuckin' wasn't.

At least not to me.

"I doubt that's the case," he murmured quietly. "What can you do at the circus?"

She dismissed him and then looked at me. "We need to talk about my sister."

I studied her blue eyes and wondered what, exactly, she thought I could do.

I mean, sure, I was in security.

I was damn good at it, actually.

But if Keene didn't want me there, then I wouldn't be there.

Which I told her in the next second.

"What's wrong with your sister?" Crew asked.

Before Hades could glare at him like she was doing to me, I answered.

“Hades’ twin sister has a stalker, and they can’t find him because they move around too much, and this mysterious stalker knows exactly where they are and what they’re doing, and can bypass all their security measures. Well, what measures they’re able to put into place when none of the sisters listen to Keene,” I said to him. “But he’s not proven violent as of yet, and Keene assures me he can handle it.”

“Keene can’t handle shit,” Hades snapped.

I would’ve laughed at her outburst had her anger not been palpable.

“Keene was in the military for years, Hades,” I pointed out. “If he wanted to fix it, he would.”

“Well,” Hades’ eye twitched. “He’s too busy trying to run the circus to think about his sisters.”

Did I note a hint of anger at how her brother was overloaded? The man was only one person. And from what I could tell, Ansel Singh, their father, hadn’t left the circus in good repair. Keene was fighting a losing battle. I wasn’t sure any of the sisters knew anything about the troubles that the circus was going through, and he was keeping them out of it as best as he could. But one day, it would boil over.

“I’m sure that he’s thinking about y’all,” I pointed out.

“I’m sure that I know what I’m talking about, and you don’t spend hours and hours with him when he assures me he’s going to fix it, then doesn’t,” she countered.

Crew whistled under his breath, one of those long, low things that said, ‘you’re fucked.’

I shot him a look that clearly said he needed to leave, and Crew’s eyes crinkled at the edges as he said, “I’ll just be right over here.”

Then he moved toward the flagpole where my gaze kept wandering due to the disrepair the flag was currently in.

Crew pulled the flag down, folded it up, then walked toward a new flag that’d been sitting on the bench outside the front doors.

I turned back to Hades. “Do you want to go grab lunch?”

Please say yes, because I really don’t want you to leave.

And also, why the fuck do you captivate me so much?

“Sure,” she muttered.

Then she moved to the side of my bike and waited for me with her brow raised. “I’m guessing I need to give you a ride?”

“I had an Uber drop me off from the bus station,” she explained.

I picked up my helmet and offered it to her, but she shook her head.

“I’m the newcomer here, and you need to wear your own helmet,” she said.

I gritted my teeth and thought about trying to offer it again, but she wouldn’t wear it. I had a feeling she was very opinionated and would do what she wanted to regardless of my feelings on the matter.

So instead, I looked like the complete dick and shoved the helmet onto my head before getting onto the bike.

She got on behind me, as if we’d done this a half a million times, then wrapped her arms around my waist.

I was ashamed to say that my chubbie became a full-blown erection when she did.

The drive to the diner I’d seen on the way in was short but memorable.

When we got to the parking lot, I was wondering what it would feel like having her legs around me for a different reason and got off the bike.

I got a few ugly looks from a couple of bikers that were heading out, and I threw up my hands. “She wouldn’t wear it!”

The biker looked from me to her and back. “You got a hundred pounds on her, easy. Pretty sure you could get her to wear it.”

I snorted. “You haven’t met her.”

The second biker looked at her and said, “You should wear the helmet.”

“Respectfully, sir, you should go fuck yourself,” Hades muttered and walked into the diner.

The guy’s eyes were sparkling with mirth, and my gaze wandered to his cut.

Joker.

“She’s feisty,” he mused.

Feisty was too tame.

She was hell on wheels, and I'd only just 'met' her.

Tipping my chin up at the two men, I followed the girl.

When I got in there, she'd already ordered herself a drink and was sitting in a booth at the very back with her back to the door, almost as if she knew it was futile to fight me on the seat placement.

I took the seat across from her, signaled to the waitress, and she came over.

"What can I get you, sir?" she asked, her eyes gleaming.

"Water," I ordered.

She left without another word, and I turned my gaze on the woman in front of me.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

I watched as she sat back in the booth, crossed her arms, and stared at me for long moments before she said, "How much has my brother told you about Tony's situation?"

"Caristonia being Tony?" I clarified.

"Yes," she confirmed.

"All that he told me yesterday, and the one other time he asked for help, was that she had a stalker. That the police wouldn't do anything because the stalker hasn't escalated to anything violent. And, since y'all don't stay in place for more than a week, you really have nothing to give to the police, who also confirmed they could do nothing without a little more information," I explained.

She pursed her lips.

"We're not quite sure when these packages started," she admitted. "At first, everyone thought some of the weird packages were from me, since I'm also notorious for sending Tony stuff that makes her uncomfortable."

"Why would you send her stuff that makes her uncomfortable?" I wondered, unable to let her finish her explanation without knowing that detail.

It was funny when you were getting to know a person, trying to find out why they ticked the way they did, that even the smallest of details could give you incredible insight into their mind, and who they were as a person. What

formed them into that person.

Meaning I usually went where my gut told me, and this time, it told me to force the answer out of her about the packages.

“My sister doesn’t know how to have any fun,” she shrugged. “But, mainly, the packages at first were a way to stick it to my father. He freakin’ hated mail day. As in, if we got a package, and he had to go get it, he would go out of his way to keep it from us for weeks on end until we finally either stopped asking about the package, or chose to forget about it. Once the game was no longer fun, Dad would give us our packages, and we’d go on with life.”

“Okay,” I said. “And that story is significant to why you give her uncomfortable packages now because...”

She narrowed her eyes, but answered me.

“Tony loved packages. She felt so special when she got them. She’s my twin, so I know that she loved the days our mom would send her something. So I started sending them when I could afford to buy her things, because I knew that she loved them. But one time, I sent her something that cost a whack. I picked it out especially for her, and she scoffed at the gift and threw it away. So I started sending her shit that would make her uncomfortable because she’d pissed me off.”

There it was.

She’d put her heart and hard-earned money into buying her sister a present, knowing how much she loved getting presents, and her sister had shit all over the gift.

She was hurt. So she’d turned those ‘gifts’ into malicious presents because she’d been harmed by her sister’s lack of enthusiasm.

“Okay,” I nodded. “And then what happened?”

She then went on to explain that the packages from the stalker had escalated to the point where he was jacking off in the box of stuff—most of it sexual in nature—and somehow getting it to them without anyone the wiser.

At first ‘Tony’ was aware that she was getting these presents. But Hades and Keene had gone out of their way to hide it from her the best that they could. And the stalker had upped his game. He’d also shown that Caristonia’s new boyfriend, Slone Day, wasn’t going to be a deterrent in getting her the

packages he thought she needed.

All we knew was that the stalker was male. Though, typically, all stalkers were of the opposite sex. It sure would be helpful to know a few more details.

“...And I have this super-duper bad feeling about Tony being with Slone.” The woman in front of me tried to hide her fear, but I saw it in her eyes before she’d banked the emotions. “So I tried to break them up.”

Tried.

Nice.

My lips twitched. “And let me guess, everyone is mad at you now?”

“Oh, yeah.” Hades shrugged. “It’s nothing new, though. I’ve been the unofficial punching bag of the Singh clan since I was born.”

Her nonchalant words made my stomach churn.

I narrowed my eyes. “Why?”

She shrugged. “It’s just been the way of it since I was born.”

I didn’t like the sound of that.

I also didn’t like my reaction to that.

It felt like I was doing something that I should definitely not be doing.

To distract myself from my thoughts I said, “So what did you do to break them up?”

She told me the story of faking an article that showed Slone had gone out on a date with another woman for a charity gala.

“You’re that good with Photoshop?” I asked.

She lifted a shoulder as she said, “Well, it was my major when I was in college.”

“Was your major?” I asked.

“I was in school for photography and design,” she answered. “It was my dream to design things. Not any particular things, just things in general. If that makes any sense. And I wanted to use my own photos to do it.” She pursed her lips before saying, “I’m good at it, too. I design all the media for Singh Circus. I had started to hire out when Folsom, she was someone who used to work with us that is a computer whiz, said I needed to start putting myself out there. Anyway, long story short, I didn’t finish college because my sister thinks that I am—or maybe was at this point—obsessed with my

ex-boyfriend, Benji.”

I frowned. “Why would she think that?”

She then went on to explain everything about Benji, and I didn’t blame her for her response. The guy sounded like a douche.

“Why not just tell your sister?” I wondered.

Why not let her know the guy you were once dating was a douche, and that you saved her from a stalker?

“I guess I was jealous at first,” she admitted, her eyes narrowing on something on the table. She reached forward and flicked a piece of dried food off the table with her nail before she looked back up at me and said, “From the very beginning, it was my sister. For my dad, he always liked Tony more. For my mom, Tony was the first one she talked to every time. For Benji, he’d gravitated toward Tony first. But I didn’t know that when I agreed to go on a date with him. I only learned about it later from one of my sisters. I’ve never been chosen first and...I don’t know. I just don’t want her to know, I guess. It hurts my pride a little less to know that she doesn’t know.”

I leaned back as the waitress came back with our drinks.

“What can I get y’all for dinner?” the older lady asked, looking haggard and worn.

I flicked my eyes to her nametag that read ‘Ross.’

Interesting.

“I’ll have a burger and fries, all the way. If you can load those fries with cheese and bacon, even better.” I handed her my menu.

She took it and tucked it underneath her arm, not bothering to write down my order.

A veteran in the food business, it looked like.

“And you, darlin’?” Ross asked her.

“What’s your name short for?” Hades asked instead of ordering.

It was amusing to see that she’d seen the same thing I had, yet hadn’t thought twice about questioning her about her unusual name.

Then again, Hades likely knew all about unusual.

“It’s Ross.” The older woman smiled. “That’s it. No more or no less. My dad was a Betsy Ross fan, and he thought Betsy was too overused back then.

So Ross it was.”

“Ahh,” Hades nodded. “My name is Hades. I tend to always ask people about their name if it’s unusual. Then I like to invite you to my weird name club so we can commiserate.”

Ross smiled at her, losing some of the weariness from her stature.

“Anyway,” Hades handed her menu over. “I won’t be having anything. I don’t want my family knowing where I am. So for now it’s just cash, and I don’t have any of that until the bank opens tomorrow.”

Ross frowned, and I rolled my eyes.

“Get what you want, and I’ll cover it,” I said. “I was the one to invite you to a diner.”

Hades’ eyes met mine over the table, and I waited for her to make the right decision.

She narrowed her eyes when she saw I wasn’t going to budge on my stance, and sighed, long, loud and unladylike.

“Since he’s paying,” she mused. “I’ll have a Beefeater.”

The ‘Beefeater’ was a double decker patty melt that had eight kinds of cheeses on it and everything else under the sun usually on a burger. Then onion rings and fries.

There was no way in hell she was going to eat it all, but I couldn’t wait to see her try.

“All right, darlin’,” she said. “I’ll be back with some refills.”

I looked back toward Hades’ drink and saw that it was halfway gone.

“Half full or half empty?” I found myself asking.

“Empty,” Hades answered as she sat back. “How long are you at Vegas Royale?”

“As long as it takes,” I answered. “Maybe like two weeks or so.”

She nodded. “If I offer him my services for two weeks, could you spare me some time in the middle of the day when they’re not open to help me figure out what’s going on with her?”

Her being her sister.

I studied her for so long that most people would’ve started squirming.

Not her, though.

“What do I get out of it?” I asked.

I didn’t work for free.

That’s not how you made money.

She leaned forward and placed both of her elbows on the table—something my mom would’ve killed me for—and stared at me for long moments before saying, “What do you want?”

My immediate answer was ‘you.’

Not that I voiced that.

I didn’t have a death wish.

“What do you have to give?” I asked.

She tapped her finger on the little dent in her chin before saying, “I can offer you my design services.”

I hated to say it, but I didn’t need her design services.

Nothing that I did was in need of visual representation.

It was all word by mouth. If you didn’t get vouched by someone that I’d already vetted myself, then you weren’t working with me. End of story.

“I’m not really in need of that,” I admitted. “But I’ll help you, and we can think of something later.”

Maybe you would get more comfortable around me and we can see where this goes.

Again, I didn’t voice that.

Instead, I waited for her to agree.

But she surprised me and said, “You can have my body.”

I blinked, surprised to hear her say that.

She was just going to give it up without me having to work for it? What was the catch?

And I knew without a doubt that she didn’t realize what she was asking for, or she wouldn’t have offered it. Nor did I give any indication that it was something that might interest me.

“I…” I hesitated.

“I heard my brother talking,” she said. “When he called to ask you for

help. I heard everything.”

Well, that explained it.

Some of the heat I’d been tamping down flared in my eyes.

“I’m not an easy guy, honey,” I said softly.

She scoffed. “Trust me when I say, I’m not easy either.”

No, I didn’t imagine that she was.

CHAPTER 6

Only whores can see this.
-Coffee Cup

HADES

I couldn't believe I'd just offered my body to him for payment in helping my sister.

And he was staring at me like I'd just surprised the shit out of him.

"I'm sorry, but even if I was okay with treating a woman like that, which I'm not, I'm definitely not okay with treating you like that," he said, surprising me.

I blinked. "What?"

"Which part did you not understand?" he wondered, reaching for his drink and taking a long swallow. Without a straw.

What kind of monster didn't use a straw?

That was how you stained your teeth.

Though, I saw that wasn't a problem with Hannibal. Either he whitened his teeth, or knew how to brush away bad decisions.

"The part where you're not okay treating me like that," I explained. "Why would it being me have to do with anything? We don't even know each other."

We really didn't.

I mean, sure, I'd seen him a time or two and thought he was rather spectacular. But I rather doubted he'd done the same.

Keene had told him to stay away from me. But, more likely, the only reason he had was because he didn't want to force his friend into anything.

"I'm going to tell you something, and if you admit this to your brother, he might very well kill me," he said.

I narrowed my eyes. "It's funny that you think my brother talks to me. The only time we even acknowledge each other's existence is when we're going over the weekly schedule, or I'm asking him why he can't pull his head out of his ass when it comes to my sister."

Hannibal's mouth twitched up at the corner as he said, "Well in that case, I'll be blunt."

"Oh, please do," I said. "I'm honestly quite tired of people beating around

the topic at hand. Just say what it is, and I'll react accordingly."

Hannibal's eyes were an interesting shade of gray. With the light of the diner filling his eyes, they went from a lighter shade of gray to gray so dark they looked like a thunderstorm waiting to happen.

"I want you."

I blinked, surprised he'd gone for that so fast and hard.

"Okay..." I waited.

"I've wanted you since I saw you in a fucking photograph," he continued. "And I can't say that your appeal to me is the healthiest of obsessions, but it is what it is. Honestly, you should probably stay away from me. I'm not the easiest man in the world to be around at the best of times. But if we do anything more than eat dinner here again, I can't promise that I won't smother the hell out of you."

Why did him smothering the hell out of me turn me on so much?

If I were being honest, I did have a bit of an obsession disorder.

Not in an unhealthy way—at least not when I was admitting it to myself—but in a fixating way that a person became all I could think about.

Though, that was a fairly new development since Benji. And I hadn't wanted to be around him so much as I wanted to kill him in his sleep. I'd been overly obsessed with the desire to take him out of my life since he'd broken my college self's heart.

That obsession had never been a healthy thing.

"Hannibal," I said stiffly. "I'm not any healthier of a person than you are when it comes to mental stability and relationships."

His eyes crinkled at the corners.

"I've seen a lot of shit in this world," he said. "I've done things, things that I'm more than proud of because of the scum of the Earth that I'd inflicted those things on, and I'm not a normal person. Shit doesn't affect me like it would affect a normal person. I don't do relationships because relationships come with me turning into this overprotective, smothering, you're never going to be able to step away from me more than five feet without me being very aware of your surroundings..." He shot me a smirk. "And my desire to know more about you has only been fueled over the years. So let's just call it

now. I figure out what the fuck's going on with your sister. Your brother pays me. Then we chill the fuck out and live our life without knowing what the other has to offer."

I eyed him with a speculative work. "If we haven't been able to stop thinking about each other since we've taken notice of each other, how, exactly, do you think that this is going to get any better if we just ignore it?"

How did he expect *me* to ignore it?

I wasn't an ignore it kind of person.

"I just know that with my track record, you'll probably hate me soon," he said.

I tilted my head and stared at him. "How about you give me everything, and I make that decision. Then I'll give you everything, and you make yours."

He took another sip of his drink, this time nearly draining it.

"I have severe PTSD. Broken down cars on the side of the road turn me into a raving lunatic that has to be sure it's not a threat before I'll even go near it," he expounded. "I don't like being around kids because they shriek and scream and trigger something inside of me that makes me want to fight or flight. I'm not even sure that I should be around my nieces and nephews without being supervised. That feeling is easing the longer I've been out, but it may never fully go away."

I drummed my fingers on the table.

"My father beat the holy hell out of me every time he got a chance," I said. "And now, every time I see a man that looks like him, whether he's a good guy or a bad guy, I'm going to go out of my way to make sure that guy is having the shittiest day possible."

His lips curved at my words, but only after he scowled ferociously at the idea of me getting beaten.

"The last girlfriend I had, when she went to visit her parents out of state, I followed her there and made sure she was safe. She found out, and we broke up because she said I was suffocating her. We broke up amicably, but it took me nearly a year to stop following her every move. It was only when she was engaged, and I found her future husband fully capable of protecting her, that I was able to stop tracking her location," he said.

I snorted. “That’s weak.”

His eyes narrowed.

Before he could say anything, though, I pulled up my phone and showed him my location trackers.

“These are my sisters’ whereabouts. I know where they’ve gone, and what they’ve done, every step of their morning. I also have a friend keeping an eye on Keene through his cell phone since he’s not willing to wear a necklace that I bought him with a tracker in it,” I said.

“They know they’re wearing trackers?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No. I just gave them one hell of a guilt trip, and make sure to replace the batteries in it every six months.”

He chuckled, making my heart catch.

God, he was sexy.

Even us comparing our overbearing insecurities wasn’t worrisome enough to take away the heat I felt for him.

“I tend to be a little overbearing and controlling, to the point of insanity,” he said. “I’ve always been this way, from a very young child, but it’s only gotten worse since I’ve gotten older and gotten more jaded along the way. I can’t promise that I’ll control those tendencies when it comes to you.”

It was like he was trying his level best to steer me away from him, yet all it was doing was making me want to get closer.

“Hannibal,” I told him bluntly. “I’m going to say this slow, so you’ll understand me. I’m not a normal girl. Things like that don’t affect me in any way. My father and family went out of their way to destroy that part of me. So when you say you’ll be there, protecting me, I’m going to tell you that I don’t care how you do it. Do it however you see fit. But just know that you’re the first person that has ever been willing to do that. Healthy or not, that’s just how I feel. Nothing you can say, bar you being a rapist or a child abuser, would ever force me to look at you with anything other than interest.”

“I’m neither of those things,” he said. “Those are the acts that turned me into this person to begin with. I might’ve been a little weird going into the military, and Lord knows it was a miracle I passed a psych eval to begin with, but I don’t condone those sorts of things. And I’ve got the dishonorable discharge to prove it.”

I sensed a story there. One I wanted to hear.

But that was for later.

This was for now.

“So we’re decided,” I said.

He tilted his head as he said, “Decided about what?”

“As my man, you’ll help me figure out what the hell is happening with my sister. And as your woman, I’ll stay around and allow you to dictate what I do and where I do it, and won’t complain about it. Until you decide that this is too much,” I said simply.

He folded his fingers together, then tucked them behind his head as he studied me.

“We’ll be a match made in hell?” he asked.

I shrugged. “We’ll be a match made in wherever we want it. I don’t care. What I do care about is eating. Thank you for buying my lunch. I’d rather them not know where I am yet.”

“Why?” he asked.

Our plates were brought out, and I stared at the patty melt with my mouth watering as I said, “Because my family has a way of ruining everything. For once, I want to think about nobody but myself.”

“And me?” he teased.

I didn’t want to blow smoke up his ass, so I told him the truth. “I don’t know yet if you’re important enough to factor into my plans.”

Was he attractive? Yes.

Was he someone I wanted to explore things with? Double yes.

But was he going to dictate how I lived my life? Not yet.

But I had a feeling he would before this was all over.

Hannibal seemed different to me.

But different in a good way.

Hopefully.

CHAPTER 7

*Now, that is what I call anxiety.
-Text from Hades to Hannibal*

HANNIBAL

I watched her from across the hotel pool.

She was sitting on the pool lounge by herself, with no one else around, writing furiously in a book in her lap.

It'd gotten colder.

It was now mid-way through October, and the weather had taken a turn for the worse.

The weatherman said that we were predicted to get snow in a few weeks—though, hopefully I'd be gone by then. Missouri wasn't my favorite place to be in the world, though it was fucking beautiful.

I'd planned to go on a few hikes while I was here, but if it was snowing, I'd pass.

My old bones needed heat to work properly, and Missouri definitely wasn't making that happen.

The wind blew, and a few stray hairs flew across Hades' face as she continued to write. The pages of her book, held down by her hand now, continued to flap in the wind.

“Sir.”

I looked up to see the maid I'd tracked down holding the blanket I asked for out to me.

“Thank you, darlin’.” I winked.

The maid, probably all of eighteen at most, blushed profusely and said, “No problem at all, sir. Let me know if I can help with anything else.”

I nearly rolled my eyes at her words.

So eager to please.

One day she'd lose that innocence, and then the real world would slap her in the face.

She was cute, though, so maybe that would never happen for her.

But I doubted it. The world had a way of sneaking up on you and grabbing your attention no matter how hard you tried to hold it at bay.

Pushing through the door that led outside to the pool, I studied her as I walked up.

She'd changed, putting on black leggings, a black long-sleeved t-shirt, and a flannel that looked like it'd been washed to perfection.

It also fit her like a sheet.

She had it wrapped around her tight, and a tight knit cap pulled down over her hair to keep her head warm.

She heard me coming and glanced up, doing a double take.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked.

"I was coming out here so I'm not stuck in my room," I told her. "I wasn't aware that you owned the area, though."

I tossed the blanket at her face, and she let out an 'ooooph.'

Grinning, I plopped down in the chair next to her and said, "Whatcha writing?"

She took the blanket off of her lap where it'd fallen, then unfolded it and threw it around her shoulders.

"I write in my journal," she said. "My therapist thinks that if I write in here and express my feelings, that maybe some of my frustration and anger at others might be controlled."

"Is it?" I asked.

I'd never understood the point of therapists. I mean, logically I knew that they were needed. That some people just couldn't function without one. But for me, that would never work.

I was too withdrawn from life to share my feelings with anyone. Sharing meant vulnerability, and vulnerability meant putting my life in someone else's hands. Something I didn't do, not even for family members.

"Well," Hades closed the book and said, "Hennessey Casey, my therapist, thinks that I'm doing better. She thinks I'm writing my frustrations out, but I'm more treating this like a memoir. Telling my entire life story as I remember it."

My stomach clenched at that.

I wanted to read it.

But I'd wait to ask until she trusted me more.

“So I have something to ask you,” I said, watching her place her journal on the edge of the pool lounge and turn to me.

I waited until she’d situated herself underneath the blanket, pulling her knees up high to her chest and wrapping her arms around her upraised knees, before I said anything.

“Hit me,” she said.

Just the thought of ‘hitting her’ made my stomach lurch after her earlier words about her father abusing her.

If her father weren’t already dead, he would be dying at my hands.

I hated abusers.

After our talk at the diner, I’d taken her to the same hotel that I was staying at for the few days while I figured out what the hell I was doing.

I was fairly sure that I was taking the job.

But with the arrival of Hades, my plans had sort of changed.

They’d gone from doing this alone—which I usually did since I only ever worked by myself even though I had a company with employees that would be willing to help me given the chance—to seeing how I could work Hades into my plans.

Mostly it was because I hated seeing that look on her face. The blank one that clearly showed that she expected everyone to let her down, even me.

And I didn’t like that look.

Not even a little bit.

“I’m going to need you close for a while when I start working on whomever is trying to stalk your sister. And it would be best if I get that done while also working my other job that I agreed to take on with Vegas Royale Circus,” I started.

“Okay...” she waited for me to elaborate.

“I need help with VRC, though,” I said. “Crew’s got some shit going on that I’m thinking might take a while. I have a weird vibe about it, and now that my claws are sunk in, I want to see where it leads me.”

She raised a brow, waiting for me to continue.

“What kind of weird vibe are you getting?” she wondered.

Instead of hiding anything, I decided to lay it all out.

“Crew was in the military. You remember that, right?” I asked.

She nodded. “A Navy SEAL. But I didn’t think you could just get out of the military like that.”

She snapped her fingers for emphasis.

“You can if there’s a family emergency where you have no other option,” I said. “His dad owned Vegas Royale. His father before him started Vegas Royale. It’s been in the family business for a very long time. Anyway, so right now, he’s still in the military. But they’re not quite sure whether or not he’s going to have to get all the way out or not because of a few family issues.”

“What kind of family issues?” she pushed, leaning forward to wipe at her nose with the sleeve of her shirt.

That move definitely should not have been sexy, but for some reason it made me want things.

I crossed one leg over the other then placed my hands behind my head as I started to explain.

“So it’s a really weird situation,” I said. “A week ago, a call went out to Crew’s command that pretty much told him his dad had died, and there was a kid he’d been taking care of. They think he might’ve been his son, but they’re also not one hundred percent sure.”

“Okay,” she tilted her head.

“Anyway, so he goes home, and it comes out that there’s a woman there that has been taking care of him, but it’s not her kid. She’s fuckin’ terrified of telling him the actual mother’s name. The actual mother is a worker at the show, but that person isn’t coming out of hiding. And overall, Crew’s noticed a huge pall over the entire circus. Everyone is fuckin’ terrified, and no one is talking. So for now, what I’m doing is setting up security, and possibly infiltrating into the crew and finding out what in the fuck is going on.” I looked at her, and her eyes were riveted on me. “That’s where you come in.”

“You want me to start working there, and possibly find out what is going on for you,” she guessed.

I sighed. “I also have a really, really bad feeling about all of this. There’s something going on here that I can’t quite figure out. Someone is terrorizing the workers. And we need to figure it out sooner rather than later because

Crew needs to get back to the SEALs, and I don't want to be here when it snows next week."

She snorted indelicately.

"You don't want to be here when it snows." She scoffed. "Careful, you're sounding old."

"I am old," I pointed out. "Forty-three. Things don't move the same way they used to when I was younger. And all these years in the military weren't very kind to me."

She let her eyes trail down the length of my body, studying my shoulders and my chest for a long moment before focusing on my thighs. "You look pretty fit to me."

I felt my dick jump at her words.

Damn, all she had to do was give me the once over, and I was ready to hand myself to her with a little fuckin' bow.

"Looks can be deceiving," I said. "Why are you out here in the cold?"

She twisted fully on her chair to face herself toward me then said, "Twenty questions."

I tilted my head toward her.

"What?"

"Twenty questions," she said. "You answer, I answer. Until we've gotten to twenty. When we're at twenty, I'll tell you my answer on whether I'll help you or not."

She'd help me.

She didn't need the twenty questions.

But I'd give them to her anyway.

"Hit me," I offered.

"Why did your mother name you Hannibal?" I asked.

I rolled my eyes.

"So unoriginal." I readjusted my legs. They were fuckin' cold. "As to the answer, my mother named me Hannibal because they'd just watched a movie where the main character was named Hannibal. So she thought that was the greatest idea ever. Meaning, instead of getting a normal name like my brothers—Harrison, Hunter, Holden and Hancock—I got a fuckin' weird one

that follows me around like a bad case of chlamydia.”

She wrinkled her nose in disgust. “That’s gross.”

“That’s life,” I pointed out. “Why did your parents name you Hades?”

Her eyes went a little distant as she said, “My mom wanted me to be a boy. My dad didn’t want me at all because I was an ugly baby...so Hades.”

I blinked. “That’s it?”

“That’s the answer they gave me,” she answered.

“Okay,” I said. “Is your mom still alive?”

“Yes, she is. She travels a lot, and I don’t ever see her.” She pointed at me. “That was two questions. You have eighteen left. My next question is...why are you talking to me?”

“People aren’t allowed to talk to each other?” I asked.

“No, people don’t usually acknowledge me at all,” she admitted. “In fact, if I pass someone, it’s like I’m invisible. Not there. Their eyes take me in, and they completely dismiss me before they’ve even finished passing me by.”

“I talked to you because I wanted to.” I told her the ugly truth. “I told you I’ve been obsessed with you since I saw a photo of you on your brother’s phone.”

She blinked, surprised to hear my answer.

“Ask your next question,” I ordered.

She blinked at me a couple of times, almost as if she was clearing her head, then said, “What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

Wow, right to the heart.

“Do you really want to know?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I shot a couple of kids once,” I said. “They were holding rifles and pointing them at the young soldiers I was charged to protect. I think they were seven.”

She looked crushed for me. Horrified that I would have to go through something like that.

“Oh,” she said. “Wow. That’s horrible for you to have to experience.”

“That’s why kids scare the hell out of me,” I said. “My PTSD already has

issues with loud and sudden movements, but when they're kids, it's like I have a flashback of having to make that split-second decision...and fuck if I don't have a mini panic attack any time I'm around a kid."

What was worse was that my brothers' kids were all at the same age as the ones I'd hurt. Anytime I saw them, this weird pressure inside my chest felt like I was repeatedly taking a knife to it.

Hancock's kids looked exactly like mine would look if I ever allowed myself to have kids—being twins and all—so my dreams had morphed into me shooting my own kids like that.

Needless to say, it was a vicious cycle that my tired brain couldn't handle in the middle of the night, let alone the light of the day.

Her eyes were intense as she said, "Ask me."

I closed my eyes and stared at the quickly waning sun and said, "What's the worst thing you've ever done?"

"Well, you know about me breaking my sister up." She paused, and my eyes opened and I stared at her, feeling something huge about to happen. "I killed my father."

The only thing to react were my eyebrows.

They went straight up to what felt like my hairline.

"You did what?" I asked.

"I killed him," she said, the small smile making my heart beat faster.

And all of a sudden, I didn't have to ask why.

I knew why. Well, I knew some of why.

She'd been hurt by her father repeatedly.

But still, I wanted to ask what had prompted her to wait.

"You can go ahead and get your next question out of the way," Hades offered.

"What happened to make you do it?" I asked.

She picked up her journal and looked at it.

"I can't talk about it. Not yet." She looked at the journal for a long second, then reached out and handed it over. "But you can read it."

I took the journal.

Our questions went on like that for a long time. Until we were well over the twenty questions she wanted to ask.

Eventually, though, the night got too cold for even the blanket wrapped around her.

Heading inside, I walked her up to the door of her room that connected to mine.

And, because I thought she could use the guarantee that she wasn't going to be a burden, I explained.

"I can promise you now that I wouldn't ask you to do something that I didn't truly need help doing," I told her point blank. "The Vegas Royale Circus is a little out of my comfort zone. It was great timing that you showed up when you did. With this many women involved, it's got to be something that they're not comfortable talking to a man about. And that obviously needs a woman's touch. It's making me realize that sometimes for my business to be successful, I'm going to have to use outside sources to make this work."

"Reassurance means a lot to an overthinker," she said quietly.

I looked at her more fully. "Overthinker?"

She laughed. "Read the journal."

Then she used the card to push into her room and close it behind herself.

CHAPTER 8

*I'm ready to settle down and suck the same dick for the rest of my life.
-Text from Hades to Hannibal*

HANNIBAL

I could hear her moving around in the room next door.

The shower flipped on. There was some speaking, which I later decided was way too rhythmic to be anything but music, and then the whirl of the air conditioner getting turned on full blast.

I had to laugh.

There I was with the fuckin' heater on, and she turned on the air conditioning.

We were not the same.

My Texas blood was just too rich for the Missouri weather.

I leaned back on my bed, clad in only a pair of sweatpants and underwear, and stared at the ceiling.

There was a large brown stain.

As in, it took up the entire ceiling.

I looked away toward the dividing door between our two rooms as the television next door turned on full blast.

Then my gaze moved to the brown notebook.

It looked old.

She'd had the thing for forever.

I picked the book up and stared at it.

She'd given me permission to read the diary, of course.

We'd given each other full disclosure when we'd had our twenty questions earlier. I knew more about her than I knew about my own brother at this point.

She promised to always be one hundred percent open and honest with me. And I'd given her the same.

She'd even given me the diary so I could hopefully understand her better.

So I could read what happened to her and she wouldn't have to explain it.

How bad did it have to be for her to not speak about it at all?

I flipped it open and read the first entry.

The date at the top had me instantly doing math in my head.
She was fourteen years old when she wrote the first entry.

Dear new me,

I found out today that my mother never wants to speak to me again.

Apparently, I remind her too much of my father.

Which freakin' sucks seeing as I would rather be like the devil himself than that asshole.

I called Mom after a particularly hard day.

She actually picked up, which should've been my first clue.

The second clue was when she actually listened to me talk. She didn't say a word while I spilled my heart out about my day.

My day being this: get up, work my ass off cleaning up and setting up with the adult workers, and then finding out that I had the stomach flu which Keene had given me. When I'd told Dad that I couldn't perform my act, he slapped me across the face and told me not to be such a little bitch. Needless to say, I performed, then spent the rest of the night puking. Simi gave me some fruit juice, but I couldn't hold it down. Then when Dad found out that I didn't help clean up for the night after my act, he grabbed me by the throat and threw me outside without shoes.

When I told Mom that I might have hypothermia and an infection in my feet, she suggested that I make friends with another adult that's not my father.

Then she asked me to stop calling her, because every time she's forced to talk to me, she's reminded about how my father took everything away from her, and how I've been a burden on her since the day I was born.

I decided tonight after she told me that, I would no longer reach out to her.

The icing on the shit-tastic day was when Dad told me that my allowance this week wasn't going to come because he had to clean up puke.

Fantastic.

Me.

Anger coursed through me at every single word I read.

Between her mother and father, I wanted to wrap her up in my arms and never let her go.

Was she loved at all while she was a child?

Was she ever able to *be* a child?

I skipped a few pages, not sure that I could handle reading anymore bad ones.

And thought I'd come to a good one.

Yet...nope. Not good at all.

The date indicated she was seventeen.

Dear future me,

One day, you're going to look at this journal and remember that there were some good things about your life.

You're going to realize that your sisters and brothers have your back.

But only because it's easier to band together than to fight a foe that none of us see coming.

Dad got mad at Zip today.

Apparently, Zip was too slow getting the tigers where they needed to go.

When I walked in, it was to see him raising a hand to slap her in the back of the head.

And, since I'd been on the receiving end of a few of those slaps, I knew better than to let little Zip get clobbered by him.

I stepped into his path and took the hit.

When Zip turned around, it was to see me on the floor and Dad looking on angrily.

He's never hit Zip before, so Zip had no clue that she'd been in the eye of the hurricane, so to speak.

She's so naïve and thinks that this world is all perfect, when in fact, it couldn't be further from the truth.

Dad sent her away, and then took the opportunity to take the rest of his frustration out on me.

I'm fairly sure that my arm might be broken. I have to hold it in a splint with a magazine and rubber bands.

I have to wear long shirts, otherwise they will all see.

These next few weeks should be fun.

Not.

Love, me.

I rubbed my eyes, and skipped almost half the book seeing as my stomach was leaden. I flipped until the pages stopped turning, landing on one that must've been flipped to multiple times.

Dear new me,

Repeat after me: I do not require the validation of others to justify my existence.

I found out today that my boyfriend, Benji, is in love with my sister.

I told him I loved him, and he told me that I would never be the one for him. That, unfortunately, he was in love with Caristonia, and there was no way around it. He couldn't keep pretending to be in love with a washed-out version of my sister.

So we broke up.

Now, Benji is going out of his way to call and text Caristonia, and I'm going out of my way to make sure that the asshole can't make contact with her. If he calls her, I call him and tell him to leave her alone.

It's looking kind of bad on my part—everyone thinks that I'm obsessed with him and won't leave him alone—when it couldn't be further from the truth.

I don't know what else to do other than what I'm doing.

Not love,

Me.

Benji definitely needed to be added to the list of people that needed to go.

As in, wiped off this Earth, never to be heard from again.

Not to mention, now that I read that particular journal entry, it made me wonder if Benji could be Caristonia's stalker.

It would make sense.

I made a mental note to get a background check ran on him, and possibly run the possibility of the stalker being Benji by Hades, then flipped to the next most visited page.

And was unsurprised to find that it was the one that she'd given me the journal for.

Dear diary,

I did it.

I finally did it.

After years of this, I did it.

I stopped reading and thought...this is the one.

Then went back to reading.

I caught him in the act. Walked in and heard the young girl saying 'no' and decided that it was time to take matters into my own hands. For years I'd taken this abuse, allowed this to happen to other people because if it was happening to someone else, it wasn't happening to me.

But today I just...snapped.

I did it.

I walked in there and interrupted him in the act.

I felt sick to my stomach, and didn't want to read anymore.

But I forced myself to do it anyway.

Usually when he does it to me, I'm tied to the bed with zip ties.

The first time he'd tried to go with ease and used rope, and obviously he didn't see the girl he was hurting as much of a threat. Otherwise, he'd have learned from the mistakes he'd made with me.

Her hands were tied high above her head with purple rope.

I remember thinking at the time that it looked beautiful against her skin—

mine always looked mottled and gray when he used the zip ties—as I made my way into his bus.

His back was to me, but her eyes were solidly locked on my moving form as I made my way closer and closer.

She was pleading with me to help her.

I had to look away from her eyes as I kept walking, wondering if I could do it.

For this to look like an accident, I'd have to choke him out first.

That meant I had to hold on tight, and hope that he passed out before he killed me.

I couldn't let go.

I had to do it like this because he had to overdose or something as to keep the suspicion away from one of us.

It had to look like he'd done it to himself, or it was a death of natural causes.

Either way, I had a plan for both.

I hadn't decided at the time how, exactly, I was going to do it. Mostly because I knew that he would hate appearing weak to the world—that was why I wanted to make it look like he'd killed himself.

But the easier way would be to inject him with something.

Dad was known for making us go out and forage for our own food. It was just his bad luck that I'd found poison hemlock just a few yards away from our camper.

It was also his bad luck that I made sure to locate this plant every single time we parked somewhere, just in case I got the courage to play God.

But enough was enough.

It was going to happen.

That was what I told myself when I walked up behind my dad.

I had one chance at this.

Which was why I changed my mode of how to get him to black out.

Remembering what the guy on YouTube suggested for the fastest knockout, I walked up behind him and enacted a hit to the back of his ear.

Only, he must've heard me at the last second because that hit he was supposed to take to the ear ended up going to the back of his head, right at the base of his skull.

One second he was very much awake and aware, and the next he was not.

He was smothering the girl, and I had to roll my father's body off of her.

She gasped when she rolled out from underneath him, scrambling up and away.

She looked at me with horror and asked, "Did you just kill your dad?"

It was then I had a conversation with the girl explaining that Ansel Singh wasn't my father.

Apparently, my mother had slept with two men at the same time. And instead of her having twins from the same man, she had kids from two different men. One of which worked for my father for a time before he was fired.

Having this conversation over my dad's unconscious body was rather odd, which only became odder minutes later when she finally got dressed and explained.

She hadn't been unwilling. At first. But when she'd seen his micro penis, she'd gotten slightly flipped out and had tried to bail. Only, he wouldn't let her. And had then proceeded to force himself on her.

I'd arrived just in time for the part where he tried to force his teeny tiny dick into a hole meant for much bigger things.

He'd choked her. Held her down. And told her if she knew what was good for herself, she'd submit.

She hadn't.

And a fight had ensued which my 'father' had easily won.

Only, I'd arrived and saved her before anything 'bad' could happen.

Her words, not mine.

After she promised me she wouldn't say anything about that day, she left, and that was when I realized that my father wasn't just passed out.

He was dead.

And, because I knew this had to be staged just right, and there was no way I would get poisoned hemlock down my father's dead throat, I did what

needed to be done.

I put him exactly where he would need to be to make it appear like he had a bad fall.

RV bathrooms were tiny.

One slip and fall, and he'd fall right down the stairs.

And, oh, oops. He forgot to put his kettlebell away.

Dragging him to where he needed to be for this to appear believable, I didn't leave until everything was perfectly in place.

Then I locked the door and threw away the keys.

Good riddance.

Hopefully he's not found for a couple of days.

He doesn't deserve a quick anything, funeral or otherwise.

Love,

Me.

Carefully I finished the entry, then contemplated burning the damn thing.

Having her confession written down on something that she could easily lose? That sounded like a disaster waiting to happen.

But I wouldn't burn her stuff.

At least, not without her permission.

I closed my eyes and tried to will my roiling stomach to be good.

It didn't listen, and I spent half the night throwing up, thinking about someone being hurt so bad that they were broken.

The first thing I would do in the morning was hand this over and suggest she burn it.

But first...I had to finish emptying out my stomach.

CHAPTER 9

*She's a ten, but she hits every curb.
-Hannibal talking about Hades*

HADES

If he'd read the diary yesterday, he'd given me no indication.

He knocked softly on the conjoining door to our rooms, and I opened it in a pair of short shorts that resembled underwear with how little they covered, and an oversized t-shirt tied at the waist.

He gave me a once over, and his lips twitched when he read the shirt.

The shirt was black with white lettering. There was a stick figure man drawn on a road with a sign that said 'BAD.' Then the little stick figure is saying 'that's not a good sign.'

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

Before I could answer, his phone rang.

"Hello?" Hannibal said, moving so that he was standing in his own room.

"Yeah," he grumbled. "I am. Why?"

There was a long pause where he listened to whatever was being said on the other end of the line, and then he was shaking his head and looking out the window.

"Listen, bro," Hannibal said, sounding amused. "This isn't that type of circus."

I snickered.

No, it definitely was not.

I'd done a lot of research the night before on Vegas Royale. And though it wasn't like any circus I'd ever seen, it certainly wasn't a bad thing. It was kind of awesome...for adults.

"Feel free to come out," Hannibal said to his brother. "But seriously, don't bring the kids."

They talked for a few more minutes, and I saw a pair of sweatpants on the edge of the bed.

I picked them up, waited for Hannibal to hang up, then said, "Do you mind if I wear these?"

He shrugged.

“Thanks,” I said as I slipped them on. “I didn’t think it’d be this cold up here, and I left in a hurry. I don’t have much winter gear. I’ll have to get some today while I’m exploring.”

He watched me get dressed, then said, “We can go after breakfast.”

“Cool,” I said as I grabbed my phone, shoving it into the waistband of my shorts instead of my pockets. “Ready?”

I immediately started to shove my feet into the closest pair of shoes.

And, seeing as they were my Chucks, it required me to sit down to do it after I realized how futile it was to attempt while standing up.

“I take that as a yes,” he rumbled.

I looked up at him with a smile. “It’s nearly ten o’clock. When you said that you were starting ‘late morning’ I thought like nine, or even eight. But not ten.”

“Sorry,” he chuckled. “But I had some things to do this morning. Sorry for the miscommunication.”

I got my shoes tied and I was standing, heading for the door.

He followed me but stopped before my door closed and said, “Do you have your key card? I forgot to grab mine.”

I twisted and grabbed it off the little minibar that was right behind the door, getting perilously close to his body as I did.

Seven years ago, when things with Benji had gotten so bad, I’d thought that I’d never feel attraction ever again.

But then I’d seen Hannibal for the first time, and I realized that maybe that part of me wasn’t dead.

That maybe, just maybe, I might be able to be a normal person again one day.

Sure, I’d worked past the part of me that couldn’t stand human touch.

I’d also managed to have sex again.

What I hadn’t managed to do was find someone I liked having sex with.

With Benji, sex was just a necessary evil.

With Hannibal, I felt like it probably wouldn’t be that way.

And based on how it felt to rub up against him, I knew that it was highly

likely.

“Got it,” I said slightly breathless.

He moved until I was directly behind him, then we walked down to the elevator. The elevator was a short ride to the bottom floor, and just as the doors opened, his phone rang. I slowed down so he could continue his conversation as we walked into the hotel dining area. He finished his call as the hostess told us to sit wherever we’d like.

We were one of four people, and two of them were already eating at a table across the room.

Once in the room, we both went different directions.

Him to the healthy side, and me to the carb side.

When we both were seated at the table he’d chosen, I laughed at seeing his plate full of fruits and oatmeal. “Health freak much?”

He eyed my state-shaped waffle and cup of Froot Loops. “Diabetes much?”

I shrugged. “I have a great metabolism. I’ll keep eating like this as long as my body keeps allowing me to.”

“Hmm,” he murmured as he picked up his fork and went to town on his fruit.

It looked good, I’d give him that. But not nearly as good as the waffle shaped like Missouri.

“What’s on the agenda for today?” I asked.

He finished up a handful of blueberries before saying, “We’ll go back to Crew’s place. Talk to him. Figure out where you’ll fit best. Then we’ll get you started this evening, bringing you back in when the place opens.”

We talked about logistics, then discussed how we’d act tonight.

When I’d continued with another bite of Missouri, I placed the fork down and groaned, patting my belly. I wasn’t giving up, but I needed a breather.

“I hope you know that every single outfit that’s worn at Vegas Royale is freakin’ skimpy.” He eyed the belly I was patting. “And unforgiving.”

I snorted. “The one good thing in my life is food, bro. I don’t care if I walk out there with a gut. I’m not gonna stop eating.”

“I’m glad for that,” he said as he watched me eat, amused. “Now, let’s talk

about your role and my role in this. I was giving it a lot of thought last night, and I think I have a good solution.”

I shoved a huge bite of waffle into my mouth and waited for him to explain.

He didn't disappoint.

“I'm thinking this,” he said as he eyed me up and down. “We act like we're boyfriend and girlfriend.”

My eyes widened as I quickly cleaned the syrup off my chin.

“You want to act like what kind of boyfriend and girlfriend?” I asked. “New relationship? Old?”

“Established enough that it wouldn't be weird that I'm following you to your job, and also, I want you to ask in front of the others once Crew 'hires you' for him to find me a job, too. I'll suggest something menial like janitorial services. That way I have a reason to be everywhere. And if I'm not doing my 'job,' oh well.”

I cut my waffle bite into a smaller piece this time, shoved it into my mouth, chewed and swallowed before saying, “I could probably make that work. Just know that I'm not performing any acts naked. That's a very hard limit for me. Also, a hard limit is wearing anything that is less than what I had on when you saw me first thing this morning.”

He didn't seem too upset about my attire choices, and said he'd talk to Crew about it when we got there.

“And what do you suggest that I do while you're doing what you have to do?” I asked. “You want me to gather intelligence on the kid situation? And why they're all so damn scared to talk?”

“Yes,” he said. “I don't really expect you to perform or anything. Maybe we can act like you're new and you don't know anything. That way you can be taught. Form a relationship. That kind of thing.”

After a few more long minutes of figuring out what we were doing when I got there, we headed out to the bike.

“Are you going to wear my helmet now?” he asked.

I was already shaking my head. “Sorry, but no. If you want me to wear a helmet, I'll go buy one once I decide I'm no longer hiding from my family.”

Or when I make enough to warrant buying that. But until then, I'm just going to continue to live life dangerously."

He didn't like that. I could tell by the look on his face.

Yet...that's how I felt.

No way would I ever take someone's helmet away from them. If he'd died because I was wearing his helmet, I'd never be able to forgive myself.

"I'll buy it," he suggested.

I was rolling my eyes before he even finished. "Or I could walk if it means that much to you. I'd just like to point out you're already paying for my hotel room."

He sighed. "I'll go rent a car."

I tilted my head to look at him curiously. "It really means that much to you?"

"Yeah, because if I'm the one who wrecks, and you get substantially hurt because you weren't wearing a helmet, something I could've provided for you easily, how do you think I'd feel?"

Well, it looked like we were at an impasse.

And it made more sense for me to give in to him buying me a helmet rather than him shelling out a shit ton of money to rent a car just because I refused to allow him to buy it.

"Fine," I said. "We can go buy a helmet."

So we did.

He came back out of the Harley store ten minutes later with a black one, and I had to smile because I'd been nervous that he'd come out with a bright pink one like the lady who'd left when we'd arrived.

It was making my heart happy to have someone actually paying attention to what I liked and disliked.

Hell, Hannibal already understood me more than my own family did.

What was up with that?

CHAPTER 10

*When you laugh, just laugh. No need to hit others.
-Hannibal to Hades*

HANNIBAL

I walked in like I was her boyfriend, not a person that could possibly change their lives.

When I saw her sitting there suiting up in a long, black, flowy dress, I had to stop and catch my breath for a second.

She really was breathtaking.

Trying to control my cock's urge to inflate at the sight of her, I walked forward until I was right behind her, then encircled her hips with my arm.

Pulling her back into my chest, I placed a wicked kiss on her throat and growled, "Hey, baby."

She didn't stiffen like I expected her to. What she did do was turn in my arms, then throw her arms around my shoulders and kiss me.

Oh boy, did she kiss me.

My hands automatically moved down the length of her body, one hand going to her lower back, and the other going to her ass and pulling her closer.

I didn't think either one of us expected the kiss to get out of hand, but that was exactly what had happened the moment that her mouth touched mine.

It was as if we'd both realized rather quickly that one kiss wasn't going to be enough.

An underlying current of need had been developing since we'd seen each other in the parking lot of Vegas Royale.

Now, all I wanted to do was kiss her and never stop.

Only, that wasn't how life worked.

There was always someone there ready and willing to interrupt your happy.

Eventually, we pulled away as if we'd both mutually agreed to control ourselves, and I realized just how quiet it'd gotten since my arrival.

Before the kiss, there'd been ten other women in the room.

After the kiss, there were now fifteen.

And all of them were silently looking at us like we'd just done something

incredibly interesting.

“Hades, darlin’,” the one who’d been closest to Hades when I’d come in said. “Who’s this striking human?”

Striking human?

Who talked like that?

“Ummmmmm,” Hades was tongue-tied. I liked it.

“Hannibal,” I said, holding out my hand to her.

She took it, with the utmost reluctance might I add, and shook it once before dropping it and staring at me like she’d just stuck her hand in shit, and not touched my skin.

“Maxine,” she introduced herself, then looked around the room. “I don’t remember telling y’all to come check out the show.”

All right, so this was obviously the ringmaster of the ladies. Noted.

Maxine didn’t look like the mothering type, but she did look like the boss bitch in charge type.

She had short black hair that was cut into a bob at the base of her neck. Her eyes were electric green that were likely fake, and her face didn’t seem to move at all, denoting a Botox fixation.

“Nice to meet you, Maxine,” I said. “I’m Hades’ man, Hannibal.”

She nodded, her eyes studying me critically.

She wouldn’t find whatever it was she was looking for, though.

Not when my skills were honed in a warzone, and not in the middle of a hostile work environment like hers was.

“Hannibal is talking to Crew about a job,” Hades murmured as she picked up the juggling sticks she’d dropped during our kiss. “Do you know where to find him, babe?”

“Uh, no,” I hedged, making it seem like I had zero clue, when in fact I knew every single hidey hole in the entire place. Not to mention security code, camera location, and panic room.

“I can take you,” Hades gave me a fake smile. “Then we can grab some lunch during my lunch break.”

I looked at my watch as she led me to the room where I knew Crew’d made his temporary office. “Lunch? You just got here, baby.”

“I know,” she said as she knocked quietly on the door to Crew’s office. “I just...”

She closed the door behind us and dropped our line of conversation.

“Everything going okay?” Crew asked as he leaned back in his chair.

I walked around his desk to take a look at the set of monitors I’d set up this morning. The women in the room we’d just left were now all huddled together talking quietly. Due to the way they were positioned, though, I could barely see their faces to make out what was being said.

That, and the audio wasn’t online yet.

“What do you think they’re talking about so intently?” I asked.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Hades start tossing the juggling sticks.

Then, when they started moving so fast that I couldn’t not watch, I turned and stared.

“I thought you said you couldn’t juggle?” I asked.

Crew had paused in his watching of the camera to watch as well.

“I learn stuff fast,” she said. “I didn’t know how to do this an hour ago.”

Jesus Christ.

The woman was a damn racketeer.

That, or she was genius level IQ and could really ingest all the knowledge and put it into motion in that short of an amount of time.

The more I watched her, the more I realized that I was ‘dating’ a freakin’ prodigy.

In probably ten minutes or so of us watching her, she went from fumbling a bit on a certain move, to perfectly executing it. Her throws got higher and higher.

“Why didn’t y’all do juggling at your place?” I asked after she stopped and shook out her hands.

“Because people find juggling ‘boring’ according to my father.” She made a grossed-out face, and I wished I hadn’t brought it up. “Plus, I pretty much had to learn everyone else’s routine to the point where my brain was so full...” She gestured to her brain with her hands and made an expanding gesture with them. “I don’t think I could have kept yet another routine in my

head. So I'm glad that he didn't have a juggler."

Crew frowned. "What do you mean you knew everyone's routine?"

"Exactly that," she said. "I was the backup for anyone that wanted to take the night off, was sick, or got fired. I had to know everything."

Crew looked at her with wide eyes as he said, "I watched y'all's latest show. You had probably thirty smaller routines to know!"

She picked up the juggling sticks again, tucking two underneath her free arm as she did, and said, "Why do you think my brain was so full?"

With that, she left out of the open door, being sure not to open it all the way so the ladies outside didn't see how close Crew and I were standing.

"She's somethin' else, man," Crew said once the door closed. "When I met her and her family, I thought she was kind of a bitch. She was very short winded and abrupt. But now...now I'm thinking that she's doing the best she can with the hand she was dealt."

I was thinking the same damn thing.

Walking over to the yellow shirt that said 'Crew' on it, I shucked my own and pulled that one on.

When I dropped my t-shirt on the seat, I said, "I'll come back for that later. I'm going to go do some sleuthing."

Crew made a non-committal noise, then went back to his cameras.

I walked out of the room and was surprised to find all of the ladies gone.

Everyone except for the older one of the bunch.

Maxine.

"Hey, Maxine," I said. "Could you point me to the utility closet? I'm going to be doing some maintenance on the lights and a few spots that need repaired wall-wise."

Maxine looked pleased about these 'fixes.'

Too bad I couldn't actually fix the lights.

I could do a lot of things, but electricity wasn't one of them.

I acted like I knew exactly what I was doing, though, when she led me to the utility closet.

When she got me there, she turned and surveyed me for a long second

before saying, “I don’t know you, but I feel like I need to reach out and let you know that some of the girls that work here are terrified of men. You will need to be slow and softer spoken around them.”

I felt a twinge in my gut at that news. “Yeah?”

She nodded.

“Which ones?” I asked.

She fidgeted with her hands, making me wonder if she was going to tell me.

But eventually she did.

“There are two blondes. One of them has curly blonde hair, about five-foot-six or so, and has a beauty spot on her chin.” She pointed to the area on her own face. “The other has straight hair almost down to her back when it’s in a ponytail, which is how she wears it the majority of the time. She has pale blue eyes, and you’ll know it’s her almost instantly because she’ll turn into a frightened cat.”

I nodded. “And the boy that I saw around here? He acted pretty skittish, too. Does he belong to one of them?”

I mean, it was a perfect opportunity to ask.

“Oh,” she frowned as she stared at me for a long second. “You saw Topher?”

I nodded. “Out front by the picnic area.”

I hadn’t seen him there, actually. I’d noticed him in the parking lot playing in between cars.

I’d thought about telling him that wasn’t very safe, but then I’d noted a few of the ladies standing somewhere off in the distance, and thought to leave him alone.

I did make note of the two ladies, however. I wanted to know if they were ‘Topher’s’ mom.

Though that wasn’t specifically my objective for the day, I was still planning ahead.

We were also running out of time.

There was more like six days until Crew was expected back, and things needed to be figured out.

“Oh,” Maxine nodded, as if that made perfect sense for Topher to be out there. “Yes, his mom is one of them.”

I tilted my head.

That was the first time I’d heard that.

Crew had questioned them all, and not a single one of them had shared any information. Yet I asked Maxine, and she answers me?

“Makes sense,” I said. “The kid was terrified of me and hid under a truck.”

“Topher’s been through a lot,” Maxine said. “In fact, it’s honestly quite sad everything he’s been through. His father just died, too. He used to be the owner of this place.”

She gestured around her.

I took it in, acting like it was the first time I was seeing it, instead of having combed over every square inch of it only hours before the place had opened for the night.

“He’s a good kid, but man, his parents. This whole thing with him has been a nightmare.” She looked cagey for a second, likely realizing that she’d said too much. “Well, I’m glad that Crew could find you a job. I like Hades a lot, and she lit up like a firecracker when she saw you coming toward her.”

Had she?

That was news to me.

Though I’d been watching her, my eyes had been focused on what her hands were doing, not her face.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “She was talking you up all morning, too. Couldn’t shut up about you. Even when one of the ladies told her to shut up because ‘not everyone is insanely happy like you.’”

That made me smile.

Of course, we’d talked about what our game plan was, but I hadn’t expected her to talk me up that much.

“I’ve gotta go,” she sighed. “You sure are pretty to look at, aren’t ya?”

Before I could reply to that parting comment, she was bustling her wide ass hips out the door.

Twenty years older and I might find the woman attractive.

But I wasn’t, and the only woman on my mind lately had long, straight

black hair and blue eyes that looked more and more intense each time I looked into them.

Heading into the maintenance room that I'd known where it was all along, I closed and locked the door behind me, then got to work on the sound system that I hadn't gotten to earlier.

After about two hours of work, I came back out of the room drenched in sweat and looking like I was actually doing something.

When I wrenched the door open, the first thing I did was breathe deep.

It'd been hot in there, but we'd all decided—Hades, Crew and me—that it would be best to work with the door closed.

I was regretting that now.

There wasn't a dry scrap of clothing on any of my body.

When I came out, I ran straight into a woman that was carrying a mop and a bucket.

The lone custodian, Melinda.

I hadn't met her, but I'd seen her personnel file.

And she looked just as pissy in real life as she did in her employment photo.

"Sup," I said as I saw her.

She looked at me with disdain—not even partially concealed—and said, "What are you doing in here?"

I pointed behind me. "Maintenance on the lights."

She narrowed her eyes and let me know without words she didn't believe me.

I opened the door to the maintenance room and showed her all the wires.

She looked down at them, then back up at me.

"You don't look like you know what you're doing," she said. "And you're very untidy."

Wasn't every man?

I'd had enough of being told what to do during bootcamp.

There wasn't a single thing I liked more when I got out than being able to go back to leaving my room however the fuck I wanted it.

Dirty? Hell yes.

Clean? Also yes.

I do what I want, and I didn't apologize for myself.

"I'm not done." I closed the door and it clicked closed with a resounding 'fuck you.'

Her eye twitched and I moved around her, leaving her at my back to do whatever pouty bullshit she'd been doing before I'd gotten there.

When Crew had told me she was unpleasant, I hadn't expected that.

But here we were...

"Yo."

I looked up to find Crew standing there, aiming a shit-eating grin my way.

"Sup?" I asked.

He gestured toward the door. "Could you help me pick something up?"

I nodded and went and did just that, helping him lift a heavy beam off the floor that needed to be set into place for the show that was set to go on in about forty-five minutes.

"Thank you," he said as he dusted his hands off. "Normally there's a three-man crew who helps, but something's going on with them today. I've yet to see them anywhere I am since I walked in the building."

"That likely has a lot to do with me, I'm sure," I said. "I overheard one of them talking outside the room I was in earlier. They weren't happy that a maintenance man was hired without consulting them first."

He rolled his eyes. "Jesus fucking Christ. I have half a mind to shut this place down."

"Is it makin' good money?" I wondered.

He shrugged. "Decent, I guess. But we employ a hundred people. If I close it down, then who the fuck knows what they'll do."

He'd had this discussion with me already.

Why I'd been the one to help him make this decision, I didn't know. But I'd sat down and gone over the pros and cons with him, where I'd then pointed out that if he could be making passive income while he was away and working, why the fuck not?

His only step was to find someone that knew what they were doing and could handle this job, and he trusted enough to do it.

That person wasn't me, and if he wanted to keep it going while he was gone, he'd have to make that decision fast.

But I had hope that he would make it happen.

Just like I'd find for sure whoever the fuck was that kid's mother for him, and figure out what sort of thing was going on here that had all the women scared.

Or, at least, Hades would.

With what little chatter I'd heard from my back all afternoon, everyone seemed to love her.

Which was quite the opposite of what I'd experienced at her own family-owned circus.

Maybe her getting out and spreading her wings was a good thing.

There was a rush of feet moving, and we both turned to survey the women that were hurrying toward a side walled area.

"What's going on?" I asked Crew.

He looked toward the room, then at his watch.

"The first show started," he said. "I didn't realize we were that close."

I walked toward the door where the hurrying ladies had disappeared through, and felt my feet literally become glued to the floor beneath me as I caught my first look at the woman on the stage.

Where we were at, it came into the side of the stage, but also allowed you a full, unencumbered view of the stage from front to back.

In the middle of the stage was Hades.

And she was juggling fuckin' knives.

I felt my heartrate pick up at seeing it, and wondered what kind of balls it took to perform in a show doing a routine that you'd just literally learned how to do only hours before. Oh, and for shits and giggles, you added the dangerous vibe to the routine so that you'd give your new fake man a heart attack.

I stepped closer then, unable to help myself, and stared.

"No..." one woman said as I got in line with all the other ladies that were

watching from the sidelines. “She told Maxine that she would make the routine better in a different way as long as she didn’t have to wear a revealing outfit.”

That sounded like Hades.

“She’s so exotic looking,” another woman said.

CHAPTER 11

A lot of people are only alive because I shed too much hair to get away with murder.

-Hades to Hannibal

HANNIBAL

I agreed.

Up there, wearing all black, she looked like an ethereal being that was made to be in the spotlight.

She threw these short swords up in the air, twisting them around like she'd done earlier with the juggling sticks, and caught each pommel expertly. As if she'd been doing it for years.

The lights changed color, and the song that was playing went to something more dramatic and scary, and I took an involuntary step forward.

She threw one sword up impossibly high, did a weird twist, then sat down on the floor in time to catch the sword a scant inch from her face.

Without. Fucking. Looking.

My heart was in my throat for the entire performance, and by the time she'd finished and bowed, I was fairly sure I had acid reflux burning up the back of my throat.

Who knew just watching her perform something so dangerous yet spectacularly beautiful could both turn you on and frighten the absolute shit out of you at the same time?

She walked off the stage toward us with thunderous applause following in her wake.

She smiled at me upon noting me there, then frowned. "Why are you so sweaty?"

I looked down at my dirty yellow shirt.

I'd cut the sleeves off of it halfway through the day, then gone a step further and shucked the shirt entirely right after that.

Now, wearing the shirt that was getting cool with my sweat plastered against my skin, I wondered if I should've changed before seeing her.

"It's hot in that room," I said, my breath coming a little faster than it should after that performance. "That was beautiful, Hades."

"It really was," a woman whispered. "As in, that's the best performance I've ever seen with juggling in it. Maybe even in some without."

Crew, who'd remained quiet up until this point, said, "You're officially hired and off probation."

Hades smirked at him. "I had no doubt in my mind I'd make it."

Hades, the bold.

"Are you interested in grabbing lunch?" she asked.

I was interested in getting something for lunch and then dessert after.

Though, she didn't need to know where my mind was wandering when it came to what kind of dessert.

"Absolutely," I said. "Where do you want to go?"

"There's a café across the street," one of the ladies, a little waif of a thing in the back, said. "Pretty good burgers, and decent chicken fried steak."

I lifted my eyebrow at her in question, and she nodded. "Sounds perfect."

I pulled my very wet t-shirt away from me and said, "I have to run by my bike to get another shirt. This one is drenched and I don't want to go all the way back to Crew's office."

She let her eyes rove from the top of my head to my lower body.

Then she smirked.

I felt that smirk in my dick.

Which instantly got hard the moment she started shooting that look my way and stayed that way through the next ten minutes of our conversation.

When we finally got out of there, she was wearing her stage makeup and a t-shirt and shorts—something she'd had underneath her outfit from her performance.

I eyed her clothes.

The shirt was sleeveless, tight, and short.

The shorts were tight, short and practically painted onto her skin that I could see the indentions her thong was making into the meat above her ass.

When we stopped at my bike, I ripped the shirt I was wearing off by tugging on the back of my collar, and laid it over the seat to hopefully dry out some.

I didn't have many clothes and I needed to do a laundry run. Unfortunately, I wasn't planning on making any trips to the laundromat.

Meaning, it would be better for it not to sit in my hotel room wet as fuck from sweat.

“Wow,” Hades said. “How’d you get that?”

She pressed a cool finger to my overheated skin, and I knew instantly what she was talking about.

It was the only part of my shoulder that I couldn’t feel.

“Took a machine gun ricochet. It grazed my shoulder only, but it took off all the skin, broke my shoulder blade, and I had to have surgery to fix it all. Now when it rains, I get this feeling. But that’s really the only feeling I have in the back part there. Like everything moves, muscles still work right, but the feeling there is just gone,” I explained as I came up with a semi-clean—I say semi because it’d been riding around in my saddle bags for a while—t-shirt.

Shrugging it on, I turned just in time to see her taking in my belly and chest before I covered it with my t-shirt.

She snorted when she read the front. “Chaotic is my middle name?”

“Family motto,” I said. “I think Holden got this for me last Christmas.”

I caught her hand and led her across the street, not dropping it the entire way.

When we got to the door, I held it open for her, but she shook her head when I gestured for her to go in first.

“Sorry, but no. This isn’t the feminist in me getting upset about the man holding the door open, either. This is the introvert in me not wanting to make first contact with whomever is on the other side of the door,” she hurriedly explained.

I would’ve rolled my eyes, but I felt her pain.

I wasn’t too keen on making first contact, either. But I’d rather me be uncomfortable than her.

“I’ll try to remember that,” I said as I held the door open for her to follow in my wake.

She did, keeping close to my back, and still holding my hand.

I pulled her in tight to my back when I spilled into the main part of the room.

I took a quick look around, noting exits, patrons and staff as I did.

When I finally gave my attention back to the employee who was staring at me, I said, “Two, please.”

I felt Hades shiver at my back, and I wondered if she was cold.

My guess she was.

It was just under fifty degrees outside, and inside the diner it wasn't much better. Though, I hoped that was due to the fact that we were standing by the front door, and not because the restaurant didn't like to use heat.

“This way,” the man said stiffly as he took us to our seats.

He placed us in the back of the room, and I had a feeling it was because people in the back didn't get as good as service. We had ‘out of town’ written all over us.

“Your server will be with you shortly,” the man muttered as he walked away.

He looked like he had a miserable life here.

“Mr. Exciting,” Hades said as she came from around my back to stare at the booth he'd taken us to.

I took her in and noted the pebbled nipples before saying, “Cold?”

“It's freezing in here,” she muttered darkly. “Why did I not bring different clothes?”

I couldn't complain.

I liked the way she looked.

But she was right. Today, she'd worn my sweatpants over the top of her shorts to work and hadn't thought to bring them with her on our walk over.

“Probably because you were under all those lights and you were hot yourself when you were done,” I supplied. “Sit on my side of the booth. You can get against the wall and my body might help you get some heat in.”

“Ahh,” she said as she slid into the booth that allowed me to see the entire room. What the guy didn't know was this was the booth I would've requested anyway. “Geez, these seats are cold.”

I took the seat next to her and scooted in a little closer than I would've done for anyone else. Then placed my arm along the back and curved it around her shoulders. “My pants are wet, though.”

She snorted. “But you’re warm.”

I was that.

Pulling up the menu with my free hand, I started to take a look at the food choices.

“It looks like it’s all fried,” I surmised.

She leaned into my shoulder and took a look at the menu.

“There’s corn,” she pointed.

“Fried corn,” I corrected.

She snickered and trailed off, her eyes taking in the entire menu as we waited for the server to show up.

It took her ten minutes, and when she arrived, she brought a plume of cigarette smoke with her.

Likely, she’d been the one I’d marked on the side of the building smoking as we’d come inside.

Classy.

“What can I get ya?” she asked in a deep, raspy voice.

She sounded like a pack a day smoker, too.

I curled my arm a bit tighter around Hades and said, “Do you know what you want?”

She nodded.

I gave my order—a grilled chicken sandwich and house potato chips—and Hades gave hers.

“I’ll have a heart attack burger,” she said. “Extra mayo. Instead of the fries, I want onion rings. Oh, and what kind of dessert do you have?”

The lady said ‘pie.’

Which inwardly had me laughing.

“I’ll have some ‘pie’ then. Also, I’ll have a lemonade, and he’ll have a water.” She handed our menus to the server.

The server didn’t write anything down, and I hoped that she would get the food right.

“Heart attack burger?” I asked when she left.

She yawned delicately and said, “The one and only thing that my mother

gave me was her body type.”

I snorted. “What about your cholesterol?”

“What I don’t know won’t hurt me,” she offered.

“That’s a terrible way of looking at it,” I said with amusement.

She shrugged, causing my shoulder to go up with her.

I stretched my legs out across from me and stretched my neck.

Today had been a long day, but all the wiring was done and the only thing left to do now was put in the work of eavesdropping to find out who the kid belonged to and what the hell was going on.

I knew we’d find it.

I also knew that I wasn’t going to like what I found.

She sighed and leaned into me. “I’m so tired. I feel like I’ve gotten no sleep these last few weeks.”

Which had me thinking about her journal, and everything that she’d been through.

“Hades?” I asked.

The waitress came and dropped our drinks down in front of us before leaving just as fast.

“Yes?” she asked.

I felt my stomach tighten at what I was about to ask.

“Why do you still work with your family if you’re so unhappy?” I wondered. “Why’d you go back after college? When your dad died, why’d you stay?”

All questions that’d been on my mind since she’d said she’d never worked anywhere else but at Singh Circus and a coffee shop while she’d been in college.

Oh, and reading about how underappreciated she was with her family.

“Well, my dad had these stipulations in his will. All of the sisters and Keene had to continue working at the circus for a couple of years before the inheritance—IE the circus—could be passed down to us. Right now, it’s held in a trust that is run by my father’s lawyer. The lawyer distributes Zip, Tony, Simi, Crimson, Val and Keene’s pay to them weekly. If there are any new hires, they get paid through that trust, too.”

I looked at her with a frown. “Why did you list everyone’s name but yourself?”

I watched as she rubbed her jaw.

I could tell with just one look she didn’t want to tell me.

“Please?” I asked.

She sighed and closed her eyes, this time leaning all the way into me. “I’m paid like staff. I don’t get any part of the circus—not that my family knows that—because I’m not biologically his child.”

“I read that yesterday,” I said softly. “I wasn’t aware that could even happen.”

Having twins with two different fathers seemed mythological to me.

But it’d apparently happened.

“It can,” she said. “I take after my biological dad, apparently. He used to be a worker at the circus. My mom slept with him and my dad at the same time. Literally, they had a threesome. Shit went weird after that between my mom and Ansel, and Mom wanted to ‘win’ him. So she kind of dropped my dad like a hot potato. Meanwhile, my bio dad didn’t like that and left. Unaware, I guess, that I was a possibility. And Mom tried to pass me off as Ansel’s. She couldn’t. I found out later from snooping that they’d done a DNA test when we were born. Tony is Ansel’s. I’m not.”

“Therefore, you’re paid like staff, and have absolutely zero say in anything when it comes to the circus,” I surmised.

“Yes,” she answered. “Though, my siblings don’t know that I’m not one of them. They just assumed.”

I had a feeling her siblings saw what they wanted and thought everything was copacetic when it wasn’t.

“None of them know that you’re not biologically related to them?” I questioned.

“Not even Tony knows we’re only half,” she said. “Ansel liked that I was a free worker, I guess. He paid me sometimes toward the teenage years when it would be overly apparent that I was getting treated differently. That, and he knew that I would leave if he didn’t give me at least something, and let’s just say...finding a person that would stay for such little pay was hard. He didn’t

pay for my college, though. Not like he paid for the rest of them. And I didn't get added to the will."

If the guy wasn't already dead, I'd kill him. I didn't like that look on her face, and I certainly didn't like the way she was looking at me. As if she was so far down memory lane she was struggling to breathe.

"Why not tell them then?" I asked. "Why stay when you're clearly not wanted?"

I felt her stiffen.

Then she all but wilted in my arms. "I love them."

I couldn't understand why.

It felt like they all had their head in the clouds where Hades was concerned.

How had none of them realized that there was something so different about how she was treated?

And I was sure that her behavior was erratic. Why did none of them question that?

Why had none of them known she was mistreated so badly by her 'father?'

"They treat you so poorly," I said. "You just let them think that you're fuckin' nuts. You're not."

"I am." She snorted. "And they think that I am. I've never disabused them of the notion."

I hated that for her.

"I used to rush to defend myself against false accusations, but now, I watch to see who believes it, so I know who to cut off first," I said. "Maybe that's something you should adopt."

She would've answered, but the waitress came and slapped our plates down in front of us like she had some vendetta against us.

"Anything else?" she asked.

We hadn't touched our drinks at all, so the answer was no. "Check, though, please."

Because who knew when she would be back?

I reluctantly pulled my arm from around Hades' shoulders and started in

on my sandwich.

When I was done, I looked over to see Hades finishing off her last piece of meat that'd fallen free of her burger. Her completely *gone* burger.

"You're rather impressive, ma'am," I teased.

She smiled, licking mustard off the corner of her mouth as she did.

"Thanks," she snickered. "It's a skill."

Hell yeah it was. I'd never seen a woman put that much food away.

It was a turn on.

So infrequently did you find a woman in this day and age that didn't give one single fuck about anyone but themselves. I'd yet to meet a woman lately that wasn't overly obsessive with what they were eating.

"Ready to go back there?" I asked.

"No need," she said. "I found everything out."

I blinked at her. "You did what?"

"I found the kid's mom, and I found the person responsible for all the fear," she said.

My mouth fell open.

"Really?" I asked.

She nodded. "When you have a plain face, and a plain body, and a plain blah personality, people tend to overlook you."

I was already shaking my head, flabbergasted by what she was saying.

But then I remembered a few of the comments from the ladies from earlier as we'd watched Hades' show.

One had said she 'hadn't realized someone like Hades had that in her.'

Another had said, "Wow, I looked at her and would've never thought that kind of talent could come from someone that has zero curb appeal."

Now it made sense.

When you thought you were nothing, you were treated like nothing.

"Tell me everything," I said instead of arguing with her.

I wasn't going to change her outlook on life in a day.

I could, and would, help her, though.

By the time I was through with her, she'd see herself clearly. And

hopefully get enough self-esteem that she would be able to live without me reminding her constantly that she was enough.

I held my hand up for the waitress to come back.

She did, taking my money and leaving without asking us if we needed anything else.

She came back moments later with zero change, and I had to roll my eyes as she placed the receipt down in front of me and left.

“I would’ve given her more,” I muttered. “But if she’s gonna be like that, I’ll just assume she doesn’t want it.”

Hades waited until we were outside to start talking.

“The mom is the blonde with the long curly hair and the permanent scowl,” she started as we made our way back across the street to the circus. “I heard her talking to the matriarch, Maxine. She was telling Maxine that she needed to tell Crew everything before he took her son away.”

“Okay,” I said. “And what happened then?”

She went to cross the street and I caught her hand just as a motorbike came flying up the street going nothing less than a hundred miles an hour.

Her eyes widened as she watched him pass, then looked four more times before crossing.

I had a smile on my face when we got to the other side.

“Then what?” I urged.

“Then I interjected, got the whole story,” she answered.

“And what’s the whole story?” I asked.

“The whole story is a little less anti-climactic than I thought it would be. Pretty much, in a nutshell, the mother was accused as being unfit by one of the lights guys that controls everything upstairs. When Crew came and the police were there, the lights guy was giving her this ‘I’m going to ruin you’ look and forced her to stay quiet. From what I gathered, the mom and the lights guy—I still don’t know his name—had a fling. He doesn’t want kids. She has a kid. So in order for him to have what he wants, he decided the kid needed to go. Hence the telling the police she was an unfit mother. Or him threatening to. The kid isn’t the son of the light guy, either. Nor Crew’s dad. It’s some random guy that Crew’s dad knew. When the dad found out about

him just leaving his son behind, he kind of took over helping raise the kid. The mom planned on leaving tonight, actually. I think I have her controlling her shit, though. From what I understand, she was going to talk to Crew just as I was going on stage.”

“Well, shit,” I said. “That was anti-climactic.”

“And from what I understand, the lights guy quit last night because Crew pissed him off,” she said.

We entered the building, and sure enough, Crew met us at the door with the news.

Leaving him with a shit-eating grin on his face, and the understanding that he was only a few short days away from freedom.

“Now what?” Crew asked, looking between the two of us.

“Now we go home and get showers. I’m disgusting. And we’re cold,” I answered.

“On that note...” she mumbled. “I’m going to collect my things.”

“You should stay,” Crew said as he tossed me my shirt I’d left in his office earlier.

I looked at him. “You have a state-of-the-art security system that’s finished, no kid to take care of, and you’re not getting her to stay and take care of the place. Ask Maxine. She knows this place inside and out, and all the ladies listen to her.”

Crew scowled.

“But she has her life together, and she’s awesome.” He sighed. “I talked to her. She said she would consider it. Maxine. Not Hades.”

I nodded.

“I can’t believe I don’t remember her,” he said. “Like literally, I just talked to her not even a few weeks ago. How do you forget someone that you literally just saw?”

I had no clue.

But that was his loss and my gain.

Though I felt bad for Hades.

Being invisible was heart wrenching.

Just the thought of her being ignored made me want to kill things.

“So I’ll get the invoice in the mail?” he asked.

I was already nodding. “Yep. I’ll have my assistant email it out first thing.”

“And you’re out tomorrow?” he wondered.

I was already nodding.

“And Hades?” he asked.

“Her, too,” I said.

I had to fix her.

She couldn’t keep living like this.

And who better to do it than me? Someone that knew how to function when they were just as fucked up as she was.

“Dammit.” He sighed. “Well, it was great meeting you, and thank you for getting things figured out so quickly.”

I didn’t deserve that thanks. “I’ll have my crew come finish up what I didn’t get to today and clean up.”

Crew nodded in thanks.

“Ready?” Hades said as she appeared in the entryway, weaving through people that were now loitering in the hall.

“Ready,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Hades didn’t spare Crew a second glance, which had him scowling.

Laughter on the tip of my lips, I headed out the door to my bike, already dreading the ride home.

Whose bright idea was it for me to ride this up here?

Oh, mine.

I was right.

The ride home was only made bearable due to the way she held onto me the entire way.

We were both downright freezing by the time we made it into our rooms.

With the door still open, we walked straight to our bathrooms and turned on the showers.

Thank God for awesome water heaters.

By the time I finished mine, I was thankful they had great ones.

After finding a seat on my bed in only my sweatpants that I stole back from her, I leaned against the headboard and waited.

I knew she'd come.

She didn't disappoint, either.

"You took my pants back," she accused.

I popped one eye open and said, "I took *my* pants back."

"To-may-to, to-mah-toe." She waved her hand through the air.

Then she dived into the bed beside me and rushed under the covers.

I allowed it, because that was exactly where I wanted her to be, and then waited for her to settle before saying my next words.

"I need a Mountain Dew." I groaned, letting my head fall backwards.

They were my guilty pleasure. Something I only allowed myself to have once in a blue moon.

Hades, who was wrapped in the blankets beside me silently up until now, looked over and said, "I'm not sure Mountain Dew will fix what's wrong with you."

I snickered, turning to face her.

When I did, my mouth came within inches of her face.

We both blinked, slightly still on that kiss high from hours earlier.

Then we both reached for each other at the same time.

CHAPTER 12

*I got you jumper cables for Christmas since you're always starting shit.
-Text from Hannibal to Hades*

HADES

We hit each other at the same time.

One second, we were far enough apart that it would be considered decent for two near strangers, and the next we were all over each other.

His hand went to my hip, and he all but yanked me on top of him.

I straddled his thick thighs, then placed my panty-clad vagina right where I wanted it. On top of his throbbing cock.

His throbbing, very big, holy hell how is that going to fit in me, cock.

He growled when our bodies met, and then he was kissing me, reminding me in no uncertain terms that he was the controlee in this situation.

“Fuck,” he breathed in my mouth when our tongues parted and we started panting in each other’s breaths. “Are you sure about this?”

And that was all the reason I needed to go through with it.

His worry for me in this situation was all I ever wanted in a man.

Someone to make sure that I was taken care of.

Did he know yet what that question meant to me?

Though he hadn’t shown any outward signs of having read my journal, the dark circles underneath his eyes told me a different story.

I nodded, my lips brushing up and down against his as I did.

“Okay,” he breathed. “Then let’s do this.”

I wasn’t sure what I expected after that, but making out more wasn’t it.

I loved it, though.

Slow, deepening kisses. Short, quick, wet ones. Sips of his lips against my own. A tongue ran along my lips here. A brush of his thumb against my bottom one there.

Needless to say, I was more than ready to move on to the next step when he pulled away and reversed our positions.

His large, muscular thigh wedged between mine, and he pushed me farther into the bed as he ground his erection between my splayed thighs.

“Are you *sure*, sure?” he asked as he pulled back and looked at me with

heartbreaking eyes.

Ones that told me that he did, indeed, read at least some of what had happened to me.

His caution was endearing.

“Yes,” I promised. “More than sure.”

So he moved slowly, gently taking me out of my shirt. Then my underwear. Followed shortly by him removing his own shirt.

He left the underwear and sweats in place, though.

When he would’ve moved to me, likely still taking it slow, I inwardly groaned.

“Fair’s fair,” I said as I watched the soft sweats move down his hips.

Then there was his erection, straining the front of his underwear.

I couldn’t help but stare at it as I helped him pull those sweats all the way off and toss them to the floor beside the bed.

My belly filled with butterflies as he once again fitted himself into the curve of my hips, grinding his erection into me while simultaneously watching me for any signs of a freak out.

God, was it too early to say that I loved him?

He moved then, kissing my collarbone and throat, skipping down a bit farther to where my bra cups still covered my breasts. He teased me, running his tongue just above the plain white cotton line of my bra.

“I hate bras,” he grumbled, teasingly pulling just the top down enough to see the light, dusky brown of my areola.

“Same,” I concurred. “If it wasn’t for some reason frowned upon to show nipples underneath your t-shirt, I’d be bare all the time. Bras are terrible. They dig in all the wrong spots, cause back fat, and pretty much are the bane of every woman’s existence.”

He grinned against my breast, then caused me to squeal when he all but ripped my bra in half.

I gasped when the bra cups gave way, fabric rendered, and my breasts flopped free.

I wasn’t the biggest in the world.

Not the smallest.

But definitely the most mediocre there was.

Once they'd settled their jiggling, he cupped them in each of the biggest palms I'd ever seen and buried his face between them.

"I've been thinking about doing this since I saw your nipples pebbled at the diner," he murmured.

"We need to talk about something important," he said to my breasts.

I squirmed when his lips brushed against one distended nipple.

"Wh-what's that?" I wondered.

I felt him smile.

Felt. Him. Smile.

"It's of the utmost importance," he said as he pulled back, going up onto his knees in front of me.

I watched as he readjusted his dick in his tight ass black underwear.

My eyes went to his stomach.

He had abs.

As in, eight of them.

Then there was this line on both sides of his groin. The kind that only men who tried really hard had. Or were genetically blessed.

"Are you listening to me, darlin'?" he asked, interrupting my contemplation of his abs.

What would it look like if...

"Up here," Hannibal said.

I hooked my thumbs into my underwear, then shoved them down as far as I could before his knees stopped their descent.

He was momentarily distracted by the sight of my vagina.

I didn't shave.

I'd never had a reason to do it. I didn't like the way it felt when I did it myself and I certainly wasn't going to allow someone I barely knew get down there.

But the way he looked at me made me want to reconsider.

Made me want to be bare so I could experience what it would feel like to have his hard cock delving between my bare lips...

“Baby,” he groaned. “If you don’t pay attention to me, we’re going to go further than we should without having this talk first.”

I ran my tongue along my teeth. “Yes?”

He moved back so that he could rid me of my underwear, then stared for a moment longer before saying, “God, I want to slide my cock between those wet lips.”

I wanted him to do that, too.

My gaze made him say ‘fuck it’ and he shoved his underwear down.

The first glimpse of his cock was...breathtaking.

Coma inducing.

Awe inspiring.

“Quick,” he said as he palmed his hard cock. “Tell me one thing.”

I licked my lips. “What?”

Was that really my voice right now?

“Birth control,” he said. “Not that I have an issue with knockin’ you up, but maybe we should get to know each other first?”

I opened my mouth and then closed it, wondering if he was serious.

The way he was looking at me, though...yeah, he was definitely serious.

I answered him as quickly as I could make my mind work again.

“I, uh, got an IUD. When I was fifteen,” I said. “There was this place where we were parked. The lady knew that...she knew that I needed it.”

His lips firmed, and then he was trailing his hand reverently over the length of my body. “I’m clean. I get checked once a year and there hasn’t been anyone this year at all.”

That was surprising.

Hannibal was a viral man.

How did he go that long?

Then again, some men had control.

Not any of the ones that I’d been with, but some of them for sure had it.

“In that case,” he said as he moved forward on his knees. “Let’s get started.”

Let’s get started.

That was laugh out loud funny, and when a startled laugh burst free from my lips, he paused crawling halfway up my body.

“What?” he asked.

“I feel like you just decided that a test was imminent,” I explained.

“Maybe I did,” he said. “How do you want me?”

The fact that he asked...

“You,” I said. “On top. In control. I need...I need to get out of my head. And to do that, you have to take me exactly how you want me, and then I’ll follow suit.”

That sounded weird when I said it...

He moved, his cock barely touching my pussy.

I hissed in a breath, a sudden feeling of need taking me over so completely that I moaned.

“I think that you need to get started,” I said.

“You just told me that you wanted me to take control,” he said as he smoothed his hands down the length of my arms.

When he got to my hands, he lifted them up over my head, and I practically felt my pupils dilate.

He stilled there, eyes sweeping over the length of my face for a long second before he transferred them to one hand.

With his free hand, he fisted his cock then moved to place it at my entrance.

I spread my legs wider, urging him on without words, and he pushed just a bit inside. Not enough to feel anything, but enough to drive me freakin’ insane.

I kept my mouth shut, for once all the chaos in my brain was quiet and waited for his next move.

He didn’t disappoint.

When he saw that I was okay, he pushed farther inside.

He filled me with a slow thrust of his hips, taking me in one delicious push.

But the entire time, he kept his eyes on my face, his left hand on both of

my wrists, and his right holding my hip steady.

I groaned, loving the delicious stretch my pussy made around his slowly lowering cock.

“Jesus,” he hissed. “You feel...”

He squeezed his eyes shut, as if he was in real pain, and stilled when he was fully seated inside of me.

It felt like that point right between pleasure and pain when you couldn't decide if it felt good or hurt. But when he pulled back, I realized it was the former rather than the latter.

The delicious stroke of his cock head against my inner walls felt like euphoria.

“Baby,” he wheezed while his hand pushed down firmly on my pubic bone. “Still.”

I realized I was squirming, trying to get him to move more.

Trying to get him to freakin' fuck me.

“Hannibal,” I whined. “I'm freakin' dying here. Please.”

He studied me for a few long seconds, then nodded once.

Hand tightening on my wrists to the point of pain, he kept his other hand on my lower belly, and started to fuck me with aggressive, unforgiving strokes.

He fucked me hard.

Not fast, but not slow.

It was the perfect rhythm.

One that quickly had my veins humming with excitement.

“Fuck,” he growled, his eyes narrowing to slits.

“You feel...” I couldn't articulate the words that I was feeling.

I swallowed hard, feeling my heartrate pick up at the way he was pulling me higher and higher.

“You feel like fuckin' silk,” he supplied. “Hot silk, wrapped around my cock like you were made to take me.”

Oh, boy. That was even freakin' hotter.

Jesus Christ, his mouth.

His hands.

My breasts jiggled. My breathing hitched.

Then the strangest feeling of impending...something...washed over me.

His hand pressed down on my belly, right above my pelvic bone, and he groaned. "I can feel my tip right here."

I didn't know if that was true.

But whatever he was doing right there was sending me higher and higher until...

I exploded.

There was no other word for it.

One second I was in the current reality, and the next I was in the damn ether.

Colors and sparkles exploded behind my closed eyelids as my world became something bigger. Better. More intense.

My pussy spasmed, and distantly I heard him growl as I squeezed around him so tight that it felt like we were breaking apart.

Or I was.

Hell, I didn't know.

What I did know was that I was now so intensely broken by whatever the hell Hannibal had just done to me that I would never be all right again.

I blinked open my eyes to see Hannibal's gray eyes were staring directly into mine.

Had he already come?

I had that answered in the next moment when his breathing hitched, and without moving a freakin' muscle inside of me, he came.

The cords of his neck strained, but ultimately he didn't move until his cock had stopped jerking.

"Fuck, baby. Fuck," he said after a few long moments.

I felt the same damn way.

Just...fuck.

•••

It was now an hour later, and we were still lying in his bed, exhausted and replete, naked.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I’m paying you half of what I made on Crew’s job.” He repeated his out of the blue statement.

I looked over at him with surprise. “It was literally a day.”

“It was a day of hard work, and you got it done when Crew couldn’t. And that was half the job, figuring out what was wrong,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “You did way more work, and way harder work, than I did, Hannibal.”

Though the thought of being paid and having my own money...

“You’re getting paid,” he said. “You’ll accept it graciously.”

“I can’t take half your money for that job.” I was already shaking my head.

“How much do you have in your account right now?” he asked.

None.

Actually, I was fairly sure I was probably negative.

But I wasn’t telling him that.

Telling people about my personal business was embarrassing.

Mostly because when I told people what I told them, they automatically assumed that I was the one at fault for what happened.

Yet, they didn’t know the punishments that I had to go through at my father’s hands. They didn’t know that, day by day, I lost the will to live so slowly that I’d contemplated suicide. I’d picked out the way I was going to do it, when I was going to do it, and where.

The only thing that had stopped me from doing it had been walking in on my father hurting that girl, and my getting rid of the problem that kept me up at night.

I blew out a resigned breath, then said, “My father’s lawyer pays me as he sees fit.”

“Then it’s final,” he said all pompous like. “You’ll get paid by me. Because I’m not going to fuck you over like they do.”

I liked that he was insistent.

It made me push past my worry.

I scoffed. "I'll accept it if you deduct the cost of the helmet out of what I owe you."

He snorted. "Done."

"Do you get paid well at all?" he asked. "Like, a living wage? You do a lot of work there."

I laughed. "I get paid minimum wage."

His eyes looked furious, but before he could start cursing or demanding that I quit, his phone rang.

He reluctantly pulled away, cursed when he saw who it was, then answered.

"Yo," I heard a deep male voice, eerily similar to the one I'd just heard calling my name as a litany in my head earlier, say. "Where are you?"

Hannibal sighed. "I told you not to come."

"Well, I didn't listen," he said. "We're here."

I felt my lips twitch at the way Hannibal looked so annoyed.

"Here as in, you expect to get into my hotel room here, or here as in you got to the hotel and you plan on getting your own?" he asked.

"Here as in here, at your hotel," he said. "They have no rooms. What room are you in?"

I looked at Hannibal with a grin on my face.

"This place is too hovel-esque for you. You'll probably die of bed bugs," he futilely argued. "You and your bougie ass should just go back home."

"Bougie." Hancock laughed. "Seriously, I'll just tell her that I forgot what room I'm in. We look the exact same, remember?"

Hannibal sighed. "Fine."

He looked over at me, and I got up and walked to my hotel room and started gathering my things.

I heard him saying some more things, but then he was there, helping me gather my opened suitcase off the floor and taking it into his room.

When everything was out, he walked back over to his room just in time to

hear the knock at the door.

“We can stay one more night,” I suggested. “You can show him around at the circus. I have some photos I wanted to show to Crew, anyway.”

CHAPTER 13

*Callipygian- having a well-shaped buttocks.
-Hannibal to Hades*

HANNIBAL

There was nothing like your brother being a cock blocker to make you irrationally upset.

I opened the door and stared at the two interlopers.

“I can’t believe you let him do this,” I said to the curvy, gorgeous woman in front of me.

Sway smiled that sweet, charming smile of hers then said, “You act like I’ve ever been able to control him.”

She had a point.

He was rather uncontrollable.

Then again, we both were.

I stepped back and allowed them inside, only then remembering that Hades was in my t-shirt and nothing else.

Hell, she still had my come dripping out of her.

Hancock’s gaze immediately went to her and stayed there.

“And who are you?” Hancock teased.

My brother was the charmer...when he wanted to be.

He could also be the asshole as well.

Though, the charmer was a newer addition to his personality arsenal.

When he’d started coaching baseball, he’d had a lot of bitchy people to deal with. Hence the act.

Those that knew him knew it was fake.

The ass.

“I’m Hades Singh,” she answered. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Hancock. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Really?” he asked, looking at me for confirmation.

“No,” Hades snorted. “He talks almost zero about you. I was just being nice.”

She was such a shit. Was it too early to say I loved her?

Sway snorted and pushed farther into the room. “This is gonna be a tight

fit.”

Hades gestured at the open door. “Y’all can take my room. I’m staying in Hannibal’s room anyway.”

Sway tilted her head on her shoulders to stare at her.

Hancock’s eyes never left mine as he gave me a raised brow that clearly said ‘what the fuck?’

I smiled and gave him my best ‘be nice to her or I’ll fucking eviscerate you’ look.

He nodded in understanding.

“I’m digging the silver, brother,” Hancock drawled.

Hades looked from me to Hancock and back again. “The silver is really great.”

I went prematurely gray from the hard life I lived.

At least that was what I was telling myself.

“It is,” Sway agreed as she walked to the adjoining room and said, “This place is a lot nicer than you made it sound like, Hancock. There’s no way that it has bed bugs.”

My brother really was bougie.

He didn’t like anything that wasn’t ‘fine.’

Then again, he had the money to pay for it so...

“It doesn’t,” I said. “Hancock, what are you staring at?”

He was eyeing the bed, then Hades, then the bed again.

“This a recent thing?” he asked.

So recent I wasn’t ever going to admit it to him, or I would never live it down.

“Not that recent,” I lied.

He knew when I lied.

It was a twin thing.

Sway left, taking her bags to the next room.

As she moved, she caught Hades’ eye and they both disappeared on the other side of the wall.

“You’re such a shit liar,” he said the moment we were alone.

I shrugged. "It is what it is."

"Whatever it is, I like her," he said. "She didn't gawk at me once."

"Not everyone knows you're a famous baseball star, bro," I told him.

"Actually," Hades said from the doorway, "I know exactly who he is. I also know his stats from the time he entered the league. I just don't think he's anything special."

Sway's full belly laugh had me grinning.

Damn, I'd missed her.

I'd missed my brother, too, of course. But Sway...she was somethin' else.

"Where are the kids?" I asked.

"Your mom and dad have them," Sway said as she hooked her arm around her husband's. "Let's go to bed. It's been a long ass day."

Hancock leveled a look on me. "We're spending the day together, right?"

I was already shaking my head. "No. I'll see you tomorrow night at the circus."

He narrowed his eyes, and I knew he was about to do one of two things: embarrass the hell out of me, or throw a little hissy fit.

Neither one of which was a good look for him.

I held up my hand before he could start.

"Fine," I grumbled. "We'll meet you for lunch tomorrow around noon."

There was a long pause and then Hancock said, "Why not breakfast?"

"Because I plan on sleeping in, bro." I slammed the door on the two of them.

"Now where were we?" I asked.

She reached for me at the same time I reached for her.

CHAPTER 14

*Don't trust everything you see. Salt looks like sugar.
-Hades to Hannibal*

HADES

“You okay?” Hannibal asked, his voice laced with a hint of amusement.

No. No I was not okay.

I knew what the ‘little death’ meant, and they were all liars.

This felt like a big death.

One that I might never recover from.

A light smack on my ass had me twisting my head to stare at Hannibal.

“What?” I grumbled, lips barely moving.

“Your phone is ringing.”

I glanced at it on the nightstand, then shrugged.

They all just wanted to know where I was.

I got about seven calls a day—one from each of them. Two, usually, from Tony.

“You’re set to come with me today, right?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Then I’ll send all your stuff home with Sway and Hancock, that way we don’t have all your crap strapped to my bike,” he said.

“Sounds good,” I continued to mumble.

He laughed and then started dressing me.

I flopped over onto my back as he slid on a thong—it was weird being dressed instead of undressed by him—and then my favorite shorts. Followed shortly by the pair of sweatpants I’d commandeered.

I waited to see what he’d do next—because bras weren’t the easiest thing to put on, especially when they were mutilated—but he slipped a t-shirt over my head.

Then a brand-new red sweatshirt I’d never seen before.

“I went down to the gift shop down the street and bought it for you,” he said as I gave him a questioning look.

Warmth suffused my veins as I snuggled deep into the sweatshirt.

It had ‘*I <3 Missouri*’ on it.

I ran my finger around the soft, faux fur heart, then looked at him with a smile.

“Ready?” he asked.

“For...” I waited, knowing exactly what he was going to say.

“If I don’t go, he’ll never shut up about it,” he explained.

“How do you know he’ll even be there?” I wondered.

“Because he’s my twin brother. I know him better than his wife knows him.”

We met them for breakfast.

After we’d had sex in the shower not once, but twice.

After I was rinsed off and my hair was dried and then he’d dressed me again, we went down to the lobby to find Hannibal’s family waiting there as if they’d known he’d come all along.

Sometimes, I knew when Tony would do things, too.

It was just something that I felt deep inside.

Hancock waited until Hannibal was at his side before saying, “Do you think they’ll limit us on the amount of waffles we can eat?”

Hannibal said something under his breath that sounded a lot like ‘fuck my life.’

Grinning at the two of them, I passed them by for a heart-shaped waffle.

Two of them.

And a little cup of Froot Loops.

Once I placed my plate on the table, I went back for a glass of milk and some orange juice, then took a seat and dug in.

“Hungry?” Hancock asked.

“Famished,” I answered around a mouthful of Froot Loops. “I haven’t eaten since last night.”

His eyes twinkled as he said, “I would like to point out that it’s normal for people to not eat in that amount of time.”

“I usually have at least one midnight to three in the morning snack,” I said. “When I don’t, I wake up grouchy and hungry, and the last thing I want to do is wait for my food to get made.”

He eyed me weirdly, as if what I'd just said was unheard of.

But then Hannibal sat down and said, "Man, I'm starving. I didn't get my snack last night."

I looked over at him just as Hancock burst out laughing.

"What?" Hannibal asked.

"Hades was just telling us that she eats a snack every single night," Sway said. "Y'all fit perfectly together."

I felt stunned. "You eat midnight snacks?"

"Yep," he said as he dug into an omelet the size of my head. "Every night if I can. I don't know why I wake up in the middle of the night, but if I don't go eat something, I'm never..."

"Going back to sleep," I finished for him. "Me, too."

"The midnight snacks, the devil names...y'all are a match made in heaven." Sway smiled before taking a bite of her granola.

I wrinkled my nose. "Why are you eating granola? Go grab a waffle, ma'am. These are great."

Hancock snorted. "She's 'trying to watch her figure' but really all she's doing is torturing herself."

Sway sighed, as if this was a normal argument for them.

"If it makes you feel better, I think you look great. We have a woman at our circus that drops in from time to time to work. She draws the biggest crowds because she's the prettiest person ever. And everyone loves the girls with the hips and the curves." I pointed at me. "I have a great, athletic body. But we're a dime a dozen. You can find us nearly everywhere. But you..." I eyed her speculatively. "You could definitely draw a crowd."

Sway blushed.

Hancock gave me an approving look, as if I'd just solidified my spot in his heart with my words.

Then he surprised me by asking his next question.

"Your circus?" Hancock asked.

I felt my heart stutter.

I wanted the man to like me, because I wanted his twin to love me.

If he didn't like me then what would Hannibal do?

But Momma didn't raise no coward...though Momma and Daddy didn't raise me at all. Maybe 'Hades didn't raise no coward' was a better fit.

"Well, my old circus now, I guess. My family owns and operates Singh Circus. I used to perform...but it's a really long story."

"Well, we're here to listen," he said. "Tell us everything."

So I did, not bothering to hide who I was from them, giving them the gory details and all.

When I was finished, and my plate was clean, Hancock stared at me for a long moment in time before saying, "That's a bunch of horseshit. I feel like you didn't tell me everything about your dad...but your family should've noticed the signs. I've had a few boys come through my baseball program with signs, and they're hard as hell to miss."

Yes. Yes they were.

Hannibal, though, saved me from explaining more about my abuse by interrupting.

He squeezed my thigh under the table and stood.

"Let's hurry up and go," Hannibal suggested. "That way we can get the show thing out of the way so we can drive home tonight. I have a stalker to find."

•••

"Come in," Crew said.

I smiled as I pushed the door open wide, laptop in one hand and camera in the other.

He grinned.

"Hades. Come to change your mind on the job offer?" he asked.

"Unfortunately for you, no," I said. "I'm here to show you some pictures I took, and to see if you want any of them."

He patted the chair at his side, a folding one that was holding a stack of papers that he didn't bother to move.

"Just sit on top of them," he suggested. "If I move them, I'll get

confused.”

So I did.

And showed him everything I’d taken yesterday.

“Wow,” Crew looked at the photos I’d taken. “These are fuckin’ gorgeous. And I don’t say that to blow smoke up your ass. They’re the best photos I’ve ever seen taken of this show.”

Pleasure at his words made me preen.

I’d never gotten compliments like that from my family when I’d taken photos of them.

Never once did I hear, ‘wow, this design is great, Hades. You did really great.’

Hell, I’d even designed the freakin’ wrap on our shared utility van. I’d worked with the car wrap guy for weeks as we made the wrap everything that it was.

Yet, not a single one of them had been impressed at all. Nor had they said ‘thank you.’

It was as if they saw me doing a job, and a job alone.

But fuck, I’d been doing the media and photography for Singh Circus for years, and I didn’t get paid for it.

And, as if he could practically hear my angry thoughts, Keene texted me.

Keene: Hey, I know that you’re ignoring us and all, but will you check the website? It’s down.

I ignored him and went back to work on the photography for Crew.

“I want them all. How much?” he asked.

“Since Hannibal says that I’m getting paid half of what he made on this job, nothing,” I answered. “But if you ever want me to do the media for your circus, or take more photos, I’ll charge you then.”

His eyes glistened when he said, “Deal.”

It was as I was walking out of his office that I got another text.

Zip: I know you’re ignoring us, but the website is down, and we can’t sell any tickets for our next show if we don’t get it back up and running. I contacted someone, two someones actually,

and they can't get it up and running until next week. Folsom's down with the flu, and can barely lift her head off the pillow, and Kobe told me to back off while she recovers and not push her. Please, please?

I ignored her, too.

Folsom: Why does it show that you were the one to take the website down? LOL

Folsom was the only one who got me.

She knew the real me.

She'd seen the real me even when my family couldn't.

So she knew that I'd taken it down for a reason, not to be vindictive.

She was also not as sick as she appeared to be, apparently.

Me: Because I'm tired of doing stuff for them that they don't appreciate. I have a new job, and it's making me realize a few things. Mostly that my family doesn't realize how much I do around there, and I'm trying to show them.

Folsom: So leave it down?

Me: I really don't care, Folsom. You can put it up or leave it down...but I'm signing off from the Singh family for a little bit. So you might be getting a few more calls soon.

Folsom: I'll leave it down for a bit. Let 'em sweat.

I loved Folsom.

"You look awfully long in the face there, baby," I heard said from somewhere beyond me.

I looked up and over to see a man standing there wearing a shit-eating grin.

I instantly felt my back stiffen.

I also didn't reply.

"Cat got your tongue?" he asked. "I saw you perform last night. You were spectacular. I know how to juggle, too. Want to see?"

No, I'd rather poke myself in the eye with a fork covered in salt.

I tried to move around him, but he side-stepped, blocking my path.

I felt my insides tighten at his move.

Crew's door was shut, but I could easily back up and knock—but I knew from before I'd gone into that room that it locked from the inside. He'd have to get up and open it...

"Sir," I said stiffly. "I'd appreciate it if you gave me room."

I wasn't a newbie to this crazy fan business.

I'd grown up in a circus. I dealt with unruly people all the time.

But there was something different about the way this man was staring at me.

"I think I won't," he said, smile becoming wider and wider the longer I stayed frozen to my spot.

"I think you'll back the fuck up, or I'll skin you, asshole to balls, and make you eat it," Hannibal snarled.

I instantly perked up at the sound of his voice.

It was pretty impressive what that rumbly voice could do to me.

The man turned to survey Hannibal.

Then looked beyond Hannibal to Hancock.

"Hey, Hancock Peters!" he cried out. "Can I get your autograph?"

"Sure, I'll use the blood from when your taint gets skinned." Hancock rolled his eyes. "Get the fuck out of here before my brother loses it. He's not altogether stable."

No, looking at him now, he definitely was not.

I moved then, going straight to Hannibal.

And, like the dumb moron he'd already shown himself to be, the man reached for me and tried to touch my hair.

That was all it took for Hannibal to lay him out flat.

One punch to the jaw, and the man was lying on the floor staring blankly at the ceiling.

Why was that so freakin' hot?

I moved until I was within Hannibal's reach, and when I did, he curled his arm around me and pulled me in really tight.

“You ready to go watch the show, Hancock?” Hannibal asked as if he hadn’t just knocked some guy out moments before.

“Yeah,” Hancock said in amusement, hooking his hand around Sway. “Lead the way.”

I waited until Hancock and Sway were well on their way through the hallway before I stopped Hannibal and pulled him back.

He looked down at me in surprise, and I planted a solid kiss to his mouth.

He kissed me back, taking it over, and solidly making me forget everyone and everything.

When he pulled back he said, “That make you hot?”

I laughed. “Only a lot.”

His eyes were twinkly when he tugged me under his arm and led us to the main room where the show was about to start.

And together with his family, we watched the performances until they were over.

CHAPTER 15

*God knew I'd be powerful if I was mentally stable.
-Hades to Hannibal*

HANNIBAL

I knew she had to be cold.

In fact, I felt her stop shivering over twenty minutes ago, which didn't make me feel all that great. In fact, there was a piece of my heart that was withering up and dying just at the mere thought of her being uncomfortable in any way. Let alone so cold that she'd stopped shivering.

When we finally pulled into my house, I shut the bike down and got off. Carefully as to not dislodge her from where she was positioned.

She sat there, practically frozen, and stared at me with sluggish eyes.

"You okay?" I asked.

She nodded, albeit slowly.

"Come on," I said as I plucked her up. "Let's get you in a hot shower."

The drive back home was six hours.

I'd dressed her in leathers that were too big for her, and a massive down jacket that was pretty good about keeping me warm. But it hadn't mattered.

She'd still gotten overly cold.

When she went to get off the bike, her legs went out from under her, and I caught her before she could fall to the ground beside the bike.

I picked her up bridal style and led her inside via the back entry.

Maneuvering the locked and armed back door proved fun, but I didn't drop her, and she didn't make a move to get out of my arms.

Instead, she laid her head on my chest, and started shivering.

Comforted that she was doing that simple thing already, I locked the back door behind me and headed straight for my bedroom.

When I got into the room, I sat her on the couch, then started the shower before coming back for her.

She was already out of the jacket and the leather pants.

"It's so c-c-c-old," she shivered out.

I helped her undress the rest of the way, then walked her into the shower stall.

Sitting her on the bench right under the spray, I maneuvered back out and stripped out of my own clothes.

When I was finished, I found her standing directly under the spray, her arms hugged around her delicious body.

Her eyes immediately came to me, and she smiled.

“I didn’t expect it to be as bad as it was,” she admitted.

I hadn’t either, or I would’ve said we should wait for the morning. Or hell, I’d have sent her with Hancock.

Yet, I felt for some reason, she wouldn’t have gone.

She didn’t trust him the way she trusted me, and that was important. That was a feeling that was slowly taking root inside of me, making me feel like I was a thousand feet tall.

Moving in behind her, I closed the door to the shower and crowded her close.

If she was going to be here long, I’d have to talk to my contractor about renovating my shower. There wasn’t that much space in my shower, and now we were having to share a showerhead as well.

The fact that I was contemplating renovating my shower because of her should’ve scared the absolute shit out of me—change of any kind whatsoever had always messed with me—but it didn’t. Not with her.

Just the thought of her being here long enough that I’d have to consider long-term solutions to my house felt like a good thing. It felt right.

What also felt right was how she felt in my arms.

I curled her in tight, then moved so that her back was to the spray, even though it didn’t hit me nearly at all.

“You okay?” I asked, rubbing her arms up and down as if it would help the goosebumps on her arms.

She nodded against my chest, her wet hair teasing my lower belly as she bobbed her head.

I reached for my shampoo/conditioner/body wash combo and started washing her hair.

She leaned her head back and groaned.

“I always liked having my hair played with,” she said to the ceiling. “But

this whole hair washing thing you're doing for me...it's making me never want to wash my own hair again."

The thought of 'I'll do it for the rest of my life' almost slipped out, but I was able to hold it in.

As it was, the sigh slipped free.

She opened her eyes and stared at me. "Does that bother you?"

I was already shaking my head before she'd finished her question. "No. What bothers me is my reaction to doing this for the rest of my life."

"And why does that bother you?" she asked, sounding...hopeful.

I tugged her hair hard, then made her look into my eyes.

"Because I've only been doing this with you for a day, and the thought of letting you go back to your family makes me want to murder them all, then lie about doing it so you latch onto me and never let go," I said.

She blinked.

Then a slow smile bloomed on her face.

"You do remember that I'm not a normal person, right?" she questioned. "Because the thought of you forcing me to stay...that doesn't bother me at all. In fact, it makes me feel all warm and gooey inside."

I sifted my fingers through her hair, then moved her so that she was once again under the spray for it to rinse out the soap.

When she was done, I snatched the stupid loofa Hunter's wife had gotten me last year. It was a bright pink one with an ice cream cone on top.

I never used it, preferring to squirt the wash in my hands and rub it all over my body.

But it would work great for Hades.

She sighed, then allowed me to wash her from top to bottom.

When I got to her pubic area, I hung the loofa back up on the holder where it'd sat since I was given it, and then slicked my hands up with more soap.

Once I was thoroughly coated, I slid my hand between her thighs slowly, watching her for any signs of distress.

When she didn't give me any indication that she was uncomfortable, I continued, my fingers delving straight between the lips of her sex.

Her moan of excitement made my half-hard cock fully hard, and I couldn't help the way my fingers slipped right on backwards until two sank deep inside of her.

She hissed in a breath, her fingers tightening on my arm.

I ignored the fact that she broke skin with those killer nails of hers and watched her face as I slowly started to pump my fingers inside of her.

She started rocking her hips, and I pulled free of her and spun her around so that her ass was snugly fit into my upper legs, her back pressing against my hard cock.

She sputtered when the water hit her in the face, and I graciously moved so that my back was taking the majority of the hit now.

Her head fell back to my collar bone, and I slipped my fingers right back between her thighs. When my fingers sank home, she once again started to rock her hips, but I stopped her by pressing her up against the wall and forcing her still.

She mewled, which caused me to grin.

"You said you wanted me to have control," I teased as I tightened my hold around her, one arm around her breasts.

She hissed in a breath and said, "Yeah, but I kind of figured you wouldn't torture me."

"I'm not going to torture you...too much," I amended.

Her eyes closed tight and she bit her lip, allowing me to know I was affecting her deeply.

"You're so tight and warm," I said as I pumped my fingers again, this time dragging those fingers toward my palm in a come-hither motion. "So soft."

She inhaled deeply, making my gaze become laser focused on her breasts.

Each of her nipples was perfectly pointy.

I wanted them in my mouth in the worst way.

But to do that, I'd have to let go of her, and I didn't want to do that quite yet.

Her breath hitched when I pressed into her deeper with my fingers, then changed from two fingers to three.

"H-hannibal." She groaned. "Please."

I liked it when she begged.

To know that she was doing that for me—something she'd do for no one else—made me feel like I was winning at life.

“What is it, baby?” I asked, swirling her clit with the side of my thumb.

“I need,” she said simply.

I needed, too.

“Put your foot up there on that ledge,” I ordered.

She did, her foot going high and wide, giving me the access I needed to replace my fingers with my cock.

In one swift move, I pulled my fingers out and shoved my cock forward, causing her to cry out in surprise.

Even three fingers were not comparable to my dick size.

I wasn't tooting my own horn or anything, but I'd always felt like I was on the uncomfortable size of big. Most women saw my dick and immediately got all weird.

Not Hades, though.

She groaned, her hand going to my outer thigh and allowing her fingers to dig in, deep.

I'd have quite a few of those little half-moons all over my body, but I didn't mind.

No, right then I was so focused on how she was making me feel that I didn't care what I looked like after this.

Arm still banded tight around her, I fucked her solidly. In and out, over and over again until I knew she was on the verge of coming.

She was no longer cold.

No, she was hot and definitely bothered.

“Please,” she whispered. “Please make me come.”

I canted my hips slightly so that I was hitting that fleshy spot inside of her with each thrust, and she cried out in relief.

“Fuck, yes,” I growled. “You're close, right, baby? Because you feel too tight and hot for me to stop. I'm going to come without you and have to take care of you...”

She came.

With a glorious scream.

“Fuck, *fuck*.” I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to control myself, but it was no use. I came right behind her, filling her with my seed and thinking that I could definitely get used to this.

Regular pussy on demand. Pussy that wasn’t toxic. Pussy that was definitely becoming addicting.

She slumped in my arms, and I knew then I had a few more minutes to get her rinsed and dried off before she collapsed completely.

I pulled away, hating the way that she sighed in my arms at my loss.

It made me want to fill her up again and stay there all night long.

But that wasn’t feasible.

Not with how much the woman tossed and turned all night.

Using the showerhead, I sprayed her off, going as far as to push my finger inside of her to scoop out what was left of my come.

She laughed. “I could’ve done that.”

I knew she could.

But I wanted to do it for her.

Jesus, I needed to get a grip.

“Ready?” I asked as I replaced the showerhead to the holder.

“Yep,” she confirmed as she pushed through the glass door. “Ready, Freddy.”

I moved to the towel rack and grabbed two out of it, wrapping her up first in one before wrapping the other around myself.

Together we dried off in companionable silence.

“I need my bag to brush my teeth,” she murmured sleepily.

I walked to the vanity and pulled out a new toothbrush.

“Floss is in the top drawer,” I said. “You can wear one of my shirts to bed.”

Her eyes twinkled as she tucked the end of the towel into itself then opened the toothbrush.

“You didn’t want to offer me yours?” she asked as she used an ungodly

amount of toothpaste.

“No,” I admitted. “There are two things that I won’t share with you. That’s a bathroom when I’m taking a shit, and a toothbrush.”

She snorted. “We’ll just see about that, Hannibal Peters.”

I was already shaking my head as she finished up her teeth brushing.

“No,” I promised. “We won’t.”

CHAPTER 16

*What in the actual what the fuck is going on here?
-Text from Hades to Hannibal*

HANNIBAL

Since she'd given me the journal, I'd spent every single night since reading the pages of her life.

Today, one week after she'd given it to me, I finished it.

And I was sick to my stomach.

I'd gotten up for a midnight snack around eleven fifty-five.

And while eating celery sticks dipped in natural sunflower butter, I finished off one of the last entries into her journal.

Dear me,

Today I met the first person to actually see me.

We didn't talk. In fact, at first he didn't even acknowledge me.

But then Keene left him alone for a long moment, and I was able to make eye contact with him.

For the first time in my existence, I was able to breathe.

I don't know what this means.

I don't know where I go from here.

What I do know is...maybe death isn't in the cards for me.

Still no love, but not quite as bleak as it once was,

Me.

That was a common theme in all of her entries.

The contemplation of suicide.

When I was younger, before my starry-eyed view of the world had been tarnished, I'd thought there was never a good enough reason to want to kill yourself.

Seriously, I was so naïve.

That was before I'd been 'over there.'

Over there being overseas, in the most horrible of places, when women

and children were treated so poorly that sometimes the only escape from their hostile realities was death.

Then there were the women in this nation that had been sold off to sex traffickers. Sometimes, they had no control, for so long, that giving them the guidance to control what did and didn't happen in their life was all they needed. And if that happened to be them taking it? Well, then that's what it needed to be.

But reading the atrocities that Ansel Singh had committed against Hades, who for all intents and purposes had been his daughter, I could see why she'd want that escape.

The threats had lessened as she'd grown older and could cope more safely with what life had given her. But they hadn't completely slacked off.

It was quite humbling to know I'd given her that sense of ease with just meeting her.

It was the last entry, though, that had my entire heart realizing one absolute fact.

Dear future me,

It's going to get better.

One day, you'll think that you can't do this anymore.

And the next day, you'll find the man that makes your intrusive thoughts stop.

Just keep holding on.

Love, Me.

I took the last bite of my celery stick, then allowed the journal to fully close before getting up and washing my hands.

Knowing that Hades would be up any second to grab a snack of her own, I quickly dried my hands off then put her journal away.

I had a plan for that journal.

One she might not like.

But it had to be done.

I couldn't leave her in limbo with her family.

And to do that, they all needed to understand.

They needed to know that she was the best person that they'd ever been handed, and they were throwing her away.

But in the meantime, I would soak in every single second with her, and bind her to me slowly and methodically, until she couldn't ever see her life without me in it.

And then, I'd marry her.

I'd get her pregnant. I would be a great father with Hades at my side. She soothed something inside of me.

I'd make it to where she was so dependent on me, that she had no doubts, fears, or uncertainties in her life as to who she meant the world to.

After everything was stowed, I pulled out the leftover pizza from lunch and nuked a few pieces.

The last five nights, she'd gotten up around two for a snack. So I was assuming tonight would be the same.

If anything, she'd have some lukewarm pizza if she did wake up.

I heard a shuffling behind me before the microwave even beeped.

Turning to look over my shoulder, I watched as she slowly made her way toward me.

I pulled the pizza out of the microwave, then turned to survey the sleepy woman walking toward me looking so adorable.

I placed the plate on the counter, and like every other night since we'd started this routine, she face planted into my chest and wrapped her arms around my waist.

Years ago, when I entered the military, I was okay with physical touch.

But that slowly started to change.

Eventually, it got so bad that I didn't even like my own brothers hugging me.

The women and children were okay—mostly—but there was something about having a person all up in my face that was the size of a full-grown male that I didn't like.

I hadn't liked hugs all that much in years.

But that was before I'd gotten one from Hades.

Now, I craved them like I craved my next breath.

When she wasn't touching me in some way, I was bereft.

"You made pizza," she muttered into my pecs. "Nutrition is very important to me, Mr. Peters."

Nutrition my ass. The last thing that was important to her was nutrition.

I snorted. "Sure. That's why we have the pizza in there in the first place, right, Ms. Singh?"

I felt the instant my words penetrated her sleepy brain. And I disliked it immensely.

She sighed. "I hate my last name."

I'll give you a new one. Right fucking now.

I brought my fingers up to her hair instead of voicing my inner feelings—no way I'd scare her away right now with my impulsive thoughts—and started to sift my fingers through it.

She leaned her head back and made a content noise in the back of her throat, making my heart full to bursting.

"You can legally change it," I pointed out.

To mine...

She shrugged. "I always felt like, if I did that, my family would hate me."

Her family could go pound sand if they hated her for something like that.

"Then they're not your family, Hades," I said gently. "If they loved you, they'd want whatever would make you the happiest. And if that was getting rid of that motherfucker's last name, then so be it."

She sighed. "I wish everything in life was as easy as you made it out to be."

I tugged a lock of her hair, causing her to wince.

"Ow," she said as she pulled back and glared her sleepy little eyes at me.

"Oops," I lied.

She dug her knuckles into my rib, and I pulled away from her laughing.

She went to the pizza I'd nuked for her and took a quick bite, groaning under her breath at the taste.

If I ate like her, I'd weigh five hundred pounds by next Saturday.

"Why are you up so late?" she asked. "You're not usually up when I get up."

I shrugged, not wanting to taint the mood with any more thoughts on her father. Or, more accurately, her lack of one.

"I'm thinking about strategies for where I'm going to start when it comes to your sister's stalker," I lied. "You said that your friend, Folsom, had tried?"

She was already nodding, looking cutely frustrated.

"I did," she confirmed. "He is very, very careful to stay away from all cameras, and whomever he is has covered his tracks. Even when at first he dropped off his packages at the post office. Folsom has never been able to get a clear view of him, other than us realizing that it was a man due to the shape and build."

I hummed in contemplation, enjoying watching the way she enjoyed her food. Even reheated pizza that wasn't very good in the first place.

"We've gotten partial photos of him, all from behind. But that's pretty much it," she said. "Do you have a place to start?"

"Yes," I paused. "Though I won't rule out anything until my hunch can be confirmed."

"And your hunch is Benji?" she asked for clarification.

I nodded. "First logical choice, to be honest. It doesn't seem very likely that your sister would find two men that are obsessed with her like that."

We talked for a few more minutes on why I thought it could be Benji, and then we headed to bed, my eyes drooping.

I'd never gotten much sleep before I'd met Hades.

Now, I felt like I got so much that I was on the verge of sick with it. I hadn't realized that your joints could hurt so much after lying in bed for hours upon end. I also hadn't realized that my employees called so much before six in the morning until lately, when I'd been returning those calls around nine.

After I'd spent some of the morning with Hades.

Whether or not we'd spent that morning doing anything recreational or

just a straight sex fest was another story.

“I’m exhausted,” she grumbled. “I feel like we need a rest day.”

I laughed. “A vagina rest day? Or an altogether rest day where we don’t do anything but eat and watch television in bed?”

She shrugged. “Sex would be okay. Later. But I want to spend the day with you, doing nothing.”

I thought about obliging her. Truly I did.

But the thought of waiting one more day to solve her problem felt like sandpaper on an open wound.

I wanted her to have everything she wanted.

And though a rest day would be what she wanted, I knew she wanted this stalker found more.

I also felt like if I solved this mystery, then maybe we could focus on other things. Like our relationship...and fixing a few things that Hades saw as a problem—things I wouldn’t be voicing aloud seeing as she’d probably clam up and refuse to talk about it.

She had given me her journal to read, after all...

We both collapsed into bed, my arms automatically coming out to reach for her.

She snuggled in deep, then sighed. “I could really get used to this.”

My last thought before we both fell asleep was, ‘please do.’

CHAPTER 17

*She's a ten, but throws hands.
-Hannibal to Hancock*

HADES

Hannibal leaned over me and pressed a kiss against my throat.

“I’m going to go,” he said quietly.

I blinked one eye open and saw that it wasn’t even light enough outside to warrant being up. “What are you doing? Come back to bed. It’s our rest day.”

He chuckled, getting off the bed and pulling the blanket up high over my body. “Sorry, but no can do. I have a stalker to find. Then we can have as many rest days as you desire.”

I would’ve risen to the bait, but shit, he’d worn me out last night.

After a long ride in the cold, he’d fucked me in the shower, and had turned around and did it again half an hour later while we were lying there about to go to sleep. Then we’d both gotten up for a snack a little later. And though we’d gone back to bed fairly quickly after that, that wasn’t enough time for me to recuperate. Unlike, apparently, him.

Now, it was dark enough outside for no light to penetrate the windows, which meant that it wasn’t smart for my health to get up yet.

Hence the reason I stayed right where I was.

“If you insist on doing that at the butt crack of dawn, you’ll never get any help from me,” I pointed out groggily.

I heard him chuckle, but refused to open my eyes, even though it was one of my favorite things to do—watch him laugh.

He patted my leg and said, “I’ll be back around ten or so. If you’re still in bed, I might make use of you.”

I smiled and fell back to sleep before the bedroom door even closed.

The next time I woke it was definitely light outside, and there was knocking at the front door.

I reluctantly got out of bed and shuffled to the front door, my eyes half open, thinking that I would find Sway or Hancock or both on the other side with my stuff.

The last person I expected to see at Hannibal’s house was Zip.

But there she was, standing right in front, waiting for me.

“What are you doing here?” I narrowed my eyes. “And how did you find me?”

Folsom would be my guess.

She scoffed, as if she could read my thoughts. “Folsom didn’t tell me. But I know other people.”

That was news to me.

And, since it looked like she was being cautious, I sighed. “What are you doing here?”

She crossed her arms. “I’ve never believed your act over the last few years. I want to know what’s going on, and I want you to tell me everything, so I can leave you alone and let you experience life with that man I just saw you with earlier.”

So she’d seen Hannibal and me at some point over the last day or so.

“When exactly would you have arrived to have been able to see that?” I wondered.

“I actually arrived in time to see your show. Then I saw you with that man. Hannibal. Then I got the last hotel room at that hotel y’all were staying at. And when y’all left, I followed you,” she said. “Well, actually I followed the Apple Air Tag I planted on his bike. Then I rented another hotel after I saw where y’all went. And now I’m here.”

What was with these stalkers I called family?

“Come in,” I said as I opened the door wide.

She did, taking a quick glance around at everything.

“Wow,” she said. “For a bachelor, he sure does know how to decorate.”

I imagined that it wasn’t Hannibal doing the decorating. If I had to guess, it was one of his sisters-in-law.

Yet I didn’t tell Zip that.

“Bagel?” I asked. “I can order some.”

“No,” she shook her head. “Some of us have to try really hard to maintain our figure. And since I’m still one of the only ones who knows how to work in this family, I gotta stay in tip top shape.”

That sounded like our ‘father’ coming directly out of her mouth.

I ignored the barb and walked farther into the kitchen. “I think Hannibal

has a protein smoothie mix. I saw it last night.”

Zip took a seat at the counter across from where I was now leaning my hips, and stared at me for a few long seconds before saying, “Are you going to come back?”

I saw no reason in lying, so I filled the awkward silence with chatter.

“How did you really find me, and I’ll tell you,” I suggested.

Zip’s mouth twitched. “I’d recognize your photography and design anywhere.” She turned her phone toward me and I saw the new banner that Crew was hanging outside the doors of Vegas Royale. “I follow other circus people. I want to be able to come up with new ideas, offer fresh ways to do things. This woman, Tarryn, is an entertainer there, and I’ve been following her for a few years. Two days ago I saw her posting about the new branding that was going on at Vegas Royale. She shared photos of the website, and of a potential banner design. And I just knew that was you.”

“So you drove all the way here?” I asked.

“Actually,” she said, “I flew. We decided to take a few of our next tour dates off, and I have exactly seventeen days to do whatever I want. You were my first stop.”

I’d noticed that they were a few down. With Simi barely able to stand up due to her nausea, Coco, the tiger, being out of service due to being poisoned by Tony’s stalker, and Tony being out with a concussion, the rest was needed.

“I’m glad I was your first stop,” I said quietly. “How’s everyone doing?”

“First, tell me whether or not you’re going to come back,” she suggested.

I slumped back onto the couch, then stared at the ceiling as I tried to come up with an answer.

“I don’t think I’m going to,” I said. “I’m going to start my own design business.”

There. I’d said it.

I’d told her my dream.

She stared at me for a few long seconds, then smiled a beaming smile that made my heart skip a beat.

“Yes.” She smiled. “I’m glad to hear that you’re doing what you want.”

That made me feel so...free.

The fact that she wanted that for me...it was a great feeling.

“I’ll still do design for the circus. And also whatever else is needed with the websites and the social media presence...but I’m not going to work for free anymore. If y’all want me to do it, then I need to be paid accordingly,” I blurted.

Her eyes went wide. “You want to be paid more than a hundred thousand dollars a year?” she blurted.

I tilted my head to stare at her.

“Zip,” I said. “I don’t get paid that a year. I make minimum wage. If I’m lucky, I get three hundred bucks a week. That’s fifteen thousand a year.”

Her mouth was open so wide that I could’ve put half my fist in it.

Zip had a huge mouth.

“What do you mean you only make fifteen...” she pulled out her phone and placed a call.

It wasn’t long before my brother answered. “Hello?”

He sounded tired.

“Keene, what is this I hear that Hades makes fifteen thousand dollars a year?” she asked, sounding pissed as hell.

Zip didn’t get mad often, but when she did...

“What are you talking about? She gets paid the same as the rest of us,” he grumbled. “What, did she tell you she didn’t make that much? Because I see the books. All of us make the same amount of money each year.”

I’d throat punch him if he was here right now.

“Call the accountant and find out,” she suggested to him. “Right now.”

“I’m wor...” he started to say, but she interrupted him.

“Call. Him.”

Keene sighed and said, “Give me five.”

It took less than four for him to call back.

All the while, Zip stared at her phone as if she was ordering him to call back already.

“Tell me,” she said as soon as she answered.

“What the hell is going on, Zip?” Keene asked. “I talked to the accountant, Dusty. He said that Hades is paid like a regular everyday employee. Only, she’s the least paid on our entire employee roster. I asked who authorized that, and he said Dad’s estate. I’ve made a call to the lawyer. His assistant said he’d call me back as soon as he could.”

I lifted my hands and started rubbing my scalp. Jesus, they were all that clueless.

I guess that was a good thing.

I would rather them be clueless than be doing it on purpose. And based on the outrage in both Keene’s and Zip’s voices, they were truly upset about the prospect.

“No wonder she hates us,” Keene said under his breath.

Zip’s eyes flashed to mine and when she made eye contact with me, I hoped that she saw the love in my eyes.

I’d never hated any of them.

That was the problem.

They were the reason I stayed when I really should’ve run and never looked back.

“Oh, there he is. Hold on and I’ll put him on three-way,” Keene said, not waiting for a reply from Zip about me hating her.

There was a click and a shuffling sound, and then Keene was saying, “Hello?”

“Mr. Singh,” the lawyer, Ted Rafferty, said. “You called?”

“Yes,” Keene said, acting like he wasn’t on the line with someone else. “I called today because I wanted to ask you about an inconsistency that I found in our books. It shows in my records that our sister, Hades, isn’t paid correctly. And she hasn’t ever complained about it, so I didn’t know to ask about it until now. Can you clarify with me her actual pay amount?”

There was a long hesitation and then, “Well, sir. Depending on how much she works would tell you how much she got paid.”

I could tell Keene didn’t like that non-answer because he was bristling, even over the phone.

“Sir,” Keene said politely, but also interjecting a bit of ‘tell me or else.’ “I

really need information here. I'd like to know what's going on. Now."

The pause this time was so lengthy I wondered if we'd lost him.

But Zip and Keene patiently waited him out.

Then the lawyer, Ted, said, "She's been paid minimum wage since she was a teenager, like you all were. There must've been some mistake..."

Keene growled low and menacingly. "Ted. Listen. I'm not a dumbass. I know something's going on here. I'd like you to tell me what that is, or I'll find a new lawyer to tell me what I want to know."

There was a long moment of silence and then, "We've always done this with the stepsister. I'm not quite sure what the problem is, seeing as she's not actually part of y'all's family. The will has stipulations. The only ones that will inherit are those that are rightful 'Singh' heirs. Since Hades isn't Ansel's daughter, he left her out of that part of the will. Technically, she's really only an employee."

There was such a lull that it started to get oppressive.

My heart started to pound and I thought...this is it.

This is where they all figure it out.

"What do you mean she's not Ansel's?" Keene asked in a very careful voice.

"Paternity was ran on both twins at birth. It was found that Caristonia was Ansel Singh's, but Hades wasn't. The mother apparently was also seeing a circus worker at the time," the lawyer murmured.

Silence.

Dead silence.

"I want her given her share, and I don't care what you have to do. She is paid what she's owed. Then, you pay her back pay for what she hasn't gotten, either," Keene snarled.

"That's not...that's not possible. The stipulations in the will..." The lawyer sounded flabbergasted.

Meanwhile, my heart was freakin' pounding.

The door to the front of the house opened, and I turned woodenly to see Hancock walk through the door.

He had my suitcase in one hand, and a little girl around five or six in the

crook of his other arm.

He took one look at my face and stopped dead, his angry gaze going to my sister, as if she was responsible for putting the look on my face.

He whispered into the little girl's ear and set her down.

She walked right into the kitchen as if she'd done it a half a million times and disappeared.

Hancock took a step forward as if to insert himself between us before Keene's angry voice on the phone could be heard.

"I don't care, Rafferty. I don't care if we all go bankrupt. You will pay her the money that's owed to her. You will tell me now everything you have on each one of us, including Hades, and you will make sure you do it all by tonight or I'll be finding a new lawyer," Keene snarled.

"Sir," Ted said. "It doesn't work like that. I can't just do that without the approval of all of you. And Ansel's stipulations in his will strictly prohibit sharing anything with Hades Pearl Singh."

I knew that.

He'd practically told me the day that the will had been read to us.

"Well, then I'll find a lawyer that can interpret the will how we want, and you're relieved of service to the Singh family," Keene said calmly now.

"But..."

Keene had already hung up on the dude, though.

Which made me feel momentarily better.

I'd thought the guy was a complete dick since the moment I'd met him.

But since I hadn't wanted to rock the boat, I'd kept my mouth shut about it.

Hancock backed away until his back was toward the wall opposite of me and stayed silent.

Meanwhile, I took my first long look at Zip's face.

"We're getting a new lawyer," Keene growled. "And we need to find Hades. She can't hear about this from anyone but us. But it won't change a thing. She's our sister."

If I was a crier, I would've cried in that instant.

But I'd learned long ago that tears literally solved nothing.

They got you nowhere.

They were literally just a bodily function that sometimes people got now.

I hadn't cried since I was fourteen.

But the happy feeling in my chest was blooming into something I hadn't realized I needed. Their understanding and their love.

Hancock looked at me. I could feel his gaze on my face. But I didn't look away from Zip's eyes.

She'd been watching my reaction.

And when I hadn't reacted correctly to the news that we'd just gotten, she started to put a few things together.

"Leave finding her to me," Zip said quietly. "We need to get her paid, though. She can't be out there working her ass off for minimum wage when we damn well know we pay our usual workers triple that."

"Agreed." Keene sighed. "I've already been going over numbers all morning, Zip. There's something incredibly fishy going on with this circus. Dad was shady as fuck, and now that I've had time to actually look into all of this instead of playing the stupid ring-fucking-master all day every day for a fuckin' year to please that bastard, I'm seeing more and more inconsistencies. I think we need some sort of investigator that can look into all of this...we have to find whatever it was that he was hiding. And I don't have the knowledge to dig that deep into this stuff."

Zip finally looked away and acknowledged Hancock. "I have to go. But I'll look into that, too. I know a few people."

Based on her finding me without using Folsom, I had a feeling that she could find someone.

The girl may be the baby of the family, but that didn't mean she wasn't a genius.

"Okay." Keene sighed. "I was stressing about that, too. Now all this... Jesus fucking Christ. I can't stand our father sometimes. I'm glad he's dead."

"Yeah," Zip said quietly. "Me, too."

Then she hung up without saying goodbye, turning fully to me before saying, "Want to explain yourself?"

No. Not really.

“When were you going to tell me—us—that you weren’t our sister?” she asked, raising her voice to the point that she wasn’t yelling, but she was really damn close.

I felt that verbal blow like it was physical.

The flinch at her words had me standing up.

I glanced at Hancock to see him slipping his phone back into his pocket. It was more than obvious that he’d texted Hannibal.

I probably had ten minutes, max, before he was back here and ordering Zip to leave.

Crossing my arms over my chest and pretending her words didn’t hurt nearly as bad as they did, I said, “You know, all I wanted to be for my entire life was a part of y’all’s family.”

Zip pressed her lips together as I continued. “You may not have known what our ‘dad’ was doing to me, but that doesn’t excuse the fact that y’all didn’t look outside of your own little bubble to see that I wasn’t doing well.”

Zip opened her mouth, then closed it, unsure what to say.

“The first time our ‘father’ told me that I was some bastard piece of shit—that I can remember anyway—was when we were five years old, and I was sitting around the Christmas tree with everyone, wondering why y’all had presents and I didn’t,” I said.

Hancock made a sound, but I didn’t bother to look at him.

“I was reminded every single day that I wasn’t wanted. And when I saw that Dad only got y’all one half ass present...do you remember that time that we were sitting all on the RV couch, and Dad had let us watch *Home Alone*, and we got to that scene where all the presents are around the tree? How even Kevin’s measly presents to his family were way more than we ever expected from our own father? That was the moment in time that I made it my life’s purpose to make sure that we never had a shitty Christmas again,” I said.

She frowned. “Did any of you ever notice that I sat beside y’all and never got a single present?”

Zip opened her mouth and then closed it.

“And to be honest, you’re the baby of the bunch. You had no clue when

we were younger how bad it was. By the time you got there, all of us were old enough to help take care of you. You never had to wonder where your next meal would come from. Or whether or not Dad would deign to take us to the dentist office to get a cavity filled. Because one of us was always there to make sure that you never saw that side of our life. But let me be completely honest here. I never had that opportunity. Nobody but me ever watched out for me. Not even Tony,” I hissed.

Hancock shifted on his feet, and I wondered what he thought of all of this.

Did he think we didn't love each other?

Because that couldn't be further from the truth.

I wasn't their family. But they were mine.

And I would love them until the end of time.

Warts and angry words alike.

“I think it's time to go.”

Hannibal.

I turned to look behind me and found him standing there looking...upset.

No, he was...furious.

Actually, furious wasn't doing the mood he was currently in justice.

Infuriated.

Incensed.

Hell, let's just say he was so mad that you could tell he wanted Zip out of his house.

Now.

“I, uh, okay,” Zip said, backing toward the door.

Hannibal wouldn't hurt her.

I'd never allow that.

But I would like her to go, too.

If only to give myself a break.

There was only a short amount of time left until all of them knew, and then I'd have to field some calls. I couldn't ignore them like I had been. They'd probably send out a search party or something.

To keep them at bay for a while, while I got myself situated, I had to give

them something.

But that moment was not now.

“I love you, Hades,” Zip said as she slowly closed the door behind her.

I didn’t reply.

I stayed right where I was until strong arms wrapped around me, pulling me into a hard chest.

I turned in his arms, looped mine around his waist, and laid my head on his chest.

I was surprised just how fast his heart was beating when I closed my eyes.

“You okay?” I asked, worried now.

Seriously, that fast of a beating heart couldn’t be good for his health.

“Your sister just handed you a mortal verbal wound, and you’re worried about me?” he asked.

“My sister probably didn’t mean it the way it came out,” I pointed out.

Hancock, who still hadn’t left, snorted from behind me.

I flipped him off behind my back, causing him to chuckle.

“I brought your stuff over,” Hancock said.

“Uncle Hanny!”

Hannibal pulled me off of him like I was a piece of dirt on his hands and turned to the girl that was calling his name.

Just as he turned, the little girl hit him like a battering ram.

“Hey there, Darcy.” Hannibal picked her up and held her tight.

Hancock slid his arm around my shoulders, and together we watched the two of them interact.

“Hey there, Hanny.” She placed both of her tiny hands on either side of his face and said, “You have a bunch of bullshit in your refrigerator.”

I snorted out a laugh.

“Don’t encourage her,” Hancock whispered. “Sway hates it when she curses.”

“I can’t see why,” I found myself saying. “She used the curse word perfectly.”

“Yeah,” Hancock nodded. “You okay?”

Was I?

I didn't know.

I knew I would be, though.

"Sure." I shrugged. "I'm hungry, though. I worked up an appetite dealing with that."

Hancock laughed. "Well, I had a dual motive when I came over here. One was to bring you your suitcase. The other was to ask if you wanted to have breakfast at my parents' farm. They own about a thousand acres about ten minutes outside of town."

"We are not taking her over there to deal with our mother after that," Hannibal disagreed, settling the little girl on his hip as if he'd done it his whole life.

Or hers.

"Yes, we are," I said. "We're gonna rip this Band-Aid off."

Hannibal was already shaking his head. "If you think you can leave later on...you're wrong."

Why did that sound so ominous?

CHAPTER 18

*I just laugh stuff off because prison doesn't cook the food I like.
-Hades to Hannibal*

HANNIBAL

My mind wasn't on the drive as it should be.

It was on how Hades had been treated her whole life.

Had I come into that house and heard Zip's words to her, I might've been in a different state of mind than I was. But I hadn't heard them come from their mouth. I'd heard them secondhand come from my brother's mouth as he explained everything that had happened since he'd arrived with Darcy.

As it was, I was angry with Zip for ruining the small amount of peace that I was able to give Hades since she'd come waltzing into my life.

Now she was sitting there worrying about everyone in her family finding out that she wasn't an actual part of their family.

And that wasn't all right with me.

As it was, she was sitting there spinning a mood ring around on her finger.

It was blistering black. No color whatsoever.

It was a color I hadn't seen on that ring before.

It made me wonder if it was supposed to mean something, or if the mood ring was broken.

"I'm sorry you rushed home," Hades said quietly into the stillness of the truck.

We were in my truck today because the bike needed a little tune up after that long ass road trip, and I had taken it into the shop this morning.

"I was already on the way home with some news," I said. "Your hunch about it being Benji was correct."

"How do you know?" I asked.

I patted a leaflet of papers that was sitting on the truck bench between us. "Take a look at those."

She picked them up and took a long look before glancing at me. "Receipts for all the shit he sent her in the mail. It was him."

She was already shaking her head as she started leafing through the pages.

"This is real," she said after a while. "All this time, and you figured it out

in a freakin' day."

Less than, really.

I hadn't had time while I was working with Crew to put even a call in to my boys in the office.

That's all that I'd needed to do today. Call in.

Jagger, one of our resident ex-cons, had used his superior sleuthing skills to get what he did.

But he'd also come back with more information.

"Yep," I said. "Now all we need to do is figure out a way to approach him and tell him to knock it the fuck off." I paused. "That's gonna be a bit of a problem, though."

She looked at me with a frown. "What? Why?"

"Turn to the next page," I suggested.

She did, and her mouth dropped open. "A restraining order? What?"

"I talked to a couple of my employees, and that's what we've been doing all morning, trying to figure out how he was able to get that. And it turns out that he's marrying an FBI agent. One who helped him get this restraining order. But since you were nowhere to be found, according to this woman, the judge issued it and you just never knew about it."

She was already shaking her head. "That's insane."

"That's the reality of having too much power at your fingertips," I corrected her. "Now the next step will be to put surveillance on the circus. Real surveillance. Once we have that, we'll monitor when/if he sends anything else. We have to have proof that he's stalking her. I already have surveillance on Slone's place where Tony's staying right now."

She looked over at me with surprise etched all over her face. "What?"

I grinned. "Funny enough, but Slone hired me to protect Tony, or Ari as he calls her, a couple of weeks ago. I didn't know, to be honest. I mean, I kind of did. But I didn't put two and two together until you were talking about your sister, and I went to the office and saw her name this morning."

She shook her head, her surprise gone.

"That's eerie," she said. "Val would have a hay day with this."

"Would she?" I asked, confused on why she would say that.

“Val is the queen of stars aligning,” she said. “She would say that this all happened exactly like it was supposed to, and that everything was now fitting right into place, exactly how it was always supposed to be because the ‘goddess wanted it that way.’”

She sounded cuckoo.

But whatever.

“We’re here,” I said as I turned my signal on and started to turn into the gravel driveway.

Her eyes widened. “That’s a big ass gate.”

It was. A double gate that swung out wide to each side with a huge ‘P’ in red, white and blue in the middle of the large wrought iron gate.

“It is,” I said. “Cost a whack, too.”

“Why so big?” she asked.

I pointed toward the cows. “Because we have a couple thousand head of cattle that sometimes need to be transported. Or we have a huge ass combine that needs to go from one field to the shop and then to another field. And also, my mom can’t drive for shit. So she needs a wide gate so she doesn’t fuck her car up as she turns in.”

Hades looked at me to see if I was being serious—and I was—and shook her head. “That’s impressive.”

“Mom’s got one of those things called ‘lazy eyes.’ She has shit depth perception, and it’s easier to just let her drive and fuck up her rims when she hits curbs than it is to tell her she shouldn’t be driving,” I answered as I started to pull up the half mile long driveway.

Hades’ head was practically sticking out the window as we climbed higher and higher toward the house at the top of the hill.

When we finally pulled up in front of it, her eyes were twice as wide as when we’d started.

“Wow,” she said.

“Hancock had money to burn, and decided to build Mom and Dad a new house where there’d be enough room to house everyone and their family for get-togethers and shit,” I explained.

“Wow,” she repeated.

Chuckling, I got out of the truck and walked around to her side where she sat patiently waiting for me and staring at all the cars in the driveway.

There were a lot of them.

Hunter and Holden's oldest two kids were now driving, and it was apparent that they hadn't wanted to ride with their parents. So between them and the others, there were six cars in the driveway, plus my dad's work truck and my mom's new SUV.

I opened Hades' door and she looked at me and said, "What do we do once you get whatever surveillance information you are looking for?"

"We catch him red handed, buying and stalking, and then we try to take that information to the judge and see if we can get a restraining order on him for now. Then we find a more permanent solution once we have him away from us." I shrugged. "And maybe he'll fuck up and we can get him arrested, then his soon-to-be wife leaves him and gives us easier access to him without her constant protection."

"He's a really good actor," she pointed out. "I mean, I was convinced he was in love with me for over a year when he was secretly in love with my sister."

"Well, even the best actors fuck up every now and then," I said as I pulled her out of the truck. "Now let's stop thinking about this right now and go face the music."

She chattered at my side as we walked to the front door of my parents' home.

"Did you know that 'face the music' is said to be originated from theatre where performers literally had to face the music? The orchestra was usually positioned in front of the stage," she announced.

"No," I admitted. "I can't say that I'd ever cared enough about that phrase to look it up."

She nervously started to twirl her hair around her finger as she stayed at my side.

When I opened the door and pushed inside, I was immediately assaulted with the sound of yelling children.

Overall, I had sixteen nieces and nephews.

Hunter had four, Holden had five, Harrison had four, and Hancock had two.

But only Harrison and Hancock had ones that were young enough to be causing that kind of racket.

“Uncle Hanny!” a screeching little boy’s voice cried out in excitement.

I turned to look to see Harrison’s youngest, Paxton, running straight toward me with a concrete paver in his hands.

He dropped the block, luckily not on our feet, and threw himself at me.

I picked Paxton up and squeezed him tight. I was so much more accepting of the noises and actions of my family’s children.

“Hey, buddy,” I said as I heard him groan out a giggle. “How are you?”

“My daddy said you weren’t comin’!” he declared, ignoring my question completely.

“Your daddy isn’t the smartest person in the world,” I pointed out.

None of my brothers were. Though, technically, I needed to include myself in that statement.

“I heard that,” Holden muttered as he rounded the corner just to come to a sudden halt.

His eyes went to Hades, then back to me. “Oh, boy. Mom’s gonna love this.”

Hades’ brow rose as she said, “I would hope so. I’m fucking fantastic.”

Holden, surprised by Hades’ forwardness, didn’t have a ready comeback.

“Who are you?” Holden finally asked.

“Hades, this is my second oldest brother, Holden. Holden, Hades, your future sister-in-law,” I introduced them.

Hades let out a small snort.

“Oh, boy,” Holden said. “I don’t think she agrees with you, bro.”

I looked down at her to see that she was giving me that ‘pleased’ smile that she gave when she was surprised by me in some way.

As if she didn’t know that people could want her. Enjoy spending time with her.

“I’m in complete agreeance,” Hades corrected him. “I’m just glad he’s

finally seeing my worth.”

“He’s likely always appreciated your worth, darlin’,” Holden pointed out. “Or he wouldn’t be with you.”

“You are not in here in your boots, Paxton Maxwell Peters,” a scary voice said from the other room.

“Let me down,” Paxton whispered. “She’s in a bad mood.”

I did, and he took off before he could get caught up in the firestorm that was headed our way.

But instead of coming in guns blazing, she came around the corner quietly. Which was why Hades said what she said next.

“Holden Peters,” Hades said carefully. “That’s...an awfully unfortunate paring of names.”

Holden’s face flushed, just like he always did, when he thought about his name.

Hancock and Holden were really the only ones affected.

Where Hancock ran with the name he was given—he was given the name ‘Parts’ his first year in major league baseball—Holden had done nothing but get hung up about it. It’d been a sore subject for years, and showed no signs of getting any better.

He’d likely have issues with it until the day he died.

Hell, I remember his high school career being awful, only because every immature teen thought it was great to tease him about it. Then his girlfriend had broken up with him because her name was Violet, and she couldn’t be associated as ‘Violet Peters.’

Needless to say, it was a sore subject, and for Hades to touch on that... well, let’s just say that it might not turn out so good.

Especially when my mother was listening to every word that was being said.

“My dad named me Hades because he hated me so much,” she continued. “I’m positive your mother didn’t do the same. But my dad was a complete dick. Hades Pearl Singh. Pearl because he, as he liked to point out, should’ve wrapped my mom’s pearl necklace around my neck when I was born and strangled me with it.”

Holden's bad mood went from hiding under the surface to flat out enraged in a matter of moments.

I was right there with him.

Even having read the journal where she highlighted some of the worst parts of her life didn't prepare me for some of the words that came out of her mouth in regard to her father.

The piece of shit.

I hoped he was suffering down in hell.

"You know," Holden finally collected himself enough to say. "Hades is the ruler of the underworld."

Hades didn't say anything, but she was definitely listening.

"And seems to me, if he treated you as bad as you just made it sound with that one explanation about your name, maybe he'll be rotting down there in hell, and you can go rule down there when you finally leave this Earth. Make his afterlife resemble your actual life," Holden said.

Hades grinned. "That would be a pretty good setup, wouldn't it?"

Holden and I both nodded.

"Ahh, Hannibal," my mother said as she walked fully into the room. "And who might you have brought with you?"

I was cautious of the face my mom was now wearing.

With none of my other sisters-in-law did she look this welcoming.

But taking one look at my mom now, I was astonished and shocked to see her look so accepting.

"Uh," I stuttered out. "This is Hades. Hades, this is my mom, Sally."

My mom continued to shock us by walking right up to Hades, drawing her into her arms, and giving her the biggest hug I'd ever seen her give to anyone that wasn't a child that was of her own womb.

"I'm happy to have you," she said. "Now come sit down. I'll have Hannibal bring in another chair."

So that was what I did.

When I arrived, it was to see everyone sitting with a gap big enough for me between my brother, Hunter, and Hades.

I took the seat and Sally grinned wickedly before saying, “Everyone dig in.”

•••

“Will you go swimming with me, Hades?” Darcy asked Hades.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to swim for thirty minutes after you eat?” Hades asked no one in particular.

“I think that’s a myth,” Dad said.

Hades shrugged then turned back to Darcy. “Sure. But I don’t have a swimsuit.”

“I have one you can borrow,” one of my older nieces, Gracie, called out. “It’s even been washed. It’s on top of the dryer in the laundry room.”

Gracie wasn’t being gracious. She just knew that if Hades didn’t get in with Darcy, she would have to.

“Okay,” Hades nodded. “Let’s go get dressed.”

The two of them disappeared inside, and my family exploded.

“You’re just going to bring a girl home and not tell us she’s coming?” my mom hissed quietly.

“I didn’t plan on coming,” I pointed out. “How would I tell you we’re coming when I don’t even know I’m doing it?”

“Well, you showed up here,” she pointed out. “So you had to have a little bit of knowledge that you were coming. A head’s up would’ve been nice. I almost didn’t have enough food.”

I laughed then. “Had Hades been a normal girl, you would’ve had plenty. As it is, she eats like a horse.”

She really did.

She’d put away not one, not two, but three pieces of grilled chicken. She’d had a heaping mound of mashed potatoes, an overly generous amount of gravy, and enough salad that it would’ve been enough for her vegetable count for a week.

Damn, she was impressive.

“Where’d you meet?” Dad asked curiously.

I gave them the very condensed version of how we met, hoping they wouldn't ask just how long we'd actually 'known' each other.

Hancock interjected here and there, then said, "She's a fuckin' awesome photographer. I was thinking about asking her if she would be interested in taking some action shots of my boys at practice tomorrow. Then getting her suggestion on a design for a banner for them this year."

They spoke in length about everything, but my mind was already on the woman that had disappeared out of the glass sliding doors with Darcy hot on her heels.

I got up and walked to the door, cracking it open slightly so I could listen.

"...heated pool because Grammy didn't like that we couldn't swim whenever we wanted to," Darcy was explaining.

"Well that is really cool," Hades said. "I haven't had the chance to swim all that much in my life. There's just never enough time in the day. So I'm glad that I have the opportunity to do it here."

She jumped in and surfaced seconds later as she flicked her hair out of her face.

Darcy jumped in right beside her, then swam right to Hades and stared at her hand.

Specifically, the mood ring on her finger. The one that hadn't moved since she'd arrived a few days ago.

"What does black mean?" Darcy asked in a quiet whisper.

Before she could answer, Hades' phone started ringing, and she swam over toward it.

She glanced once at the screen.

"Well," Hades said as she swiped out of the phone app and to a different app and started typing something in. When she had whatever up she was looking for, she twisted her phone to the side so that Darcy could see from where she was now hanging off the side of the pool. "Black means 'sad' or 'burned out.'"

"What does burned out mean?" Darcy asked.

Showing she had the patience of a saint, Hades explained, "Burned out typically means 'worn out.' Or 'tired' or 'overworked.' 'Stressed.'"

Darcy nodded as if she was absorbing every word.

“What about the purple that it’s showing right now?” Darcy continued.

Sway came up to stand beside me, looking over the edge of our parents’ deck right along with me.

“She’s really good with her,” Sway said quietly. “And your mom loves her.”

I knew.

“You should make sure you hang onto this one.”

I looked over at Sway with a confident smile and said, “I plan on it.”

CHAPTER 19

Coffee helps, but I'm still a bitch.
-t-shirt

HADES

It was his hand on my thigh the rest of the night that did it.

It all started innocently enough, I supposed.

I mean, there we were, talking to his family, when he reached over and absently placed his hand on my upper thigh.

Not anywhere that was totally ‘inappropriate’ or anything. I mean, hell, there were a thousand kids in the room. And Hannibal would never cross that line when there were kids.

But my mind went to other things. Things that included me scooting closer to him on the couch, and him holding me there by his grip on my thigh.

How, if he could just move one of those long, scarred fingers an eeny, teeny, little inch, he’d be rubbing the seam on my inner thigh. And if he moved upward...

“So, Hades,” Tessa, Harrison’s oldest that was on her way to college in January, said. “What did you do for Singh Circus?”

“If you go to their social media pages, you’ll see.” I paused, trying to get my head back on track. “I took their website down, though, so you can’t go there.”

“Why’d you do that?” Gracie asked, folding her now dried swimsuit and putting it into her bag.

I appreciated her allowing me to wear the bathing suit to swim with Darcy, but the sad fact was, I didn’t like that much of me exposed, and I’d probably never borrow another one of hers again.

I thought about omitting part of the truth for a moment, but decided that if they wanted the real Hades, they were going to get her.

“I’m tired of doing a lot of work for nothing,” I answered truthfully. “I’m tired of learning every routine and covering where I’m needed, when I’m needed. I’m tired of never having a day off. I’m tired of taking promotional photos, using my skills as an artist to put promotional stuff together, only to have a minimum wage hourly rate thrown in my face for compensation. Honestly, this was a wake-up call for them to finally notice me, and if not

then...oh well.”

Drake, who was quiet but watchful, turned to look at me then, catching my attention.

“It’s funny how family works,” he said gruffly. “They can be your best and worst enemies. Sometimes, it’s nice to shake things up a bit, and remind them that you’re not a pushover, and that you don’t like it when you’re treated like you don’t matter. They’ll come around, and when they do, they’ll all hate themselves for their actions. Then you’ll be the bigger and better person and forgive them for their transgressions, and life will go back to a new normal. Until the next fiasco starts up with someone else.”

If that didn’t hit the nail on the head...

“Yeah,” I said. “And today they found out that I wasn’t actually related to them, only my twin sister, Tony.”

There was a long pause and then Holden carefully saying, “Tony? Wouldn’t that make him your brother?”

I grinned. “Her name is actually Caristonia. We call her Tony. Though her new NFL soon-to-be husband, though that’s not something she’s admitted yet, calls her Ari.”

“Ari.” Holden nodded. “I don’t know. Tony definitely has a ring to it.”

“Wow,” Penny, Holden’s oldest, said. “These photos are awesome. The way you captured the fear and the love in her face...”

I looked over to see her showing the room one of my favorite photos I’d ever taken.

It was of Keene when he had to catch Zip after a fall.

She’d plunged something like fifteen feet from an aerial silk tied to a couple of beams erected over the tent poles. Keene’s arms were held out as he readied to catch her. His eyes were intense and fear-filled as he waited for her with open arms.

Meanwhile, Zip was laughing.

Then there were the rest of us, all staring at the actions of the two of them in horror, because that was not how the show had been supposed to go.

No, in fact, in reality it was supposed to be her falling something like four feet with him catching her. But her foot had gotten tangled up in the silk.

He'd caught her, though, and they'd both gone down to the ground.

The subsequent photos I'd taken following the fall, that were up on the Facebook page, were of Simi wrapping her arms tight around Keene's neck and kissing him all over his face.

He'd endured the kissing for a solid ten seconds, then he'd remembered that his sister annoyed him and set her away from him.

Keene had been sixteen at the time. Zip younger, probably around thirteen.

"Tell us the story behind this one," Drake said next.

So I talked them through all the photos, beginning from a few short weeks ago, to the very first photo that'd been posted on our social media.

That one had been of me.

And it was the only photo that I hadn't taken.

Val had started the page when we were very young. Why I'd been the one to make the first official social media photo, I didn't know. But there I was, in all my gangly glory.

"Wow," Holden said as he looked. "How old were y'all when y'all started working?"

I thought back to the beginning. When that particular photo was taken.

"We didn't do shows until we were like ten, or our 'Dad' felt like it would be a good fit for us. Everyone else started when they were older. I'm six in the photo," I explained.

"Six," he said. "What was it you were doing there?"

I was standing in the middle of a wooden board.

"They were throwing knives at me," I said softly.

There was a long, careful silence and then Hannibal squeezed my leg.

"Who was throwing the knives?" Hunter asked, sounding horrified.

Mostly because when he said it, he looked over at his daughter that was right around the same age as I had been.

"My father," I replied quietly.

Hannibal's hand got tighter and tighter on my thigh until it was perilously close to pain.

"I don't think I could ever do that," Hunter murmured. "I just...I couldn't.

No matter how good. I couldn't do it. What if I slipped? It's one thing to be doing it with ropes when we catch them outside like we do the cows. But knives..."

Sally stood up abruptly, her anger almost as palpable as her son's.

"I hope that man doesn't think that I'm going to be nice to him at your wedding if that's how he treats my future daughter-in-law," Sally huffed.

Hannibal eased up on my thigh.

"Well," I said quietly, "that's gonna be kind of hard to do since he's dead."

Sally sighed. "Well at least something's good in this world."

Hunter's wife made a noise in the back of her throat saying she clearly agreed with her mother-in-law.

Hannibal abruptly stood up and offered me his hand.

"Hunter, would you mind getting me the manilla folder out of the truck?" Hannibal asked as he led me out of the room. "And then meet us on the back porch."

I followed without hearing Hunter's reply.

When we got to where he was pulling me—a place that looked like it was once a child's room but was now a mix between storage and the old stuff left behind by one of the boys—he let me go and then grabbed his hair.

"I don't..." he paused. "Six?"

I shrugged. "You knew he did that."

"I knew that he was having you do all kinds of things he shouldn't have been doing. But throwing knives at you?" he asked in a rush. "Is that why you have a scar on your side?"

He'd noticed that?

"Yes," I answered.

Why lie?

"I just...I don't even know what to say." He growled in frustration. "If he wasn't dead..."

Hannibal would be killing him.

That I could get behind.

“I think I love you,” I blurted out.

His eyes were intense, and then he was right there, in my space, kissing the holy hell out of me.

Only when I was thoroughly ravaged by his mouth did he pull away and say, “Let’s go back out there. I’ll get their opinions on where to start.”

•••

“You never went to jail,” Sally said, her eyes annoyed.

Hannibal’s smile grew. “Exactly. I was *taken*.”

Sally threw up her hands. “You’re impossible.”

That comment had us all laughing, though.

I swear to God, it was such a weird feeling being totally at ease somewhere. Even with my own family, whom I loved with all my heart, there was still an underlying tension that never seemed to go away.

Though Dad had put that rift there.

When he was alive, it was his expectations of us. When he was dead, it was the impossible task of keeping the circus running just so we could liquidate it when it was deemed enough time.

“So are we just going to talk about how you’re going to get caught?” Hancock asked as he leaned back in his chair. “Or are we going to talk about what you can do to not get caught?”

“What about getting invited to his wedding?” Holden asked. “All their stuff is online. I’ll bet their invitations are, too.”

I tilted to my side to see the computer he was parked in front of.

The screen showed a photo of Benji and his soon-to-be wife.

She was cute.

Then again, Benji had always been attractive, too. So it’s not so hard to believe that he would find someone just as attractive as he is.

“You said you had a hacker friend, right?” Hunter asked. “You could ask her if she can get y’all on the list.”

“You can’t,” Sway pointed out. “She has a restraining order on her.”

“You could go as your sister,” Hancock pointed out. “Y’all are twins after

all.”

I was already shaking my head. “I look nothing like her.”

Sally snorted. “Dear, you look a lot like her. You just don’t put the time and effort in that she does. You never wear makeup. You have the same eyebrow and hair color. Your eyes are different, but that can be solved with contacts.”

“I can pass for her if it’s dark out when they get married, and the only kind of lighting they have is shitty.” I rolled my eyes.

“Well if that’s what it takes...” Hancock shrugged. “Then let’s make it happen.”

•••

I watched Hannibal as he pulled his shirt over his head.

His eyes caught mine, and then he was looking at me with a smirk on his face.

“You want something, baby?”

I didn’t see the point of beating around the bush.

“You had your hand on my thigh all night long,” I pointed out. “And you’re going to act coy and tease me?”

He launched himself across the bed, caught me by the foot, and then dragged me unceremoniously across the bed.

“Put your hands above your head,” he ordered.

I did, slowly.

His eyes sparkled with desire as he watched me cooperate.

“Don’t move them,” he insisted.

And I didn’t.

Not when he took my shirt up over my head and left it tangled around my arms. Not when he hit the front clasp of my bra and my breasts spilled free. Not when he yanked my pants and underwear down so forcefully that I nearly slipped right off the bed.

He didn’t let me fall, of course.

Didn’t let me move, either.

His eyes said it all.

I moved, and he stopped.

And there was no way we could have that.

CHAPTER 20

*I really want to be a trophy wife.
-Text from Hades to Hannibal*

HANNIBAL

I could see the tension in her shoulders and around her mouth.

She was exhausted, tired, and horny.

I'd made sure to give her just enough to get her wanting, but not enough for it to be anything but acceptable in front of my family.

Today had been another shit day of me finding things out about Hades and wanting to kill everyone involved.

I should probably take the night and allow my temper to cool.

But there was no stopping us now.

Not when she looked at me like she needed me.

Not when I was this out of control.

"You okay?" I asked.

She bit her lip and gave me the words with her eyes.

Yes, she was more than fine.

She was good.

She was fantastic.

She wanted more.

"Hold onto the bed frame," I ordered.

She did, her hands going up and her fingers reaching out to curl around the wrought iron.

When she was where I wanted her to be, I slowly descended her body, my mouth trailing kisses as I moved. A kiss went to her throat, then to her collar bone. One to her perky, upturned nipple, then to her ribs, right under the swell of her breast.

The final kiss before I went right to the best place ever was her navel, where I dipped my tongue inside and looked up to see how she was doing.

Her eyes were glazed and she was staring at me as if she would urge me on if she thought I'd listen.

Her eyes caught mine, and they stayed locked together as I descended lower, not breaking her gaze until the sweet smell of her pussy caught my

attention.

“Mmmm,” I moaned as I buried my face into her pussy. “Tastes and smells good. Do you think it’d be weird to make this into a candle?”

At that question, she burst out laughing, causing her pussy to rise into my face.

I licked forward, my tongue slicing between her pussy lips.

The taste of her sweetness burst to life on my tongue, and I groaned.

“If there was one thing in this world that I could have for the rest of my life...”

She widened her legs, her pussy opening up nicely to my seeking tongue.

I went to work, licking and sucking and tonguing her pussy. Focusing on her clit for a while before I moved downward to her entrance.

She wiggled beneath me, urging me forward.

“Baby,” I said to her. “You want my tongue inside of you, or my fingers?”

She hissed in a breath, then whispered something I couldn’t hear.

I moved forward, intent on hearing her answer, which in turn took me a little too far away from her pussy for her liking.

“No!” she cried out.

The elatedness in my movements didn’t go unnoticed.

“You’re the devil,” she whispered. “I want your fingers in my pussy, and your mouth on my clit. I want to come. I want to do it fast. And then I want your cock inside of me when I come a second time. Then I want to go to bed, spent and drained, and not wake up until so late in the morning that it’s considered indecent.”

I could definitely do that.

Moving back to where my belly was flat on the bed, I slipped two fingers inside her wet entrance, and began to curl them toward the front wall of her pussy.

She about took my ears out when her knees slammed against my head in response.

I moved my mouth to her pussy and worked her clit at the same time, building her higher and higher until she nearly shattered my ear drums with her scream.

The only thing saving them were her thighs wrapped around my ears.

With a self-satisfied smirk on my face, I lifted and crawled up her body, dragging my hard cock along the length of her thigh as I did.

Hitching her leg up with one hand, I guided my cock to her entrance with the other and sank inside.

Her eyes closed, and her mouth opened in a silent scream.

But this time, I made the reason she was holding onto the headboard apparent.

I fucked her senseless.

By the time we were both rolling over the edge, both of us were dripping with sweat and depleted.

When I finished filling her with my seed, I rolled us so that she was lying on top of me, panting and incoherent.

“You okay?” I asked.

Jesus, was my brain okay? I’d never come that hard in my life, and there I was trying to make sense of things we couldn’t make sense of.

She nodded but didn’t speak.

Grinning, I reached to the side of the bed, hit the light switch on the wall with the last of my energy, and plunged us into darkness.

Only when we were both cooled off and no longer sweating did I cover us up with the sheet.

“I need to go clean up,” she said. “This is how you get urinary tract infections.”

I squeezed her ass and started to pull out, but she clamped her thighs around my torso and said, “Stay.”

So I stayed.

And we risked a UTI.

We’d done worse, though.

And were about to prove it.

CHAPTER 21

*I don't know how much longer I can slay.
-Text from Hades to Hannibal*

HADES

Month 1

I was on a run.

My God, what had he turned me into?

“Are you sure that we can’t just skip this?” I asked pleadingly.

Hannibal flashed me a smile. “This is a 5K my company puts on every single year. It raises money for veterans and wives of veterans. If I don’t go, it’s going to look bad.”

I sighed, long and loud.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “I’ll go. And run. But you can’t leave me.”

He flashed me a look that clearly said, ‘and when have I ever left you?’

He was right.

He never left me. Even when I was telling him to an hour later as he ran the fourth circle around me.

“Hannibal,” I grumbled as I shuffled behind the dude wearing the freakin’ full bunker gear, including oxygen tank, boots, and oxygen mask. “If you circle me one more time, I’m going to sit down in the middle of this road and refuse to move.”

He studied me for a long moment, then slowly started to circle again.

Just when I went to take a step back to plant my ass, he caught me up around the waist, slung me on his back, and started to really run.

We passed the dude in the bunker gear, causing him to laugh.

Then we passed even more people until we were middle of the pack.

If I was ever curious whether or not Hannibal was in shape, I now knew.

He was well and truly in the best shape ever, and I benefitted from it.

Both right now, and when we would be alone later.

The finish line loomed in the distance, and I pressed my nose against Hannibal’s throat, feeling his pulse beating strong beneath my lips.

The crowd started to cheer, and then we were crossing the finish line with a group of people that were all dressed in Christmas gear, even though

Christmas was over a month away.

We pulled to a stop near the medal table, and the old man wearing the Veteran hat hung a medal around my neck.

I beamed at him. "Thank you for my freedom."

He smiled in response. "It was truly my pleasure."

• • •

Month 2

"Whoa!" I cried out as Hannibal once again threw me on his back. "I was just going to sit on his lap!"

Though, secretly, his high-handed refusal to let me get close to an old fat man made me happy. I liked when he acted all possessive and cave man like. It made me feel wanted and accepted. Something I didn't know that I desperately needed until he'd given it to me.

"I don't care if that man is dressed as Santa. He's a man that can clearly get something out of you sitting there," he grumbled.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, my cold nose going into the crease of his neck, as I tried to warm it up.

We were at his home in Texas, and though I'd experienced cold before, this was different.

It was the coldest day of the year, so of course that would be the day that they would host the stupid Christmas parade.

Though it'd been planned for over nine months, it felt like they'd done it purposefully to get people into the Christmas spirit.

He moved us toward the snow that was being artificially made out of water and a mister, and then let my face get directly under the mister before he moved me away with a laugh.

"Jerk," I grumbled as I closed my eyes and inhaled his scent.

"*Your* jerk," he teased.

He was *my* jerk.

Forever if I had my way.

Hancock and Sway appeared in the distance, making their way toward us.

They arrived, and Sway gave me a cup of hot chocolate that was in her hand and said, “Here. Hannibal told me to grab you one, too.”

I gratefully took it, smiling at her before beaming at Hannibal.

He winked and went back to watching the Kilgore marching band filter past us twirling batons and marching in a line.

I pulled my camera out—an old one that could definitely use an upgrade one day—and took a photo of the tuba player who was almost blue in the face.

His Tuba was decorated with tinsel and ornaments, making for the perfect photo op.

I got lots of those photos.

And later that night, I sent them to their organizations using my new company email.

HP Designs.

It was a little presumptuous, using P for Peters that I hoped I would one day become, but it was way better for me mentally to disassociate myself with the Singh name.

The only way I would heal was to move on.

My eyes were almost closing on their own volition when I finally made my way to bed.

When I got there, it was to see Hannibal in his closet tucking something away on the top shelf.

Before I could ask him about it, he flipped off the light and headed toward me.

His eyes twinkled as he got a look at my outfit.

“Hottest little elf ever?” he teased.

I posed for him, causing him to laugh. “Ready for bed? I turned on the heated blanket.”

He wiggled his eyebrows in that sexy way of his.

I all but dove into the bed, groaning when I wiggled in deep under the comforter and heating blanket.

“Ahhh,” I sighed.

I was asleep before the man watching could join me.

Later that night, as the clock struck midnight, Hannibal pulled me out of his bed with my eyes still fully closed.

I groaned and tried to blink open my eyes, but they just wouldn’t open.

“Don’t wake up,” he ordered, causing me to smirk.

As if I could control that.

My eyes stayed closed, though, as if they agreed with his order.

When I woke up the next morning, my eyes blinked open and I stared at the Christmas tree that was only a foot away from my face.

I reached out and touched one of the ornaments we’d hung up on the tree together.

When Hannibal had learned that I hadn’t ever had a real Christmas tree before—how could you when you were in a traveling circus your whole life?—he’d immediately gone out and bought the stand for one.

Then, together, we’d gone out to a tree farm outside of Kilgore, Texas called Danville Farms. There we’d walked through rows and rows of trees until we’d agreed on a perfect one.

It was ten feet tall, had the perfect amount of spots in it that made it look so unique, yet it was big and beautiful and the most perfect tree I’d ever seen.

I decided that he’d given me the tree that I’d wanted, not because he’d thought it was perfect like I had.

The ornament—a bright red bell—jingled when I touched it, causing the man underneath me to stir.

“Morning,” I said quietly, looking away from the tree to stare at him.

His eyes sparkled—and not because of the lights that were inches away from our face—as he cupped my cheek and said, “Merry Christmas, Hades.”

I felt my heart melt.

“What time do we have to be at your mom’s?” I asked.

He shrugged. “As early as we can be without having to get there in the dark. Dad always says we have to wait until it’s light out to come over.”

“And y’all all go over there that early?” I asked. “Even the ones that have

kids?”

He nodded. “Used to, they tried to do their own Christmas at home first. But the grandkids like breakfast more than they like presents. And nothing against all of their wives, because they’re great cooks, but my mom is amazing. She does a big spread, and...where are you going?”

I was pushing myself up and off of him. “You had me at ‘big spread.’”

He laughed and caught me before I could go get dressed. “What part of ‘we have to wait until it’s light out’ did you not understand?”

He rolled me underneath him on the air mattress he’d deposited us on sometime during the night, and grinned directly in my face.

I reached up so I could loop my arms around his neck, then said, “Kiss me, Han.”

He kissed me.

In fact, he did a lot more than that.

We tested the strength of the air mattress, and I was quite impressed in what we found.

It could totally hold up to anything we had to give it and didn’t lose a single bit of air.

It was the most magical experience of my life.

He’d gone to a lot of trouble to give me this memory, and I would cherish it forever.

“I think I might have perished,” he groaned.

I snickered, then poked him in the side. “It’s light.”

“It is.” He looked over toward the window. “Just.”

I started to get up, but he rolled and pinned me to the bed once again, this time reaching under the tree and pulling out a box.

I stared at it as my eyes started to fill with tears.

“You got me a present?” I whispered, voice cracking.

“Yes,” he said. “Open it.”

So I did.

When I pulled out the brand-new professional camera, I looked up at him in shock.

“Han, this thing cost thousands,” I breathed, touching the box reverently.
He shrugged. “You will use it.”

I would.

Forever.

“I didn’t get you a present,” I murmured quietly.

His eyes actually lit from within. “You didn’t?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t have time.”

And I hadn’t.

I’d wanted to get him something.

In fact, I’d had every intention. But the last month had been chock full of Hannibal’s business dealings and me following him all over the country. I hadn’t had a single ounce of time to myself.

I wasn’t complaining. In fact, I enjoyed every second of being with him as we went this way and that. But I would’ve liked to get him something small at least.

“That’s the best news you’ve ever given me,” he said. “The fact that you haven’t makes me happy. I want you to focus on you for once. And knowing you didn’t find the time...that’s makes my heart happy.”

I melted.

Utterly melted.

“I’m going to get you a present one day,” I pointed out.

He touched the tip of my nose with one finger. “Yeah. And one day, I’ll know that you got it for me for the right reasons.”

Geez, I loved him.

“Merry Christmas, baby.” He pressed a kiss to my nose.

I closed my eyes so I could hold in my tears.

I wasn’t successful.

But he didn’t mind kissing them away.

And later, when I got even more presents from his family, and they got ones from ‘Hades and Hannibal’ that Hannibal had so kindly gotten them and included me with, I realized that I was healing.

Slowly.

Surely.

And Hannibal was the reason why.

• • •

Month 3

Our first big fight happened before I'd even realized that I'd messed up.

I stared in shock at the gun that had been pointed at me only moments before.

"If you'd fucking listen to me!" Hannibal growled.

I hadn't listened to him.

I hadn't realized that I should.

I mean, yes, he had said to stay in the car.

But I'd had to pee.

And I'd walked in on him fighting a man who'd been about to shoot him.

When I'd walked in the door, the man had gone from pointing the gun at Hannibal to pointing at me.

And he'd pulled the trigger.

One inch higher, and I would've had a bullet lodged in my brain.

I'd also probably be dead.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't realize it would be that bad."

He'd told me, of course, that this op was one that I couldn't participate in.

I hadn't realized the dangerousness or the seriousness of his words, though.

I mean, he'd told me the guy was dangerous, but I hadn't realized that he'd shoot first and ask questions later.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

His eyes were fierce when he said, "Get out."

I did.

And waited miserably in the car for him to come back.

He didn't until my bladder was near to bursting. And didn't talk to me for

a full day.

• • •

Month 4

I didn't go on dangerous ops anymore.

But while he was gone, I amused myself with taking photos all around the area that he'd stationed his home base at.

And then I sent photos to businesses and shared my art with them.

A lot of times they asked for more, but by the time they asked, we were already back at his home in Texas or moved on to the next place.

All in all, I was garnering up a lot of business interest.

But there was one guy that was being quite insistent, and that was what I was doing now. Bringing up my thoughts to Hannibal.

"He offered me ten thousand dollars to document his daughter's quinceañera," I said to him.

Hannibal's brows lifted.

We'd talked about how much he got paid when he went on jobs or took them with his company and then sent out one of his guys.

So I knew that this was a serious offer that would actually garner his attention.

"When?" he asked, already pulling out his phone to check his calendar.

"Tomorrow," I said. "I've been ignoring his queries since they started coming in. This was the first huge offer, though."

His eyes narrowed. "How often do you ignore these queries?"

I bit my lip. "Um. All the time."

He blinked.

"All the time," he repeated.

I nodded.

"Do you want to take more photos for people?" he asked.

I shrugged.

“Hades,” he growled. “Do you want to?”

I opened my mouth, and then closed it. I really didn't lie to him.

So I sighed and said, “Yes.”

He looked at me then and said, “If there's ever one you want to do, tell me. I'll make it work with my schedule.”

I blinked at him in shock. “You'd do that?”

He caught my face with one hand, wrapped his fingers around my jaw, and pulled me in close before saying, “In a single heartbeat.”

• • •

Month 5

“What job are you doing this time?” I asked as we got in the truck instead of getting on the motorcycle.

I looked in the back seat and blinked when I saw the entire area full of fishing stuff.

“We're going to Broken Bow, Oklahoma,” he said. “And I'm going to teach you how to trout fish.”

“Umm,” I said. “I've never fished a day in my life.”

His lips quirked. “I know.”

The trip took less than two hours.

We arrived at a tiny little cabin in the middle of the woods and I felt my heart skip a beat at the beautiful river that rushed behind the cabin.

Traveling as much as I had, I'd seen some beautiful sights in my life, but the one I was seeing right then was one of the best.

“Wow,” I breathed. “It's gorgeous.”

Hannibal wrapped his arm around my shoulder and said, “Do you want to unpack and get stuff inside, or do you want to go fish?”

Pfft.

“Go fish, obviously.”

It was the best thing ever.

What was even better was the smile on Han's face each time I caught a fish and showed it to him.

"You happy, baby?" he asked after I released my latest catch.

I looked at the fish as it swam away, then back at him.

"I didn't realize what it was like to feel like you can breathe."

CHAPTER 22

Did you hear about the scarecrow that won an award? He was outstanding in his field.

-Text from Hades to Hannibal

HANNIBAL

“Do you ever think that this is the wrong choice, and maybe we should leave before we fuck it all up?” Hades asked from beside me.

I looked over at her.

“You need to talk to your family, baby,” I urged.

She didn’t want to talk to them any more than I wanted her talking to them.

All of them had called her every single day, twice a day, since they’d found out she wasn’t actually a part of them. Hell, even Keene had called me to try to find her.

“I mean, I realize that,” she said. “But maybe we could do it and not confront Benji about his stalking on the same day?”

She was nervous.

I’d give her that.

I mean, it was at a wedding of all places that we were doing this confronting thing. Benji’s wedding, of all possible outcomes

“It’s a good idea,” I disagreed. “It’s been six months of us trying to track him down and lure him to an event that they were going to be at.”

And it was true.

For the last six months, since Hades had given me the ridiculous rule that I couldn’t hurt Benji, or force him to do anything against his will, we’d been playing this cat and mouse game with him.

Though, to be one hundred percent honest, she had a good reason for requesting that rule.

Benji was getting married. To an FBI agent. An FBI agent that had absolutely no clue what kind of man that she was marrying. An FBI agent that came from a long line of FBI agents. An FBI agent that had so much brass in her family line that she might as well have the world at her back.

“I don’t want to hear the same argument, Hannibal Allan Peters,” she warned.

I offered her a smirk. “Yes, ma’am, Hades Pearl.”

She offered me a dazzling smile.

One that took my breath away.

God, she was gorgeous.

And holy hell, was it time to admit that I couldn't believe I ever saw her as plain. No, she wasn't plain. She was breathtakingly beautiful, and if someone couldn't see that, they were fuckin' blind.

And, to distract her from what she was currently thinking—IE everything bad that could go wrong today with her family as well as Benji and his wedding—I broached a subject that we hadn't touched on before.

Not in the six months that we'd been in this weird seriously dating, but not actually married, kind of thing.

“Do you want to go get married?” I asked.

She looked over at me sharply, her mouth all but hanging open.

“What?” she asked a little bit too loudly.

“Do you want to get married?” I repeated. “To me.”

Her mouth dropped open impossibly more as she floundered for a short moment.

Then, with a grin, she said, “Yes.”

Just like that. Yes.

My heart started to pound. “Right now?”

She twirled a lock of hair around her finger as she said, “I've done crazier things.”

We came to a stop right outside the large open field right in front of some tents.

The sisters were all away.

At least, all of them but Val, Zip and then Keene.

That's why we'd chosen today of all days to finally go see them.

We were only dealing with half of them at a time, and hopefully that wouldn't completely overwhelm her.

In the six months that we'd been putting this plan into place, only one thing was certain, we'd need Keene's help.

Val and Zip weren't coming to the wedding. But since Keene was invited

—along with Tony—we’d decided to meet up first and go over what tonight was going to look like.

Originally, even Zip and Val weren’t supposed to be here.

But Val had overheard Keene discussing him being gone for the night with the others, and they’d hijacked our visit.

At first, Hades had been hesitant.

But then she’d seemed to grow a backbone when it came to her family and chosen to go anyway.

Which led us to now.

Here.

“Ready?” I asked, leaning over to capture her hand and bring her fingers to my mouth.

She nodded, licking her lips nervously.

I hated seeing her this freaked out.

The only time that I did was when she was showing her work off, already anticipating people to hate it before they’d even seen it.

Needless to say, they always fuckin’ loved it, and she was an overreactor.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a tiny little silver fabric bag.

I uncurled her fingers, then placed the bag into her hand.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Open it,” I suggested.

She did, and a black diamond on a matte black platinum band greeted her.

Her breath hitched, and she looked at me in surprise.

“Put it on,” I ordered. “Try it. See if you like it.”

Her hands were shaking as she dumped the band into her hand and studied it.

“It’s gorgeous,” she murmured quietly.

So quietly that I could barely hear her.

“Try it on,” I urged again.

She did, slipping it right onto her left ring finger.

It fit like a glove.

Exactly like I'd expected it to.

I'd stolen her mood ring one night after her shower, and had kept it even though she'd looked frantically for it all day long.

"My mood ring," she murmured. "You are the one who took it, aren't you?"

I flashed her a grin as I said, "I had to make sure it would fit."

"It does." She gazed at it with adoring eyes.

A knock on our window had me turning to find Keene standing there looking annoyed.

I dismissed him and went back to looking at Hades.

The knock sounded again, and she curled her hand into a fist and said, "Let's get this over with."

I got out of the truck and rounded it so I could get to her side of the car where she waited for me like always.

We'd learned a lot about each other the last six months.

Such as neither one of us liked doing laundry.

She didn't like doing the dishes, and I didn't like emptying the trash. She loved mowing the lawn and I could care less if it was mowed on time every week.

She loved sleeping in, and I was up at the crack of dawn.

She couldn't stand pizza unless it was thin crust, yet that was my favorite type to splurge on.

Most of all, I knew that she was overly nervous, and it was time to get this half of a family reunion done so she could stop fretting over seeing her family again.

Keene stepped back when I rounded the hood, watching silently.

I helped her out of the vehicle, and together we turned to Keene.

Keene took one look at me, then at Hades, and frowned.

"I told you to stay away from her," he mumbled.

I narrowed my eyes. "I didn't listen."

His gaze moved to our closeness, and he sighed. "I guess maybe I convinced myself that this was going to go back to normal, but I'm thinkin' it

never will, will it?"

Hades shook her head.

"You're never coming back?" he asked.

She shook her head again.

"We miss you," he said. "We miss you a lot."

Hades' shoulders slumped slightly.

I wrapped my hand around her waist and pulled her into me.

"She's happier with me," I pointed out.

He nodded. "Can I at least get a hug?"

Hades moved right into his arms, hugging him tight.

Keene closed his eyes and whispered something into her ear.

Something that had her smiling, so I didn't have any problem with it.

"Val and Zip are practicing," he said. "I told them to stay away for a bit while we discussed the plan for tonight."

"Actually," Zip said, "we're right here."

Hades stiffened in Keene's arms, and he whispered something else to her that had her relaxing slightly.

"Can we get in on that action?" Val asked quietly.

Hades, with her puppy dog eyes, surprised everyone but me when she said, "I would be offended if you didn't."

It all went well, despite the awkwardness in the beginning.

An hour later we were sitting at the picnic table discussing our plans for the night.

"Benji is a frou-frou person, so you have to dress up," Val said. "I'll bet we can fit all this hair under one of those big hats that those women wear to those horse polo shows."

Hades grimaced.

"But also, it's going to be dark soon," Zip said. "I don't think he'll look too closely at her at first. He is getting married after all."

I wouldn't put it past the psycho.

We'd learned a lot about this 'Benji' character over the last six months.

I'd been asked a lot about why it'd taken me six months to make a move.

Sure, a lot of it was the opening that the wedding provided. Convenience. Opportunity. All of that played a factor in the waiting.

But also, I'd learned in the first week of doing research on the dude that he wasn't all that he'd seemed.

Benji, also known as Benjamin Brady the Third, was a man that'd been created when he was sixteen.

There were no shot records for Benji. No school records. No DMV records, even.

Which had me curious as to why.

Why did he look like he'd just appeared out of thin air when he was sixteen?

Then Hades had gotten Folsom digging into Benji, and she hadn't found much more on him.

It was eerie how he'd stayed off of social media, too.

Even the dumbest of people wanted to have some kind of online presence, whether it be to pay bills, register their car, do some online banking, or even to register for school.

But Benji had nothing.

And the only people that had nothing like that were people with something to hide.

The research on the dude had started and I hadn't liked what I'd found.

I'd spared two of my most trustworthy men, and they'd started giving me detailed hourly updates on what the dude was doing day to day.

At first, nothing too exciting happened.

But then he'd made his first mistake.

He'd visited a store where he hand-picked a present for someone from a newly established bondage and fetish store. He'd walked out with a Cheshire grin on his face and had immediately gone to his car and had jacked off into a box with the present in it.

From what my men told me, he'd spent a long time in there looking at something on his phone while he'd done it, then taped the box up and had taken it to someone in a shady part of town. Money had been exchanged, and the men had split.

One had followed the guy with the box as he'd driven it to a store on the north side of town where he'd then posted the box and had returned home.

The other man I'd had on Benji had followed him to a cake tasting event with his FBI agent fiancée where he'd acted like nothing had happened.

My man that was on Slone had reported the arrival of the box a few days later, hand delivered by a man that had shown up in a local box store delivery truck, dropped it off at the gate, and had gone about his business delivering shit as if he hadn't just delivered a spunk-covered 'present.'

Multiple instances had occurred, but it was the delivery of a package by Benji's hands the day before his wedding that had given the police enough proof to do some arresting.

Over the last six months, we'd also been working on the restraining order that he had against Hades, too.

As of three weeks ago, that had expired.

Though I'd still done some research that had included the 'why' of the restraining order.

According to the paperwork the judge had, the reasoning behind it was nothing short of insubstantial and made up.

Apparently, Benji had a stalker of his own, and he'd only assumed it was Hades. That'd been enough for Benji to take it to a judge, who he'd then paid off handsomely.

The judge was retired now, and at this point I assumed that Benji was having trouble finding someone else in his social sphere to get the restraining order pushed through.

Leaving tonight completely legal for Hades to attend.

Even if she were going as Caristonia and not as herself.

"I tend to agree," I said quietly. "She's a gorgeous woman in her own right. If Keene doesn't get anywhere near us while we're there, there should be no reason that he would even notice who we are. The reception being outside could definitely play in our favor as well. There are over three hundred people on the guest list. Not to mention he's not going to know half the guests that are there."

At least, that was my hope.

“You don’t want me near you during the night?” Keene asked.

“No,” I said. “A, we work pretty good together. Adding a new person into the mix might very well mess our mojo up. B, you’re very distinctive. He’s going to know you on sight. And if we’re with you, there’s going to be no doubt that he’ll pay attention.”

“Agreed,” Hades said quietly.

Everyone once again focused all their attention on her.

It was Val who said, “We’ve missed you, Hades.”

Hades’ eyebrows raised. “Really?”

Val rolled her eyes. “I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t mean it. Did you forget how I act?”

Hades snorted. “No.”

“Then trust your instincts.” She tilted her head. “Is that an engagement ring?”

Eyes wide, they all whipped their heads around and stared.

It was Keene’s low, angry voice saying, “Can I have a word?” that had me sighing.

“Sure.”

I winked at Hades, then moved off to the truck while the sisters moved farther into the tent and started discussing something.

Keene waited until they were well out of hearing distance before saying, “I know we’ve really mucked this up. Seems like I’m fucking up left and right. But she’s still my sister. One of my best friends. If you end up hurting her, I won’t be able to forgive that.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “And know that she hates being left behind. Your overseas trips are over.”

They weren’t.

But he didn’t need to know that.

“I’ll take care of her.”

He blew out a long breath then said, “You will.”

The ‘or else’ was left unspoken.

CHAPTER 23

*I'm fucking busy. And unfortunately, it's not the other way around.
-Hades to Hannibal*

HADES

I wasn't nervous.

We'd prepared well for this.

I'd also had my makeup professionally done, and my hair had been teased to the point where I feared whether or not I'd fit in the truck.

I pulled the black dress up over my hips, situated the sleeves over my shoulder, then realized the zip wasn't happening on my own.

One, because I couldn't reach it. Two, because it was so tight I would have to hold it together while Hannibal zipped me up.

We'd left the circus two hours ago, and now that left us scrambling to get ready after my hair and makeup had been done.

Hannibal had waited for me the entire time. He'd not been entirely comfortable leaving me there because we were now in the same town as Benji. He'd also never left my side unless he had a job that took him somewhere he agreed to be.

And even that hadn't happened all that often because he hadn't wanted to leave me alone.

I wasn't sure why he'd given up his going out of town gig, but I was glad as I'd figured out my so-called life.

I'd also come to realize that Hannibal had become an integral part of my life.

I didn't wake up or go to sleep without thinking about him. I didn't plan my day without first seeing what it was he had planned.

My morning wasn't complete without him bringing me a cup of coffee. My night wasn't over until he brushed my hair.

I followed him to all of his jobs.

And you know the funny thing? He didn't care that I was obsessed with him, and I fucking loved that he was obsessed with me.

There was nothing unhealthy about our relationship.

It wasn't weird when I sent him seventeen texts in an hour.

He didn't find it odd that I asked to follow his location using his phone.

He especially loved being able to pull up my location and follow me to wherever the hell I'd wound up that day.

It was awesome.

And I'd never realized how a person that was made for you, that freakin' loved you, could be the complete complement to your personality until I found Hannibal.

The cars were the first thing we saw.

There were so many of them they'd started to park along the roadway.

"You parking way back here?" I asked curiously.

He tossed me the 'are you kidding me' look he was prone to do when I asked him questions he didn't think I needed an answer to.

"Well, where are you going to go if they're already parking back here?" I wondered.

He didn't answer, instead pulling up into the parking lot that was filled to bursting.

He looped around the back, then he was parking in front of a gate that said 'NO PARKING ANYTIME.'

I raised a brow at him, and he winked.

He got out, and I was about to do the same when I saw him walking up to the lock on the fence and popping it open with his lock-picking tool.

I scooted over into the driver's seat and pulled it through, and he locked it back behind us.

When I went to scoot back over so he could park where he wanted, he opened the door and caught me, ass in the air, about to crawl back over the console.

"Mmmm," he said as he pulled me backwards.

My breath hitched when I felt his stiff cock press into my backside.

"Han," I said, not sure whether I was protesting or urging him on.

He took my indecision and ran with it, smoothing his hands up the length of my leg, pushing it under my skirt, and squeezing my ass.

My legs were dangling indelicately out of the car, and my torso was firmly

in the seat, while my head was now resting on the middle console.

It wasn't the most comfortable position in the world, but my comfort level and my need level were currently duking it out, and my need was winning out.

My dress started to make its way up farther and farther, until I could feel the cool night air on my bare ass.

"Fuckkkk," he hissed, finding my surprise that was supposed to have been for this evening.

I smiled and looked backward at him. "You weren't supposed to find this out until later."

His eyes were blazing with need as he looked at me.

With our gazes locked, he sank two fingers deep inside of me, taking advantage of my underwearless state.

My mouth formed an O, and the little evil glint he got when he knew what he was doing to me—IE freakin' killing me—lit his eyes.

"You like that, baby?" he asked, gently pumping his fingers in and out.

With my legs dangling how they were, I could do nothing to help move him along.

Unless...

I started to move my hands down to push my body backwards toward him, but he caught my hands before I could do anything and pinned them against my back.

Now he had full control of me.

"Now then, where was I?" he rasped, placing a kiss against my backside.

I knew what he was doing then.

The truck was at the perfect height.

And when I felt his tongue replace his fingers, I nearly screamed.

"Fuckin' love tasting you," he rasped against my inner thigh. "Bring this leg right here up and put your knee in the floorboard."

I did, allowing my legs to widen, giving me something to somewhat brace on, and loving every second of it.

"This won't do, will it?" he asked, squeezing my dangling leg.

I didn't know what we'd do about it, but I really wished he wouldn't stop...

He stopped. "Goddammit, Han."

He chuckled, and I could feel the seatbelt moving against my leg.

Looping my leg through the belt, he slowly tugged out the excess belt until it locked, then fed it back through the feeder until my leg was suspended in the air.

That's when I realized he'd let go of my hands to do that, and I used the opportunity to bring them back under me.

"No, baby," he said. "Give me those hands back."

I didn't want to.

I wanted to...

He forced them back behind me one at a time, pinning them to my lower back.

Before I could blink, he had something around my wrists.

"Wh-what is that?" I asked.

"Paracord," he murmured. "I use it to tie stuff down when I get it at the hardware store. I'm glad that I have it with me now, though."

I wasn't sure I was so glad.

But then he was back to eating my pussy, and I was thinking there wasn't much I cared about at that point other than coming.

"H-Han..." I closed my eyes as I felt his tongue parting my folds. His fingers were digging in to either side of my thighs as he spread them open wide for his seeking tongue. And I couldn't decide whether I liked the way they were digging in, or they hurt. Later, I'd probably have bruises. "P-please."

He growled against my pussy, and swear to all that was holy, I felt his Adam's apple vibrate against my clit when he moved just right to bite one ass cheek.

"Sweet baby Jesus," I groaned.

"You worried about being seen?" he asked curiously.

Was I?

Not really.

I mean, could we be seen? Probably. Did I care? No.

They wouldn't see much, because there was no way in hell Hannibal would ever let someone see my body.

What I was worried about was being stopped mid-orgasm because he realized that we shouldn't be doing this in such a public setting with Benji only feet away.

But I wasn't going to voice my concerns, because then he might stop, and I didn't ever want him to stop.

"No," I lied.

He chuckled and moved backwards, tugging my hips with him.

My legs flattened together completely, ass to calves, and then I heard him unzipping his pants.

Seconds later, I felt his cock head at my entrance.

With one brutal thrust, he was filling me to bursting.

I cried out, unable to stop the surprise from leaving my throat at his invasion.

"Okay?" he asked.

As he always did.

God, I loved him so freakin' much.

"Yes," I assured him.

I was more than okay.

I was perfect.

This was perfect.

He was perfect.

My life was perfect.

"Good," he said.

Then he was using me.

He was fucking me so hard that I felt the tines of his zipper digging into my pussy lips each time he slammed inside of me.

My pussy would be sore tomorrow, both from the brutal fucking he was handing out, and the way that his pants dug into me.

But I didn't care.

What I cared about was coming.

The orgasm that was about to leave me was going to be nothing short of an explosion.

He must've known it, too.

Because he started to slow down.

"Han..." I whined.

"Quiet," he ordered.

I was, and that was when I heard the male voices that were talking loudly somewhere nearby.

His thrusts went from long and rough to short and deep.

He wasn't moving in and out so much as grinding and repositioning.

It was a completely different sensation, and I couldn't stop the impending orgasm even if I tried.

"Han, God. I need..." I cried out.

I heard a 'what was that?' and a 'sounds like someone's getting some.'

But I couldn't think. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't freakin' see.

Because he pulled out and slammed back inside so hard that I saw literal stars as my head went back and I saw the dark sky above my head through the moonroof.

Then my orgasm slammed into me, taking me under so hard and fast that the real stars transformed into fake stars as my eyes squeezed so tightly shut that they exploded behind my eyelids.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I heard said.

I wasn't sure who said it.

The men we'd been hearing. Hannibal.

I didn't know.

What I did know was that I was broken.

Utterly and completely broken.

There was no way I'd be able to function tonight.

Then things started to come back online.

The dinging of the truck as it kept saying 'keys have left the vehicle.'

Harsh pants coming from the man that'd just fucked me senseless.

The rumble of the diesel engine as it ran.

"Holy shit, what the hell was that?" I found myself asking.

Hannibal pulled out of me then, and I felt the wetness leaving me as he did.

"Shit," I said. "We don't have anything to wipe this up."

We'd just cleaned out his truck that morning. We'd come back and forth from all over the country so many times in his truck that it was a freakin' mess. We'd vacuumed it out, washed it, and had thrown away so many fast-food napkins that I'd laughed.

I wasn't laughing now.

I was going to be whining because I was wet the entire night.

Then his hand was there.

He was cupping my pussy with his big palm, and then he started to rub the semen he'd left behind into my pussy. Then my ass. My upper pubic area.

My breath caught.

"Han..." I started.

But then he pulled back his hand, and it came down so hard on my ass that the reprimand that'd been on the tip of my tongue was lost.

My breathing hitched, and then I was wondering how in the hell I could be ready for more of him when I'd literally just had the orgasm of my life.

"Scooch upward so I can get your leg out of this seatbelt.

Yeah, it was kind of stuck.

It wasn't going to be moving without me going forward to slip my leg out.

Which was exactly what I did.

The long flowy dress was a hindrance as I all but army crawled back into my seat.

He caught my foot and guided it through the loop before letting it go.

I heard the seatbelt zip all the way up just as I smoothed my dress down and sat on my bottom.

I looked over at him as he climbed inside, then watched as he slammed the door closed and pulled forward and around the building.

He came to a stop in front of two men that were staring at us.

They looked unsurprised to see us there.

This must be two of his men.

I'd known they would be there, but it was still slightly embarrassing to see them *there*.

Hannibal bailed out of the car and came around to my side to let me out.

I slid to the ground, and his eyes took me in.

“Okay?” he asked.

Was I okay?

I was more than okay.

I was fuckin' zen.

“Yes,” I promised. “More than okay.”

His lips quirked, and then he was looping the hand that'd just rubbed his come into my skin around my waist—with his hand fisted—and walking toward the men.

His other hand, the one that I was fairly sure was covered in my pussy juices still, went out to shake the two men's hands.

He stopped halfway though, realizing what he was about to do, and then fisted his hand and gave them fist bumps instead.

I dropped my head to hide my smile.

“Albert. Gustavo. This is my girl, Hades. Hades, these are the two men that'll be working with us tonight. If anything were to happen, and you need to get away, both of them are there for you to go to.”

We'd gone over this a hundred times already.

But I nodded my head and said, ‘yes’ anyway.

“It's nice to meet you both,” I said, trying to hold their gazes and failing.

Yep, they'd heard everything.

Though they weren't showing any smugness at the knowledge, I was more than aware that if they weren't showing it, they were definitely thinking it.

They wouldn't be Hannibal's men if they weren't extremely intelligent.

At least they were discreet.

“Ma'am.” They both nodded at me.

“Y’all ready?” Hannibal asked.

We all nodded.

“Then let’s do it.”

CHAPTER 24

*Save the bees. Plant the trees. Clean the seas. Titties.
-T-shirt*

HANNIBAL

“You know what you need to do?” I asked Gustavo and Albert.

Both nodded. “Then see you later.”

They left, giving me time to say, “We need to go to the bathroom so I can get my hands washed. I don’t mind having you on my hands and all, but if I’m going to schmooze, I would feel wrong shaking people’s hands. I don’t want to share you with anyone. Not even that way.”

Her eyes were sparkling as they met mine.

God, she was pretty.

I was stunned with how good of a job they’d done.

She looked like she was wearing no makeup at all, to be honest. But her hair. It was in gorgeous ringlets that made me want to wrap my fingers around them just to pull them down and watch them bounce.

Not that I didn’t love her actual hair. Because I really did.

Long, black and straight, it was gorgeous. But like this...she looked like she was about to get married. And it was giving me these ideas...

Ideas like getting on a plane and flying to Vegas.

It would be a short flight...

“Let’s get it done then,” Hades whispered.

I caught her hand in mine and led her to the bathrooms.

They were separated in men’s and women’s, but I wasn’t about to leave her outside by herself.

“Come on,” I said, pulling her to the handicap bathroom.

The door closed behind us, and I said, “Fuck, there are a lot of people here.”

“Yeah there are.” She was shaking her head. “Benji did like a good party. I’ll bet every last person that’s here is someone he knew once upon a time. The more people to celebrate him, the bigger his ego gets.”

I snorted as I washed my hands, then dried them with a fuckin’ napkin.

A fuckin’ napkin.

A cloth fucking napkin.

“This is gonna be a long night for whomever is having to clean and restock this bathroom,” I said as I pointed at the already overflowing basket holding the spent towels beside the door.

She eyed it and shrugged. “Seems like an added expense that wasn’t needed. But kudos to them for helping save the planet.”

Grinning, I caught up her hand again and opened the door, unsurprised to find people already waiting.

With the amount that were there, there would be lines at the women’s restrooms *and* the men’s.

An elderly woman eyed the two of us with a knowing smirk before pushing past us with her walker into the bathroom.

I ignored the look and led us deeper into the shadows so we could look around.

“Anyway, what is our plan?” she asked.

I’d waffled a bit on the actual plan.

My first instinct was to confront the little prick before his wedding and hopefully show his soon-to-be wife what she was getting herself into.

Then I found out that the wedding had already taken place, and that all this would be was a reception.

“Did Folsom get ahold of the slideshow?” I asked quietly, looping my hands around her and pulling her into a dark corner.

“Yes,” she answered. “She’s just waiting for the go ahead from us.”

“Tell her to go ahead,” I said.

Funny enough, Folsom was able to get the itinerary for the wedding.

That was how we’d figured out that they were getting married prior to the wedding reception that everyone had been invited to.

But we did know when the cake cutting would be. When the slideshow was happening—during the first dance. Oh, and when the sendoff would be.

Our hope was to be meeting them before the sendoff so that we could discuss a few things.

His wife needed to know the man she married.

And Benji needed to know that if he continued doing what he was doing, he wasn't going to like what happened.

Keene was there to help where needed, to smooth the way if necessary to get them to talk to us. And the two men that worked for me were there because I didn't trust anything to ever go the way I planned it.

If I needed backup because Benji decided to go crazy, then they'd be there waiting.

I explained to her my thoughts, and she nodded, turning and putting her back against my front.

I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her in tight.

She dropped her chin to rest on my forearm and brought her hands up to latch around my biceps.

We watched the room and waited.

Keene found us an hour in.

"Show time?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Folsom just texted and said they were getting the slide show pulled up," Keene whispered. "Where do you want me to go?"

I didn't know.

Benji was an unknown.

I wasn't sure what he would do.

My hope was that after this slideshow his new wife would pull him into a room and I'd get to slip in there with him.

Have my discussion and leave.

"Here," I said. "Stay here. If I can slip away and get the talk done, then that's what I'll do."

"And the cops?" Keene asked. "You said they had enough to arrest him for stalking."

"They do," I said. "But they move at their own pace. And since I can't influence that pace, I'm going to reiterate what I want, and hope that he follows through."

Keene nodded. "I'll stay with Hades."

It wasn't five minutes later when the first dance/wedding slideshow started.

"Here we go."

The dance started, and then the photos started, too.

At first, they were normal couple photos.

Benji and his wife looked good together.

Really good together.

But something always looked off in their photos, and I couldn't quite put my finger on as to why.

Then the photos that Folsom added started.

At first, people thought it was a joke.

The first one was a vibrator that had been sent to Tony.

Then there was the massive dildo labeled 'horse cock' and the white, dried remains of what had to be spunk all over it.

The photos continued until the last one followed up with one of the latest ones.

The photo of Benji hand delivering the latest 'package' to the guy that had driven it halfway across the country.

Then the last photo was of the package I'd had my guy pick up.

In the package was a lacy pair of crotchless panties. And a note that said 'wear this and think of me.'

The crowd was murmuring loudly now, and the couple that'd been blissfully dancing away, unaware of the commotion surrounding them wasn't a good thing, but a bad one for them, finally looked up.

The music had stopped, and then a girl was whispering in the bride's ear.

Benji was now staring at his package in horror.

Oh, he knew he'd been caught.

Now it was time for damage control.

The bride whirled and stared at Benji, saying something to him.

He caught her arm and led her back to an area that was behind the bar.

Then they disappeared into the back room.

I took that as my cue.

“Watch her, Keene,” I ordered.

He took my spot, not wrapping his arms around her, but getting in close all the same.

I threaded my way through the whispering crowd, hearing conversations about the slideshow.

“What do you think that was about?” one asked.

“Whoa, that was Benji and that was his package. Look, it’s the same card that you saw him writing on a few pictures before the end,” another said.

I passed them all, my smile growing.

It was good that the room was filled with law enforcement. They’d understand the significance and see the clues.

They’d be able to put two and two together and get ‘stalker’ out of it.

There was a man standing near the bar, but I bypassed him and walked right into the back room behind it.

The bride was now yelling at Benji.

“What the hell was that?” she screeched. “Benji, that was weird!”

That wasn’t weird.

It was sadistic is what it was.

The door closed behind me, and the two people looked over.

The woman looked confused. Benji just looked angry.

“Who are you?” Joan asked.

Joan, the bride, sounded pissed.

“You don’t know me. But I know you,” I said. “My name is Hannibal Peters, and I’m a security specialist.”

Joan tilted her head. “Okay.”

My eyes went to Benji.

And, maintaining eye contact with him, I said, “I’m a security specialist that was hired by the Singhs.”

I saw the moment he comprehended.

He opened his mouth, but I spoke over him.

“Over the past six months, I’ve been investigating, and guarding, a woman named Caristonia Singh,” I said. “She originally called me because she was

receiving alarming packages from a stalker that she couldn't find to stop."

Joan inhaled.

"You think it was Benji?" she asked.

"I know it was Benji," I corrected. "We have video evidence of him on three instances delivering these packages. We also know that he has been doing this for years. At least three."

"That's preposterous," Benji disagreed loudly.

I didn't bother to correct him.

Instead, I said, "We have taken out some protection orders. All members of the Singh family have taken them out. Tomorrow morning, you should be receiving paperwork on those." I tilted my head. "You know, which is how protection orders should be handled."

Joan made a sound in her throat.

She knew what I was talking about seeing as she was a helpful person when it came to obtaining one on Hades with no evidence and no delivering of materials to the party that was accused.

"As of right now, I am just informing you that should you come around any members of the Singh family, you will be treated as a threat by security," I said. "My company does not play."

Joan's back stiffened.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked.

I looked at her then. "I know that you are a clearly deceived woman that has no clue about the man she married today."

Joan's mouth fell open.

"I know that you think that badge you carry around with you gives you power you don't have," I said. "I also know that you know the letter of the law, and you know that you shouldn't be doing some of the things you're doing. And no matter how much you try to hide it, there is always evidence. Especially with technology what it is today."

Her eyes were so wide that they looked freaky.

I straightened my cuff links as I said, "Good day to you both."

Then I was walking out the door.

I heard arguing behind me, causing a smile to form on my face.

I found Keene and Hades waiting for me near the back exit.

We were nearly there when someone tried to stop and detain us.

The bride's father.

His name was Shute. Literally. Shute.

Pronounced like shoot.

He stepped in front of us, his big body blocking the way.

"I know who you are," he said.

Hades went slightly behind me without me having to ask.

Keene caught her and pulled her a little farther back.

Albert and Gustavo moved closer. Not close enough to be seen, but close enough to react if needed.

"Okay," I said.

"I heard what you said, too," he continued.

"Yeah?" I waited.

"Yeah," he said. "And I've been telling my daughter that there was something wrong with her man since the very beginning. But she wouldn't see reason."

I relaxed slightly.

Not all the way, but enough to really listen to what he had to say.

"I want everything you have on him," he said, his eyes flicking backwards. "I'm gonna send that sick fuck down."

That was what I'd been hoping for.

Though I didn't expect to make the initial contact while at the wedding.

"I can have it sent to you in an hour," I said. "But if you don't mind, we'd like to leave before he realizes how fucked he really is."

Shute nodded. "Then by all means."

We didn't make it out the door.

A shout from the bride had Shute looking up.

Albert and Gustavo reacted fast, pushing the door open and all but shoving Hades outside.

Keene went with her, and I was just about to follow when something black

appeared in Benji's hand.

I saw what was going to happen before it happened.

Joan moved, placing herself in front of the gun and holding up her hand for him to give it to her. But Benji pulled the trigger anyway, shooting his bride in the heart.

The crowd reacted.

Shute's bellow of outrage followed us all out the door.

We didn't leave, though.

We stayed in the back and waited for the police to arrive.

They did in full force.

But by the time they arrived, everything was well in hand.

That was what happened when you had hundreds of law enforcement in the same room.

There were plenty of eyewitness testimonies.

We gave our statements, and then we left.

Keene kissed his sister and said, "Don't be a stranger, Hades. You're welcome home. Anytime. But I'd understand if you needed a break."

Hades threw her arms around him and said, "I'll come. Eventually. But until then..."

Until then, no one knew what she was doing.

Living life free to do whatever the hell she wanted.

We got in the truck and left.

Gustavo and Albert followed us all the way home.

The next day, as I read the morning paper at the continental breakfast that Hades was stuffing her face at, I was shocked.

Last night, they'd thought the bride was going to make it.

But this morning, the paper said differently.

"What's wrong?" Hades asked as she put her plate containing two waffles on the table.

I looked at her and said, "Benji killed her."

Hades winced.

"Shute's going to fuck him up," she guessed.

I agreed.

Shute was definitely going to fuck him up.

And he did.

It wasn't two nights later that they found Benji dead in his cell.

There was no evidence of who'd done it. But we didn't need evidence.

There was a heartbroken dad somewhere out there that had nothing left to lose.

CHAPTER 25

*My joints go out more than I do.
-Hannibal to Hades*

HANNIBAL

Finding him was easy.

Getting through his gate proved to be a bit tougher, especially with the hired muscle guarding the area.

“Boss.”

I grinned at Leo.

Did I mention that I had a crew of bodyguards that used to be old teammates with me in the SEALs that worked for me?

Years ago, when I’d decided to go into protection and security, initially bodyguarding had been my main goal.

Leo, also known as Leonardo Sands, was one of my first hires.

“Hey,” I said as I walked up the walkway to Slone’s front door. “What are you doing here?”

I thought he had the day off?

“Figured I’d offer you backup,” he answered. “Knew that you were coming because of the flight logs.”

Leo had access to company documents because he was who ran the business when I was away for extended periods of time.

“He’s not gonna be mad that you just let me in?” I wondered.

Leo shrugged. “He’s a pretty cool guy. At least until it comes to his girls.”

His girls being his daughter, Briley, and his new girlfriend/fake wife, Caristonia. Though he called her Ari.

Ari/Tony/Caristonia was Hades’ twin sister.

And when she answered the door after I knocked on it, I wondered if she’d recognize me.

“Can I help you?” she frowned, looking around as if to ascertain how I got in.

She didn’t look scared, though.

“I let him in, ma’am,” Leo offered, even though that wasn’t the truth.

I’d broken into Slone’s gate and opened it with a few handy tools that

allowed me to do things like that without breaking them.

“Oh,” she frowned harder. “I thought you were off today?”

“I am,” Leo nodded. “Just wanted you to meet the big boss.”

Tony’s eyes, which were nothing like her sister’s, turned to survey me.

“Come in,” she said. “Are you wanting to meet with Slone?”

“Yes,” I answered. “Both of you, actually.”

She made a comment under her breath about ‘rudeness’ and held her door open wider for me to enter.

I came in and quickly took note of all exits, possible hazards, and anything else I might need to know to keep myself safe.

Leo stopped at my side, slightly behind me, letting the man that came into the room know who he was protecting if needed.

Slone didn’t miss it.

“I wasn’t aware of anyone coming to meet me today,” he said as he placed his shaker cup on the table next to the couch.

I shrugged. “I was in the area.”

I wasn’t in the area, technically.

It was funny, but what would Tony think when she found out that Hades had been living next to her, in the same town, for the last however long?

Funny enough, I hadn’t needed to make a flight to see them. I’d made a flight to come home.

How Leo had known I was coming there today probably had more to do with Hades, who had taken over the corner office at my building, than him reading the flight logs.

Slone crossed his arms and said, “Why do I feel like you have something to say?”

Because you are an astute man, I thought to myself.

“I want to share with you some news,” I said. “Your sister tasked me with finding out who your stalker was.”

Slone shifted, but it was Tony who had my attention.

“Okay,” she hesitated. “Did y’all find anything on him?”

“Yes,” I said. “It was who we suspected all along. Benjamin Braddock.

Your sister's ex-boyfriend."

"And did you get him to stop giving them to me?" she asked. "The 'presents?'"

I shrugged. "He's dead."

Tony's eyes widened. "You killed him?"

I didn't want to give them all the details.

If Hades wanted her to have them, then she would.

Eventually.

"I didn't, no," I said. "But you can guess that he won't be giving you any more packages."

Slone snorted. "Good riddance."

I didn't reply to that.

I did, however, say what I needed to say next.

"I'm going to leave you with something," I said as I pulled Hades' journal out of my inside pocket. "I want you to remember something, though."

"Okay..." she said as she took it, her eyes narrowing as she realized the relevance of the notebook.

It wasn't hard to guess.

From what Hades had told me, she'd carried it around with her everywhere. It would be noticeable to her twin sister.

"I want you to read this," I said. "And no, Slone can't read it."

Slone's mouth opened to say something, but I gave him a sharp look. "Would you want the details of your wife's rape to go to any other man?"

Slone slammed his mouth shut.

No, he definitely wouldn't want that.

He would be staying away from the journal. That I knew for sure.

Tony's eyes were wide as she listened to me talk more about her sister.

The sister that it was likely she didn't even know.

"But..." she said.

"The journal," I said. "Read it. When you're done, Hades wants you to burn it."

Tony pulled it to her chest and hugged it, her eyes filled with tears.

“I will,” she promised.

I headed toward the door, but Tony’s words stopped me.

“Is she going to come to my wedding?” Tony asked.

I looked at her with blank eyes before saying, “She’s healing, Tony. I don’t know what she’s going to want to do when you get around to doing it.”

With that, I left, glad that I’d gotten everything over with.

They knew about Benji. They knew about Hades. And soon, they’d know why Hades was the way she was.

Hades had never asked for her journal back, but I had a feeling she never would.

That part of her life, needing to share things with the papers and nobody else, was gone.

If she needed a release, I would be able to offer it to her through my body.

I drove home. It took me three minutes.

She met me at the door and her smile was everything.

She threw herself into my arms, and I pulled her in tight, feeling like I could breathe again for the first time since I’d left two nights before.

“Welcome home,” she said quietly.

I smoothed her hair back and said, “I love you.”

Her eyes were all melty when she said, “I love you, too.”

• • •

4 ½ months later

It took them four and a half months to agree to see each other.

Well, it took Hades three and a half months to agree to see Tony, not Tony willing to see Hades.

In fact, the calls started coming in only twelve hours after I’d given her the journal.

But, after telling Hades what I’d done—because there would be absolutely no lies between us—she’d been obviously hesitant.

Though, she hadn't been mad at what I'd done.

In fact, she'd told me that she'd wanted to do it for years, but hadn't had the courage.

But, knowing how much her family meant to her, especially her twin, I'd taken a chance and had been rewarded.

Though, seeing her now, nervous as hell to see her sister, made my heart ache.

But she pulled up her bootstraps and bailed out of the truck before I could get around to her.

Her eyes were wild and a bit scared when she started marching toward the front door.

The fuckin' tigers met her at the door.

She dropped down onto her haunches and caught both of their heads in her hands as she cooed at them.

Slone, who'd been the one to open the door, nodded at me.

My stomach was in knots myself.

Never had I ever thought I'd be nervous over a meeting between two women, but there the fuck I was.

"Slone," I said quietly. "Nice to see you."

"You, too," Slone murmured.

"You two go outside," I heard Tony order, directing her words toward Slone and me. "We'll be inside."

"No," I immediately disagreed. "We can go in another room, but I'm not leaving her alone. Sorry."

I wasn't sorry.

But I was trying to soften the blow.

I didn't want her to think I was mad at her—though I was, kind of a little bit seeing as she'd had the life Hades should've had—and start taking that out on Hades.

But she understood, and her shoulders loosened.

"Okay," she said. "Y'all can go to the kitchen then. I just made brownies. Hades' favorite."

Hades' head finally came up, and she stared at her sister.

"I love brownies."

Tony smiled. "I know."

And so that was what we did.

After Slone and Hades exchanged a stilted greeting, we went to the kitchen and the two ladies stayed where they were.

But not before I gave her a look over my shoulder.

You need me, I'm here.

I didn't have to say the words for her to know.

Hades smiled and nodded her head.

"I want you to know I've denounced our mother," I heard Tony say as we headed into the kitchen to give them some privacy.

"You didn't have to..." was Hades' reply.

"I did," Tony said firmly.

Then there was nothing else heard because we were too far away.

If they raised their voices, though, I would.

"Where's Briley?" I wondered.

"Camp," he answered. "I just want you to know, if the journal is half as bad as Ari's sobs were...I'm sorry."

"I don't need your apology, man," I said. "But if you're interested, Hades might."

Slone nodded. "I plan on it."

And he did.

After an awkward thirty-minute-long talk in his kitchen, the women came to us. And Slone finally got his chance to apologize.

"I'm sorry for not looking beneath the surface, Hades," Slone said quietly.

Hades came to me and burrowed into my body.

I wrapped both arms around her and pulled her between my legs where I was sitting on the bar stool.

I pressed a kiss to the side of her throat just as Hades said, "I think we should all start over."

Slone nodded, looking relieved.

Ari smiled a watery smile.

And my woman stayed exactly where she was.

“You okay?” I whispered into her ear after a few minutes.

She turned to look at me as she said, “I will be.”

She sure would.

EPILOGUE

*Okay, hear me out. An old-fashioned candy necklace, but with Tums and
Ibuprofen.*

-Text from Hades to Hannibal

HADES

I don't know what I'd been thinking when I met Hannibal.

I should've known, based solely on the way he bulldozed through life, that he wouldn't give up the 'going to the Middle East and saving people' thing.

Yet, here we were, a year and a half into our marriage, and he was coming back from his third trip over there. One trip had taken two months. One three. And this one, luckily, was only seven weeks.

Sure, during those times I gave my family uninhibited access to my routines and free labor—because I was never going to be an employee of Circus House again—but I also missed the heck out of him.

I'd proved Keene wrong, however.

I didn't need Hannibal there to hold my hand through everything.

He'd fixed me.

I didn't have a problem with being left alone.

At least, mostly.

I still missed him, but I didn't lose my shit when he wasn't around.

I was a happy, healthy, and loved human being.

I was also horny as hell.

Who knew that when Hannibal left the last time, he wasn't just leaving me, but someone else as well.

And, because I knew it would embarrass the hell out of him, I made a sign that said, "Peters, report for booty."

I also decorated it with red, white and blue streamers, sparkles and glitter.

He was going to hate it.

I'd found out the first time that I'd welcomed him home at the airport that he hated a fuss.

And I'd made it my life's mission to do that for him every single time that I saw him after he'd been gone for a while.

This being one of those times.

Though, this time, things were a bit different.

I watched him as he walked toward me across the tarmac.

It being a military plane he'd been on, it wasn't like the usual airport coming home thing.

No, this was him walking in camo toward me with a sea of a hundred other men dressed exactly like him.

I would know that man anywhere, though.

That silvering hair. Those gray eyes. That big, jacked body.

God, I couldn't wait to get him home and use him until he had nothing left to give...

His eyes were already rolling when he read the sign.

When I was sure I had his attention, I flipped the poster board over.

He came to a jarring halt.

One of the soldiers behind him narrowly missed running into him.

His eyes were huge when he read the lettering.

Then he was moving.

I wasn't sure who started running first, but then I was in his arms, and he was wrapped so tightly around me that I could barely inhale.

"Can't. Breathe," I wheezed.

He let up. Barely.

"Are you fuckin' serious right now?" he asked.

I pulled back so I could look down into his eyes. "Deadly."

His lips drew up, and then he was shouting out a laugh.

"Holy fuck, babe!" he said. "I'm going to be a father?"

I nodded.

"You're sure?"

I nodded again. "Had the wand up my vagina to prove it."

He was already shaking his head, alarmed eyes taking me in. "That's...are you okay?"

His serious tone had me nodding. "I'm fine."

"You're sure?"

God, I loved this man.

“I’m sure.”

He spun me around then, making me giggle.

“Thank you for your service,” an elderly gentleman wearing a WWII Veteran cap said, holding out his hand to Hannibal. “And congratulations.”

My feet met the ground.

Hannibal took his hand, and very gently shook it. “Thank you for yours.”

The two parted ways, and Hannibal’s eyes focused back on me. “I can’t believe you just did that.”

I shrugged. “I mean...how else was I supposed to do it?”

“Possibly at home, where I can cry in relative peace?” he suggested.

I rolled my eyes. “You don’t cry, Hannibal. You didn’t cry when we got married. You didn’t cry when I was in that reception hall and that gun exploded. And you didn’t cry when we watched *Pirates of the Caribbean* and we thought Jack Sparrow died. If you’re not going to cry for those things, then why would you cry for this?”

He shrugged and pulled me toward him. I let the poster board drop, and then his mouth was on mine.

I twined my arms around his neck and groaned as he leaned into the kiss.

Hannibal’s kisses were always the best.

But his kisses after we’d been away from each other for a while? Those were so much sweeter.

He’d never stop doing what he loved. He was just too good at his job, and the world needed him.

But that didn’t stop the longing of wanting him with me always to go away.

He pulled back and stared down into my eyes and said, “I missed the hell out of you, Hay.”

Hay.

“I missed you, too,” I said.

He caught up my sign, and we were off.

“My family called me over for lunch,” I said as we started toward the exit. “Is that okay?”

Zip's idea of a permanent home for Singh Circus had been a hard pill for them to swallow at first. Though nowhere in Dad's will did it expressly prohibit them docking the circus permanently, everyone knew that finding a permanent home for it was going to be rather lackluster at first.

But the thought of permanent employees, and seeing how Crew's circus ran, had been a very interesting possibility. And frankly, too enticing to turn down.

So over the year after it'd been introduced, they'd hashed out where it would be best to house such an event permanently.

In the end, Dallas, Texas had been the chosen city that would permanently house the circus.

And it'd turned into one of the greatest decisions ever.

"I caught a good nap on the plane," he paused. "Though I'd fuckin' love a hot shower."

I smiled. "I brought a change of clean clothes and your shower stuff. You can use Tony's shower."

He nodded once. "All right. Let's go."

When we got outside and he saw his bike, he narrowed his eyes and whipped his head around to stare at me accusingly.

"What the hell?" he asked.

There were a lot of things that Hannibal would tolerate with me, but one of those things was not me driving his bike.

A peal of laughter escaped me, and I doubled over, partially bending the poster board I still held in my hand.

"Don't worry." I rolled my eyes. "I didn't drive it. Leo helped me by trailering it over here."

And, like a kid in the damn candy store, he picked me up and deposited me on the back of his bike.

He shoved my helmet on, cupped my helmeted head in his hand, and said, "Let's go for a ride."

And we did.

Right to my sister's house where I announced my pregnancy after they presented me with a check for a half a million dollars.

Oh, and a partial ownership of Circus House.

I then shared with them the photos I took for the grand opening.

And we lived happily ever after.