



THE
MONSTERS
Obsession

KELSEY GAMBLE

THE MONSTER'S OBSESSION

A FRANKENSTEIN RETELLING... OF SORTS.

KELSEY GAMBLE

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*This one is for those of you who have fantasized about an
adult version of Build-A-Bear.*

You know who you are.

Build-A-Boyfriend...

Now accepting corporate sponsors and private investors.

(But not actually. What do you think we are—mad scientists?)

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CHAPTER ONE

CHELSEA

A scowl. “Has he approved the budget for my project yet?”

Watery eyes. “I told the barista it *had* to be peppermint, but she said they’re out of peppermint syrup all over the city.”

“Chelsea, are you still there?” Sharp tone.

I blink once. Twice.

Deep breath.

I push my dark hair over my shoulder before placing my palms against the cool surface of my glass desk. I almost always wear it half-up. It’s in my face today, driving me crazy as I deal with all of these problems that aren’t actually problems.

“Yes, Mrs. Rhodes,” I answer the voice in my earbud with the same soft tone I would use to talk to a newborn baby. “And I agree, Ivan is overdue a lunch with you ladies. Donna won’t be able to brag about her over-hyped son after Ivan takes all of you to a restaurant that isn’t even open yet—and *pays*. I’ll even make sure he wears the Rolex for the occasion.”

He hates the Rolex. He’s going to kill me.

But my answer does as intended, and Ivan’s mother begins to pour praise out over the phone line to me. It’s a delicate balance, I’ve learned... Staying on her good side.

I click my mouse twice to mute my side of the call momentarily, so I can give my attention to the scowling woman leaning over my desk and into my personal space. She works in marketing. She has big red hair and even bigger round glasses. She dresses like she’s still stuck in the eighties.

I really, really wish I was better at remembering names.

“He wants to ask some clarifying questions before signing off,” I reply simply, succinctly. “I sent a meeting request to your email yesterday that’s waiting for your response.”

From a scowl to pale faced. “Oh, I—”

“It’s okay.” I smile as warmly as I can muster running on so little sleep. Always so little sleep these days. “You had that dental emergency the day before; I’m sure your inbox is exploding. I left Mr. Rhodes off of the invitation and added it to his calendar on your behalf, assuming the date and time works for you.”

“I’ll make it work,” she says gravely. “Thank you, Chelsea.”

“No problem!”

Matthew shuffles closer as the space in front of my desk frees up. I hold up one finger with a pleading face to ask him to give me another moment. He nods, even as a fat tear manages to escape and roll down his cheek. His short brown hair is a mess, and the collar of his white button-up shirt is askew... Like he couldn’t stop fidgeting with it.

“—and you *will* come for Christmas this year, won’t you?” Mrs. Rhodes prompts as I unmute the line. Perfect timing.

“I’ll see what I can do, ma’am, but you know that’s a busy time of the year for us.” More traveling means more opportunities for marketing the hotel chain. And if Ivan works around-the-clock, so do I.

“Sure, sure.” She hums. Speculation. I’m sure she’s already mentally picking out a gift for me. Clothes or shoes, no doubt. Which will be delivered with a thinly veiled insult about my own fashion choices.

I can only imagine how she’d react to the canary yellow sweater I’m wearing today. *The horror.*

“Well,” Mrs. Rhodes continues, “I should let you get back to work, dear. We’ll talk soon.”

Every week. Like clockwork. I’m pretty sure at this point she calls when Ivan is busy *on purpose* so that she gets time with me instead. I can’t fathom what the appeal is for her. I would guess she’s lonely, except she has a very full social life—that I always hear about in great detail. Each conversation

ends with me feeling like she thinks the calls are doing *me* a favor.

Shake it off, Chelsea.

“Looking forward to it!” I fib to my boss’ chatty mother. I make sure to let her end the call first, and then I double check from my computer that we’re fully disconnected. I’ve been burned by that one before. And I only make mistakes like that once. Usually.

Moving on to...

Watery eyes. No. Tears now. Full-blown tears.

“Matthew, we can’t do this every week.” I push my desk chair back so I can lean over to yank open my bottom left drawer. The peppermint syrup is half-used already and Matthew has only been here three weeks. It doesn’t bode well for him... Though, the constant dramatics have helped me remember *his* name at least.

Unusual for me. Names constantly seem to slip right through my fingers.

“He’ll know,” Matthew whispers, shoulders hunching.

I shake my head with a half-smile. “No, he won’t.”

He will. He always does. But right now, wrong coffee is better than no coffee. “He thought Tuesday’s coffee was the best he ever had.”

Also not true. At this point, this job has turned me into a full-blown white liar. Anything to get us all through the day with some semblance of sanity intact, though.

Besides, all signs point to Ivan letting Matthew go by the end of this week. One more wrong coffee order won’t make the difference now.

“You know best, Chelsea.” He huffs and hands the coffee over.

I’m careful not to cringe as I reach out to pull the cup closer and flick the lid off. It’s nowhere near hot enough. As soon as Ivan sends Matthew off to collect his mail from the

mail room, I'll go out and fetch the correct coffee order myself. For now, I pour a healthy serving of peppermint syrup into the lukewarm coffee. I settle into the knowledge that I'll drink it on the way to pick up the correct coffee.

"There are few things I know best about," I muse aloud. "Ivan Rhodes just happens to be my specialty." I wink at Matthew as I put the lid on the coffee cup and hand it back.

"Better you than me," he mumbles quietly. But not quite quietly enough.

The moment Matthew steps away from my desk, I frantically jolt to my computer mouse and click open the instant-messaging application at the bottom of the screen. My fingers fly over the keyboard as I make a desperate plea.

C. Snyder: *Please wait to fire him until the end of the day. Remember what happened last time you fired an assistant mid-day?*

I. Rhodes: *It's the coffee again, isn't it?*

C. Snyder: *I'm already putting an order in for you at the place I like that you pretend isn't better than the place you like.*

I'm not sure why he bothers pretending he still likes the place on the corner when we both know my favorite place a block further is superior. After all, I've run into him there enough times now to know that's what he drinks when we're not all in the office.

I. Rhodes: *Fine.*

I send a smiley face back to him. Ivan might be a monster to most people in the office, but never with me. Perks of always getting his coffee order right, I guess.

* * *

It's nearly dark when I opt for an evening stroll after a long day at work. Ivan pays for me to have parking access at my

employer-provided apartment building, but I leave the company car at work more often than not.

Even in the evenings, walking from our downtown office to my apartment building a few blocks from Inner Harbor is incredibly safe. There are plenty of other people out walking the same route, allowing me to get swept up in the mass exodus of corporate America for the evening.

I'm grateful for my job—the healthy paycheck, company car, and free apartment. So grateful that I've been struggling to come to terms with an inevitable truth:

It's time for me to give my notice.

What's the point of working all these long hours and saving a small fortune if I don't eventually use that money to take a chance on doing what I really love?

Jewelry.

My fingers automatically reach for the chain around my neck, tracing the thin silver strand until I bump my favorite piece of jewelry. An amethyst ring my great aunt gave me days before I graduated high school.

"I'm proud of you, Chelsea," she said as she handed me a plain, brown box. Scowling. The expression has stuck with me all this time. The irony of her familiar scowl as she said words I'd longed to hear since childhood.

Nan—Nancy Snyder—the sour woman who refused to accept less than perfection and rarely left her house...

She was proud of me.

I'm sure it didn't last long once I followed my brother to Baltimore and never returned. But for a moment, at least, she was proud enough to share her gift with me. I watched her making jewelry for years in awe, though I was never allowed to touch any of it. And suddenly I owned my very own piece of her art.

Even now, I cherish the ring. Unfortunately, the band is slightly too large to wear comfortably. I have the tools to fix it, but I never seem to make the time. Soon. I'll fix it soon.

“Hey!” A slender arm draped in flashy bangle bracelets waves me down steps from the front door of my building. Hannah’s wide grin is contagious, and I smile as she slows her model-gait to fall into pace with me. She brushes her long, blonde hair away from her meticulously made-up face before she puts the code in for the door to let us both in. Together, we make our way to the elevators.

“Hey, where have you been all week?” I ask curiously. I usually pass her coming-and-going at all hours of the day. Officially, Hannah is a working model. In reality, she’s more socialite than model.

“I had some fittings in the city.” Her casual use of city seems so metropolitan to me.

I have no doubt she means New York City, where she owns an apartment. Why my gorgeous neighbor chooses to stay in Baltimore so often despite working mostly in New York is beyond me. But I like Hannah as a neighbor, so I’m certainly not about to start questioning things too much.

Hannah is the closest thing I have to a friend in this city. My work schedule makes regular adult companionship tough. Which only another reason on a too-long list that it’s time to let my sacrifices finally pay off... To quit my corporate job and let me follow my muse for a while.

“It’s always nice to have you home again. How long until your next job? We’re due for a Chinese takeout night.” It’s far less sad eating noodles out of cardboard boxes when you’re not doing it alone.

“Oh!” Hannah’s eyes light up as the left elevator doors finally open and we step on together. I press the button for our floor and watch the elevator doors smoothly slide closed. “I have photoshoots nonstop for the next week but then a whole month of nothing. We can do Chinese *and* ice cream.”

“Sounds like we have big plans then.” My lips relax into the first genuine smile I’ve given all day. Junk food with a friend is the kind of thing that makes a person feel human, and I don’t get to indulge nearly often enough.

The elevator begins to rise as Hannah agrees, “It’s a plan.”

The elevator makes a speedy ascent to our shared floor. Hannah steps off first, already heading for her door mere feet away from the elevators. “Talk to you soon.” I wave at her as she lets herself into her apartment. I have to go further down the hall to my corner apartment.

There’s a blind curve to the hallway just before my door. As I make my way around within sight of my front door, my eyes fall to a white box sitting pressed against my door. My stomach dips uncomfortably as a wave of nausea slams into me.

“Not again,” I murmur. Tears already blur my eyes as I whip my head one way and then the other. Except, there’s no one else up here in view. There never is when this happens.

And it *keeps* happening.

I’ve tried asking the front desk to hold my packages, but these somehow keep getting by. I tried asking once to review the footage from my floor, but management said the request would have to go through Ivan since he technically rents the apartment on my behalf.

My hands shake as I lean over to grab the box. They shake so violently I almost can’t get my key into the lock to let myself in.

Once I do, I rush toward the kitchen island to drop the box. I don’t want to touch the package any longer than necessary. Whoever keeps leaving these *gifts* has surely touched this package; I don’t want to let my hands linger where theirs have been any more than absolutely necessary.

“Why does this keep happening to me?” I ask my empty apartment.

Predictably, silence answers me.

I keep to myself, I don’t date or make friends, and I’m quiet enough that I’m usually a wallflower in any given room. Why would anyone want to stalk me? I’ve tried convincing myself that’s not what this is, but with every new gift, it’s become more difficult to ignore the reality facing me.

Someone is leaving me personal gifts. Someone who knows far too much about me.

I brace myself as I lift the lid off of this newest show of distant appreciation. I swallow back the feeling that I might be sick any moment. White tissue paper greets me. I peel it back and stare down at the most confusing gift yet.

I lift the pale-yellow towels out of the box and frown at them. They're a set of kitchen towels. Ones that match my kitchen eerily well...

I lift my chin and stare at the dishes in the sink that are the exact same shade. I couldn't find kitchen towels in the color when I bought the set, so I went with a light gray instead. They were nice, but a couple days ago, I spilled red wine across one of them and wasn't able to wash it out. So now I only have one.

I only have one gray kitchen towel.

And it just so happens I just received this brand-new set of kitchen towels. A perfect match for my kitchen. A kitchen no one besides Hannah has ever seen since I moved in. I haven't had so much as a maintenance visit over the two years I've been in this apartment.

Someone has been watching me. I drop the towels to the counter and do a slow spin. All the blinds are closed, but I do occasionally leave them open. How well would someone have to see in to know that I spilled wine on my towels, though?

I reluctantly glance back in the box knowing there will be a note waiting for me. There always is. And it's always typed in an opulent script font. Always on thick cardstock. It somehow makes the whole thing feel more intense.

The card sits, as expected, just below where the towels were folded. I pick up the small white envelope and slip the card out from inside. I shudder as I read the vaguely suggestive words:

Let me take care of your every need.

CHAPTER TWO

FRANKIE

“Slow down, Chelsea.” The name rolls casually off of Andrew’s tongue, as if those two syllables aren’t enough to make my artificial heart stop beating. “I can’t tell what you’re saying.” His tone is exasperated over whatever’s happening on the other end of the line.

I wander out of the kitchen, covered in blood from the steak packaging I dropped in my haste when I heard her name. I follow the sound of his voice to the seldom-used office tucked away in the small room beneath the stairs.

The door is wide open. Inside, Andrew paces three steps in either direction behind the mammoth oak desk that takes up most of the room. A small bookshelf in the corner and a leather armchair nearly fills the rest of the space. Still, there’s just enough room for me to step over the threshold and watch him pace with great interest about the person on the other side of his call.

His hair’s more of a mess than usual, and he’s running his hand through it again. I watch as he rolls his blue eyes toward the ceiling. “Are you sure it isn’t some kind of misunderstanding? Maybe the package was meant for someone else.”

Andrew is using his placating voice on Chelsea. He’s used it on me a few times—and at least twice on Susan, the next-door neighbor.

My voice rumbles—startling Andrew—as I ask, “What package?”

He shakes his head slightly and mouths *later*. But I don’t want to know later; I need to know now. My ears perked up at the mere mention of her name.

Chelsea.

Beautiful Chelsea. The dark-haired beauty with her big, blue eyes that stars every night in my filthiest fantasies. Andrew would probably cut my tongue out if he knew the uncouth thoughts I have about his younger sister. The things I wish I could do. The way I wish I could take care of her, cradle her delicate cheek against the tough skin of my left hand while my right hand—softer than the other—traces her curves until she's covered in goosebumps and straining toward me.

“Just come home, Chelsea. Whoever it is, they won't follow you here. Plus, it'll buy me some time to do some digging.”

My spine straightens almost painfully as I strain to bite back a reaction. Here? Chelsea... here. The very thought is unfathomable. For two years, I've existed like a caged monster pacing this house, this small town, wishing for any excuse to go out and claim what's been mine from the very moment I laid eyes on her picture.

And now her very own brother is nudging her into the lion's den. If he only knew...

“I'll buy your ticket if that's the problem.”

Andrew's face scrunches with annoyance. The same annoyance he shows when I've interrupted his work. As if he can't understand why the universe doesn't fall in line and make things easy for him. He doesn't always understand other people, but he's my best friend. My only friend. Unless, of course, you count Susan. Though I'm not sure my free labor and her occasional, snarky *thank you* actually counts by any stretch of the imagination.

If the sudden rise of her voice is anything to go off of, Chelsea doesn't take kindly to Andrew's insinuation that she can't buy her own plane ticket. She's not loud enough for me to make out her words, but I can hear the hum of her voice crossing the phone line.

I ache to *really* hear her. I've only ever gotten small snippets from videos posted to social media. A few words to

play over and over as I take my cock in my hand and pleasure myself to a woman who has always been entirely unattainable.

Until now.

“I can help search for whoever is following her,” I offer helpfully, even though I’m not actually part of the conversation. Andrew glances at me again, speculatively this time. “You know I’m good on a computer,” I remind him.

“You are good.” He’s musing. Perfect.

More words stream across the phone line, causing him to wince slightly and then frown. “I have a friend here, he’s a wizard with a computer. He can help.”

Yes. Fuck yes.

“I’m sure you have vacation time, Chelsea.” His exasperation is growing. When Andrew gets too annoyed, he tends to turn into an asshole. If he’s not careful, he’ll lose any leverage convincing her to come here. His worst fear is that his sister will never return to this small town again—and that’s my worst fear as well.

“Andrew.” I tilt my chin down and stare pointedly at him. We stay locked in eye contact for a long moment. Our friendship is as tight as it gets. He doesn’t need me to voice the warning out loud—he might as well be able to read my mind.

About everything except my overwhelming desire for his sister, apparently. Thank fuck.

Andrew takes a deep breath and resets. “Chelsea, please. You can’t call crying about having a stalker and expect me to do nothing. And it’ll be safer for you to come here than stay there.”

A stalker? I bristle, hands tightening into clenched fists as I struggle to temper my breathing.

I pictured some lovesick loser following her around. Not a full-blown stalker taking an interest in my woman.

Tense silence takes over the cramped office. I picture the walls slowly closing in on us, and I hold my breath as I wait

for an answer. The idea of Chelsea being here... under the same roof as me... her smooth skin begging for my touch...

“That’s great.” Andrew stops pacing, a relieved smile showing off the gap between his front teeth. “Send me your flight information as soon as you book it. I can arrange for a ride from the airport for you.”

A pause.

“Well, it’s just that I have a big project here that’s hard to step away from.” Andrew looks forlornly toward the computer monitor on the desk. It seems Chelsea hasn’t taken well to him offering for someone other than him to pick her up. A swell of anticipation builds in my chest, though. Because the only other person he’d send for her would be me. Right?

Another long pause.

Andrew’s voice drops into a soft tone that I’ve never heard him use before. “You’ll be safe here, Chelsea. I promise.”

Safe from her stalker and safely delivered to my waiting arms. There’s nowhere safer in the world she can be. Once I have her within reach, I’ll never let anything happen to her ever again. No one will touch a single hair on her precious head.

Andrew ends the call with his sister with a parting promise that everything will be okay. After setting his phone down on the desk, he rubs at his temples.

“Headache?” I ask. Usually it’s work that causes this kind of stress on my friend, but I imagine this situation with his sister carries plenty of weight alone.

He jerks his head in a nod. “Just a little one.” He sighs heavily before he drags his eyes up to meet my gaze. If he sees the intensity that I’m feeling reflected in my eyes, he doesn’t acknowledge it. Instead, he says, “Well, you heard one side of that conversation. It seems my sister has picked up some unwanted attention. She’s going to be staying with us for a while.”

“I’ll help any way I can.”

“You’re a great guy, Frankie. I can always count on you. My sister is a sweetheart, but she’s always been a bit of a free spirit. You’ll have to help keep a firm hand on her while she’s here, so she doesn’t go getting herself into any trouble.”

“Happy to help,” I manage to say despite my suddenly dry mouth.

Keeping a firm hand on Chelsea Snyder won’t be a problem in the slightest. In fact, there’s nothing I want more.

I force a cough to cover my grunt as I shift my body sideways to hide my growing erection. I’ll have to watch myself now that Chelsea is returning home for the first time since she and Andrew left this town for Baltimore years ago. I can’t give away my interest in Chelsea until I figure out how to deal with Andrew. He’s always been protective of his sister, even from a distance. The last thing I need is him thinking he needs to protect her from *me*.

CHAPTER THREE

CHELSEA

“Vacation?” Ivan repeats, as if the very word is a foreign concept to him. Perplexed. The muscles in his left cheek twitch. “You can’t take a vacation.”

His jaw flexes, and I watch as he swallows even more of a reaction. Instead, he shoves his fingers through his ashy blond hair and loosens his tie before undoing the top button of his dress shirt. I’ve seen this reaction a hundred times before.

I knew he wouldn’t be keen on me being away. Which is exactly why I went around him to Human Resources to put in the request for time off and let them be the ones to send the initial notification to him. Luckily, I’ve endeared myself to the head of HR by sticking around despite Ivan’s usual rotating door of executive assistants.

Apparently, before me, Ivan went through assistants faster than water slips through a person’s fingers. Rolling away before he ever even learned their names properly.

“You’ll be in good hands with the temp while I’m away, Mr. Rhodes.” He’ll hate the temp.

He shakes his head. “No.”

“It’s only two weeks.” Hopefully less. The head of HR—I really wish I wasn’t quite so bad with names—encouraged me to max out the time I could take at one time. *Just in case.*

Ivan huffs out a laugh. “Two weeks is unacceptable. And how many times do I have to remind you that in private you can call me Ivan?”

“Sorry, Ivan,” I apologize automatically. I do a decent job most of the time, but it’s hard to be so casual when I nervously feel like I’m under a microscope. I always feel like this when he’s upset with me... At least he’s mercifully upset with me far less often than most people. I can’t imagine feeling this way all the time.

“You can make it up to me by cancelling your trip,” he deadpans.

I giggle nervously, cutting the sound off abruptly when I realize his face is still serious. So serious. He’s not joking. His eyebrows have even straightened into the harsh lines I’m used to seeing when he’s particularly annoyed with how a meeting has gone.

I’m suddenly very concerned that I might not have a job when I return if I hold firm on taking this time away. I chew at the inside of my cheeks. Ivan’s eyes immediately zero in on the motion, and he sighs heavily.

“One week.” He holds his finger up. His face is pained. A bead of sweat has developed at his temple. “You may take one week of your vacation time, *if* you leave me the address for where you’ll be and names for who you’ll be in contact with while you’re away. I’ll also require a daily check-in.”

My nose scrunches. “For what?”

He blinks at me with a blank expression on his classically handsome face. For a second, it seems like he doesn’t actually have an answer. “You’re the only person that knows my business almost as well as I do,” he explains slowly to me after a moment, as if I’m a child. “I need to know we can debrief regularly in case anything significant arises.”

Ah. Duh, Chelsea.

“Of course.” I nod overly enthusiastically, relieved that the end of this conversation appears to be within sight. He narrows his eyes like he can read my relief. He probably can. We spend more time together than most married couples.

“And Chelsea?”

“Yes, sir?”

“I’m sorry your brother has fallen ill, but this better be a one-time occurrence. Don’t you ever dare go around my back to HR to take a last-minute vacation again.” Furious. An emotion that’s never been directed my way before. Not from my boss.

I drop my chin to my chest. To Ivan, I'm sure it looks like guilt for going behind his back. In reality, I feel guilty for lying to HR about my brother being sick.

Ivan dismisses me early, treating it like a favor even though I think he just can't stand to look at me for the rest of the work day. I've learned from working closely with him for so long that he's easily distracted by his own anger. Get him too riled up and he completely loses track of what he's doing. I've learned to bribe him with things like coffee, new ties, or lunch from his favorite steakhouse to calm him down.

I push thoughts of Ivan and his anger from my head, focusing instead on one that's more pressing. Because the problem with being let out of work early is that the last place I want to be is at home. I keep picturing my stalker jumping out of a closet or hiding behind my shower curtain. So instead of going home, I call the one person I *can* call in this city.

* * *

Whose idea was it to make the sun so bright? I groan as I bury my face deeper into the sleeve of my baby pink sweater.

Hannah laughs and pats my shoulder. "Here."

I pull my arm away from my face just enough to look out of one narrowed eyelid at her. She holds out a pair of rose-gold sunglasses that I declined when she tried to offer them to me before leaving our complex.

"I told you that you'd want them." She shrugs.

"Thank you," I mumble as I swallow my pride and take them from her, sliding them haphazardly onto my face to protect my sensitive eyes. "I got a false sense of security from not waking up feeling sick."

She nods sympathetically. "That second pitcher of margaritas was probably a mistake."

"And yet you're perfectly put together as usual." Now that my eyes are protected, I'm able to actually look at my friend as she sits beside me in the taxi, her legs somehow delicately

crossed despite the tight space. She has to be nearly a foot taller than me, and I feel squeezed tight in here. Incredible.

Her face is peaceful. Happy. Blissed.

Hannah shrugs again. “I go out to drinks after work all the time. Your boss likes to work you like a dog around the clock so you can’t socialize. It makes sense that I’d hold up better, Chels.”

“He doesn’t work me like a dog.” I bristle slightly.

I’m lucky to have the job that I do. The pay and benefits are incredibly good considering I don’t have a college education and started working for Ivan with only a couple years of administrative experience under my belt. Even getting an interview with him came as a shock.

Hannah tsks. “It’s okay to like something and still criticize the bad parts, you know?”

“That’s... fair,” I admit begrudgingly. “I do work a lot.”

“Look at you now though, getting an entire week’s vacation to go out into the world and be the vivacious woman you are,” she says with a lighthearted giggle. Hannah winks conspiratorially, as if she expects me to *sow my wild oats* while I’m back in my small hometown. Not likely.

“I’m going home to see my brother,” I remind her. “And considering how small my hometown is, I would hardly consider it *being out in the world*.”

Hannah winks again, though this time she does it dramatically, like an old Hollywood starlet. “Life is all about perception, my friend.”

I breathe out a laugh and shake my head at her. I wish I was half as charismatic as Hannah. We had a lot of fun last night drinking margaritas while eating tacos in the back of a weird hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant that I probably couldn’t find again if my life depended on it. I also vaguely recall Hannah being responsible for the line dancing that broke out with the live band that was playing in the tiny place.

It was fun. It was the kind of thing someone at my age *should* be doing after work.

Yet I only wound up there because I'm spooked by what may very well be a genuine stalker. And here I am, running home with my tail between my legs. My fond memories of last night give way to more melancholy as the reality of my trip sinks in.

Speaking of my trip...

Please don't forget to pick me up.

I resend my flight info even though I've already sent it through twice. The second time, my brother finally responded with a thumbs-up emoji. Ugh. He's yet to respond to my texts this morning, but my flight is early. I'm hoping he just isn't up yet. He's always had a bad habit of working wacky hours when he gets caught up in a project.

Though, these days, I'm not even sure what kind of projects he might be working on. It's been a long while since we kept up with each other regularly. Guilt gnaws at the edges of my stomach. I send another message:

I can't wait to see you, Andrew!

Suddenly, my spine prickles with awareness. The awareness that comes from feeling *watched*. A feeling that's growing too familiar and that shouldn't be following me in a moving vehicle as I flee town. *No*. I sink down slightly in my seat as my head turns toward the window, my eyes scanning for any sign of...

What am I even looking for? What does a stalker look like? Should I be looking for a trench coat? Binoculars? That car with awfully dark tinted windows?

No, I guess not. The car turns the opposite direction of us at the next light. And there are no trench coats or binoculars to be found.

"Are you sure you're going to survive your flight?" Hannah asks, real concern flooding her voice. "You're getting really pale. Are you going to be sick?"

There's a horrified gasp from the ride share driver who has been silent until now. "Not in the car!"

"I'm not going to be sick," I reassure him. Based on his worried glances he passes my way in the rear view mirror every few seconds, he doesn't really believe me.

At least we're almost to the airport. I need a distraction for the last few minutes of this drive to curb my paranoia. I think back to last night and am struck by a vivid memory of Hannah being jealous I was taking a trip and on the spot deciding she should take one of her own.

"Hey." I shift my body to look curiously over at Hannah. "You never told me last night where you decided to buy your impromptu plane ticket for."

Hannah tilts her head. "Oh, I didn't? I'm headed to Vegas."

"Isn't it hot there?" I've never been, but I know my basic geography well enough to know she's planning to head for the desert. Hannah stares at me blankly until I remind her, "You packed sweaters and boots last night after you impulse bought your plane ticket."

"Wow, I guess I'm really going to wind up regretting that, huh?" She exaggerates a funny face, and I force a fake laugh. She's being weird all of a sudden, but I don't want to call her on it after having such a good time together last night.

I guess everyone deserves to keep a *few* secrets.

I don't have time to ask more questions anyway, because the driver has finished the drive to the airport drop-off in record speed. He practically tosses our bags at us from the trunk in his hurry to be done with us.

"Enjoy your trip. See you when you get back!" Hannah squeezes me in a tight hug that seems to be over almost as quick as it starts.

She disappears instantly into the abyss of the crowded airport. Hannah has luggage to check, and I only have my carry-on. Besides that, we're booked on different airlines. I head off to security alone and try to ignore the lingering sensation of unwanted attention.

“How would a stalker even get through security?” I whisper to myself with a soft laugh.

A woman walking past me shoots me a dirty look and shoos her two kids quickly away from me. I barely restrain the urge to call out that *I’m* not the stalker I’m referencing. I would like to minimize my odds of ending up on a no-fly list today, thank you very much.

I do my best to take a calming breath as I step into the security line. *Go to your happy place, Chelsea.* Of course, the problem is that I don’t have a happy place. That’s just a thing people say... Isn’t it?

I’m losing my mind.

I squeeze my eyes closed and resolve not to think about my maybe-stalker until I’m safely at my brother’s side.

I don’t think about my maybe-stalker as I feel eyes on the back of my neck the entire time I stand in line waiting for security to clear me.

I don’t think about my maybe-stalker as I hear perfect echoes of my own footsteps following me to my gate.

I don’t even think about my maybe-stalker when I swear I hear my name stage-whispered from within a passing crowd as I wait for them to start boarding my flight.

Because that would be *crazy*. And I’m not crazy. I’m just going back to my hometown to visit my estranged brother for funsies. Or because he’s uh, sick, depending on who you ask.

And so I also *definitely* don’t think about my maybe-stalker as my flight takes off... The other two seats in my row of the plane mysteriously empty.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHELSEA

Ring. Ring. Ring.

The shrill chime of my unanswered call makes my stomach queasy as I drop onto the bench just outside of the airport doors. My eyes continue to hopelessly scan the short line of cars outside the arrival gates—as if I could have somehow overlooked my brother instead of facing reality...

It's been a single day and Andrew has already forgotten about me.

There's a pang in my chest. A part of me wonders if this is exactly what I deserve for coming home after all this time. Andrew is the saint who sacrificed everything to come back and care for our great aunt when she got too sick to be alone.

I stayed in Baltimore. I kept my head down and worked as if my hometown—and the severe woman who raised us with very, very little warmth—never existed. I didn't even return for the funeral. Though in my defense, there wasn't a proper funeral. No one was interested in saying goodbye to the harsh woman, save for my brother.

Our great aunt spent most of her time in isolation. In fact, if it hadn't been for her taking in Andrew and me, her big house on the hill would probably have been otherwise empty for her whole life. Just the crotchety old woman hunched over her desk with tweezers and whatever well-priced precious gems she could get her hands on at any given moment.

I should try calling Andrew again.

"Hello?" my brother's muffled voice answers on the second ring.

I suck in a deep, relieved breath. "Andrew. Finally. You were supposed to pick me up from the airport."

There's a brief silence followed by, "Shit. How late am I?"

“About thirty minutes.” An hour, actually.

“Shit.”

“It’s okay,” I tell him slowly. “I can see about getting a ride share or taxi.”

“No, no. Don’t do that. Shit.” My brother’s favorite word these days seems to be *shit*. Oh, who am I kidding? It always was. He curses again and then says, “I’m right in the middle of testing a new project I’ve been working on.” It’s exactly the reason I worried about him picking me up in the first place. He’s quick to add, “But I have a friend who can pick you up. I’ll call him right now.”

“You don’t need to—”

The line falls completely silent. I pull the phone away from my face and glance at the screen to see my brother has already ended the call.

“Awesome,” I mutter to myself. I guess it doesn’t matter if he sends some friend I don’t know to pick me up. If I ordered a car, I’d be getting a ride from a stranger all the same. I’m just a little jumpy still after my early-morning airport paranoia.

I lean back against the bench and brace myself to continue waiting. I’ve already gotten (slightly embarrassing) sympathetic looks from the airport security woman keeping cars from parking in the pick-up lane. I could see the pity in her eyes when she passed, offering me a tight smile. I look for her again for something to watch to pass the time.

She’s made her way down to the end of the line. I squint, trying to decide if the person she’s talking to is arguing with her or is just grumpy.

“Chelsea.”

My heart ricochets up my throat as I leap to my feet and whirl with wild eyes to find the source of the unfamiliar voice saying my name. I know I didn’t imagine it this time. I—

I freeze.

For a split second, all I can see is a broad upper body at eye level. The man is in a thin zip-up hoodie that leaves

nothing to the imagination. It's too small for him. I can see every ridge of his—*very well defined*—abs. Someone should really do something about global warming, because the temperature outside just unexpectedly leaped about twenty degrees. Sweat pools at my temple as my mouth dries.

Then I look up and feel a different kind of temperature shift. My blood runs cold as I lock eyes with two mismatched irises. One brown. One blue. Slightly different in shape, as if they don't quite belong on the same face. A heavily scarred face with blunt eyebrows that give nothing away at their current position.

One thick scar circles his left cheek. Another curves along the left side of his forehead and disappears into his hairline. The skin looks disjointed, as mismatched as his different colored eyes.

“Are you ready to go?” he asks in the same raspy voice that said my name. His eyebrows move slightly and give me a better read on him. Expectation.

I balk and side-step to put more space between us. He's standing far too close for a stranger. “Uh...”

“Your Andrew's sister, Chelsea, right?” His eyebrows rise into high arches. One slightly more rounded than the other. But something about it looks... Fake. Practiced. Insincere.

“That's me,” I answer cautiously.

“And you need a ride.” He holds his hand up and jingles a set of keys. I immediately recognize the lime green lucky rabbit's foot keychain attached to them. It's fake—something I won during a school fair and gave to my brother as a joke when he bought his first car. That old Jeep shouldn't still be running, but I also recognize the chunky key attached to the keychain.

“Do you work at the airport?” I frown.

He shakes his head. “Nope. Just here for you.”

That doesn't make sense. I haven't been off the phone long enough for Andrew to get someone else to pick me up, have I? Am I completely losing my mind here? Is my entire sense of

reality gone? I glance down at my phone still in my hand to make sure I haven't magically lost an hour of my life somehow.

No. It's only been a couple of minutes since my brother hung up on me. But this guy has my brother's keys and Jeep, and this airport isn't that big. I'm being overly cautious because of the whole maybe-stalker thing. This is how small-town life works. People jump in to help each other. The scarred muscle man was probably just borrowing my brother's Jeep and using it nearby, and Andrew got lucky on timing.

"Okay, I'm ready." I reach for my bag on the bench, but the man beats me to them. My bag looks comically small dangling from his thick fingers. "What was your name?"

"I'm Frankie." He offers me his other hand to shake.

Something in me wants to hesitate, but I fight the instinct. So what if his appearance is a little jarring? I refuse to treat a man weird because of something out of his control. He clearly was in some kind of horrible accident. I place my hand in his and focus on breathing normally as his big hand engulfs mine in a warm embrace. He doesn't shake my hand, simply cups it in his own. Surrounding me. Holding onto me.

For a second, we stand with gazes and hands locked together, unmoving.

I clear my throat. "Where are you parked?" I would have been able to pick my brother's Jeep out on sight if it pulled up to pick-up. I tug my hand out of his grasp, noting the weird way Frankie seems to resist letting go of me right away.

"Just around the corner." He nods his head toward the flow of traffic. Ahead, a sign notes there's parking to the right.

"Lead the way." I try to infuse some enthusiasm into my voice, but I don't think I'm doing a great job based on the wary way his eyes narrow slightly at me. Both eyes. The difference is more noticeable when squinting.

He takes a few steps but moves slowly, leaving me to fall into step beside him instead of following him. He seems awfully suspicious of me considering he's the stranger who

showed up out of nowhere to pick me up with minimal explanation.

We're almost to the corner of the building when Frankie's phone goes off in his pocket. He barely glances at the screen before answering, "Hello?"

"Hey, I hate to ask you this, but I need a favor." My brother's voice is loud enough to carry and be recognizable from across the phone line. I strain to make sure I'm hearing him correctly as Frankie grunts noncommittally. "I forgot about picking my sister up from the airport, like an idiot. Do you think you could—"

"Yeah," Frankie interrupts. "Got it."

My footsteps falter as Frankie hangs up on Andrew as abruptly as my brother hung up on me minutes before. Frankie turns his body toward me as he shoves his phone into his pocket and grimaces down at me.

"My brother didn't ask you to pick me up."

"You just heard him ask."

I take a small step back but freeze again as I remember Frankie is holding my bag. Everything important I own is in that bag. I'm not going to abandon it. "But you got here *before* he asked," I point out quietly.

I glance backward quickly, scanning for airport security. She's still way down the row of cars. If I could just get her attention...

"Fuck," Frankie grunts.

I barely have time to register what's happening as his shoulder digs into my midsection and my feet leave the ground. "What are you doing?" I rasp out as I grasp at his back to keep my balance while he throws me casually over his broad shoulder.

"Taking you home," he snaps with finality. Fight or flight fails me as he swiftly turns the corner, and I find myself frozen as I'm carried away by a complete stranger. Completely

unable to react as the stranger takes me home—whatever that means.

CHAPTER FIVE

FRANKIE

I can feel the moment some of the tension in the car dissipate as it sinks in for Chelsea that I really am taking her to her childhood home as promised. She spent the first twenty minutes of our drive nervously joking about me murdering her in the middle of nowhere. I'm pretty sure she mostly *wasn't* joking based on the way she white-knuckled the door handle. I tried not to snap at her for assuming the worst, but considering the optics... Well, they don't look great.

I didn't *intend* to snatch a woman up in broad daylight. It just happened.

My years of pining over a woman I mostly knew from old diaries and social media posts did nothing to prepare me for the reality of Chelsea in the flesh. She's observant. I could see it in the way she studied my face, her eyes following my every muscle twitch.

I expected her to be more like Andrew. A little aloof. Unaware. Desperate for my friendship. *Ha*.

I miscalculated where it comes to Chelsea Snyder.

Won't happen again.

The Jeep skids a little as I take the turn too fast onto the gravel road that leads to the two houses that sit atop the hill at the end. One of the houses is Andrew's—his great aunt's house that was Chelsea and Andrew's childhood home for most of their young lives. The other house belongs to the grumpy neighbor, Susan. She's not particularly friendly, but she has an incredible garden. There's nothing I love more than spending time in the turret of the house looking down at the greenery and vividly colored plants next door.

My attention has been divided between driving and Chelsea, so I hear her sharp inhale when the front of Susan's house comes into view.

“Wow.” Chelsea sounds awestruck. “That’s gorgeous. I guess the moody widow that used to live there moved. Who lives there now?”

I glance over to take in Chelsea’s curious face looking back at me. “The widow still lives there. Her name’s Susan. She’s still moody, but I like to think the plants help.”

“Wow,” Chelsea sighs again, a dreamy quality to her voice.

“You like plants?”

My eyes are back on the windshield as I pull slowly toward the side of the house. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Chelsea purse her lips as she studies me for a moment before answering.

“I love a good garden, especially when it’s growing so full it starts to look a little wild like that.” She likes the same kind of garden I like, then. “Why would that surprise you? Lots of people like plants.”

Her suspicious tone gives me pause. I can’t exactly admit the truth. That her modern apartment with only a modest balcony for outdoor space doesn’t exactly indicate a love of gardening. I’ve researched what she makes for a living. She could afford a house with a yard if she wanted to plant things.

“Just because I’m wearing a dress doesn’t mean I’m a princess who can’t get her hands dirty,” Chelsea adds defensively.

“I didn’t think that at all.” I fight the urge to look at her legs in that dress now that she’s drawn my attention to her outfit. I’ve been trying hard not to think about how easy it would be to slide my hand up her thigh under the skirt of that dress and... What were we talking about again?

“Uh-huh.” Chelsea crosses her arms over her chest as I pull to a stop in front of the dilapidated garage and put Andrew’s Jeep into park. It’s a good thing he forgot about picking his sister up because he would have had a lot of questions about finding his Jeep gone without any warning from me otherwise.

But I think I might be in the clear. I picked up Chelsea, who has calmed down now that she's made it to her intended destination. Plus, Andrew *did* wind up asking me to pick her up, and so now, my woman is here. At home. Where she belongs. With me. The only thing left is to make sure she stays here.

"Let me get your door," I tell her.

I rush out of the Jeep, but I barely make it around the hood before she's already out of her seat and slamming the door shut behind her. "I can get my own door," she tells me, raising her nose slightly in the air.

"I'm just trying to be a gentleman." I have to tread carefully. I feel like I know her, but the truth is that she doesn't know me. Apparently, I'll have to warm her up to me slowly. But I can do that.

Chelsea hums and brushes past me. I grab her by the elbow and pull her back to me before she gets very far.

"I'm sorry for frightening you at the airport," I tell her, my voice a little stiff. Andrew is so aloof that I can't remember the last time I apologized for anything. Nothing ever seems to bother the man besides interrupting his work, and I know better than to do that.

"You didn't." Her lie isn't even remotely believable, but she steels her spine like she wants to seem tough.

"Good. I'd hate for you to be uncomfortable with me here."

"Here?" she repeats the word slowly. "You're staying here?" She glances from the house to me with a deep frown.

I nod. "I live here."

"Oh." She stares at me intensely. It doesn't bother me. I've grown used to the way people stare at me on the rare occasion I venture out. The way I look makes people uncomfortable. Chelsea so far seems less bothered by it than most. Unlike most people, she has yet to ask about my thick scars.

Andrew warned me his sister doesn't know my origin story. We agreed not to hide it, but I'm not jumping to explain myself either. My origin will require extra delicate explanation when it comes to her. I don't want her to think of me as any less of a man when I move between her thighs. I want her to know I'm a man in all the ways that count when I'm inside of her.

Without another word, Chelsea pulls her elbow from my lingering grip. She stomps onward, walking ahead of me with heavy steps that are funny coming from her soft, petite frame. She might look soft, sweet, and delicate, but there's a hint of fire in her. The kind of fire that long ago lit a spark in me that I now want to stoke to a full flame.

I need her more than air. (Literally, since my artificial lungs are actually more decorative than functional.)

I fight back the urge to throw Chelsea over my shoulder again. Forget being a gentleman or warming her up to me. Maybe what she really needs is a firm hand. The woman is like a wild horse that needs to be tamed. A job I'm more than happy to do seeing as how I'm already the one taking care of her the best. No one in Baltimore seems to be protecting her the way she needs. And Andrew means well, but he can barely see past his own glasses when he dedicates himself to a new experiment or invention.

The front door opens as we near. Andrew grins widely as he steps out onto the front porch, his eyes shadowed by the metal roof of the covered porch. "Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes."

Chelsea's entire demeanor changes in front of my eyes. The suspiciousness falls away as she rushes to meet her brother at the bottom of the steps. He barely steps off the last step before she leaps toward him. He wraps his arms around her and squeezes, resting his cheek on the top of her head and inhaling. I know he's been waiting years for this moment—Chelsea's stalker has given him the perfect excuse to finally draw his estranged sister home.

“Chelsea, it’s been too long.” His grip around his sister tightens, and I hold back the urge to growl. I don’t care that they’re blood relatives, their hug is completely appropriate, and that Andrew has never given any woman a second look; he’s holding her too close.

“I know,” Chelsea says, mercifully pulling away and swatting her brother playfully on the shoulder. “About two hours longer than necessary, though, since you forgot to pick me up.”

Andrew grimaces. “Shit. I’m sorry again about that. I’m working on this new project with aging.”

“Oh, Andrew. Don’t tell me you’ve gone all obsessed with some *fountain of youth* dreams,” Chelsea says as scrunches her nose and tilts her head to one side in obvious disdain. She looks like she’s used to her brother’s antics but exasperated by them all the same.

“No. Not at all. The work I’m doing is to *create* aging. To mimic the process.”

Chelsea stares blankly. I can’t blame her. Andrew’s ideas are often obscure and hard to explain. Time has taught me that he *always* has an explanation for the odd projects he works on—those explanations are sometimes just a little slow to reveal themselves. I have no doubt there’s a reason for his work, even if it’s hard to imagine anyone would want a product or treatment to *increase* aging.

Andrew waves his hand. “Nothing for you to worry about anyway, you’re aging just fine on your own.”

Chelsea’s jaw falls open as Andrew’s cheeks pinken. His words make it sound like a dig at her looking older.

“I didn’t mean it like *that*,” he rushes to explain. “You’re aging just fine. Beautifully, even.”

He’s not wrong. There are only slight differences in her appearance from her high school photos to her most recent social media posts. There are a few lines around her eyes, but there are dark circles under them that I don’t approve of.

Otherwise, she looks like she could have stepped out of a time capsule buried on the day of her high school graduation.

Uncanny.

“I’m glad you’re here, Chels. Let me show you what I’ve done to this place,” Andrew offers. His gaze slides to me. “And hey, thanks a lot for picking my sister up, Frankie. I couldn’t ask for a better friend.”

I’m equal parts smug and guilty as I mutter, “No problem.”

I relish the way Chelsea looks curiously over at me, no doubt trying to reconcile her own initial opinion of me with her brother’s praise. I also feel guilty as hell for such praise knowing that picking up Chelsea had nothing to do with being a good friend to Andrew. And I’m not sure my friend would be so quick to praise me if he had any idea the kind of twisted thoughts I’m having about his sister.

The kind of dark thoughts that refuse to stay locked away. Thoughts that demand to be acted on—consequences be damned.

* * *

“I understand it’s an important account, but my return flight is already booked and non-refundable.” Chelsea’s voice carries through the vent, allowing me to hear her clearly from my bedroom, which used to be Andrew’s. I imagine she has no idea that her every word carried directly to her brother’s bedroom all these years via the air vent.

I followed Chelsea’s every move as she re-familiarized herself with the house and her brother. Then she decided to call it an early night to head to bed, and I got stuck pacing my bedroom. Being one room away from her with all these beds nearby is wreaking havoc on my system.

My cock is rock hard. I stroked myself when she first answered the phone call from who I’ve gathered must be her boss. But as the call has gone on, my hands now rest fisted in

my lap as I sit on the bed leaning toward the direction of the vent in order to hear every word clearly.

He's trying to get her back to Baltimore. She hasn't even been here a day and he's already trying to take her from me.

"It's really kind of you to offer to pay for a new ticket, Ivan, but I'm here for my brother and he needs me."

It's interesting to hear her lying to her boss. Even more interesting that she's referring to him by his first name. The sound of another man's name rolling off her tongue makes the hair on the back of my neck stand straight.

"It's only a week," Chelsea says.

But that's not right. She told Andrew she would be here for two weeks. And I planned to use every minute of those two weeks to lock her down and convince her never to leave again. Fuck. One week is half the time—and this fucker she works for has the nerve to try to cut the time even shorter. That's not happening.

Chelsea laughs, but the sound is off. I'll bet it's a fake laugh. It doesn't sound genuine at all, and I wonder if this Ivan guy even knows it or if her boss is so far up his own ass he doesn't really notice anything about Chelsea at all. I'm not sure which concept pisses me off more.

"I'll see how tomorrow goes and think about your offer, okay?" she folds, making me shoot to my feet with an audible thump as my big feet thunk the ground.

There's not a chance in hell I'll let her leave. Not unless it's with me by her side and we're on our way to Baltimore to pack up her apartment to move her home. Or to go deal with the stalker who seems to have taken a liking to *my* woman. Either way, the end result is her back here with me. Sharing a bed, feeling her under me, my cock buried in her wet pussy, my name the only one falling off those plump lips of hers.

I grunt as I release one tight fist and wrap my hand around my cock again. I squeeze until the pressure offers a bit of relief, but it's not the kind of relief I need most right now.

What I need is the relief that will come from knowing that Chelsea can't go anywhere. Not until I say so.

A fucked-up plan forms in my head, and I have every intention of acting on it. I force myself to sit back on the bed and listen as Chelsea finishes her phone call. I stay still to listen to the sounds of her moving around the room—getting ready for bed, I assume—after that. I prefer to keep moving as much as possible to avoid boredom usually, but for once, stillness comes easily to me.

Only after hours have passed do I set my next move in motion.

CHAPTER SIX

CHELSEA

I'm being watched.

My eyelids fly open, and I jolt upright in bed. Our eyes meet almost instantly, my gaze going right to where he sits in the armchair that usually faces out the picture window overlooking the side yard and the neighbor's house. He has the chair turned to face me as he sits leisurely, his arms relaxed across the arm rests and his head lightly lulled back.

Frankie makes no attempt to hide, and he keeps his mouth shut too. There's no attempt to explain his presence in my bedroom while I've been sleeping.

And I *know* I locked my bedroom door last night, though I guess the old locks might not be so hard to get around. Especially for someone like Frankie, who seems determined to encroach on my privacy and free will.

I need to try using different tactics. Ignoring and resisting him yesterday did nothing. I need to think of him like one of Ivan's needier employees, desperate for the boss' attention. If I can just get to the root of what Frankie needs, he can move on and leave me alone.

I relax my shoulders as I think through this new plan.

This is my comfort zone. I do this all the time on Ivan's behalf. All I have to do is pay attention to the details, get to the root of what Frankie *really* wants, and figure out a way to satisfy that need without sacrificing myself in the process.

A breeze. Totally.

“Your nipples are getting hard.”

My mouth falls open as I yank a handful of the duvet up to cover my chest. I forgot I fell asleep in only a thin sleep tank. “It's cold in here.” It's actually not.

“No, it's not.”

The nerve of this guy. *Take a deep breath and think of it like work, Chelsea.* “If there’s something you need, I’m happy to help, but I should probably get up and get dressed first.”

“Be my guest.” He gestures for me to go ahead.

I can’t help but huff out a laugh. The audacity is actually impressive. “Alone, preferably.”

“Your preferences have been taken into consideration,” he says as he grins lazily. “But I think I’ll stay.”

There’s no way I’m abandoning the safety of the thick duvet with him in the room. And I’m especially not entertaining the idea of getting dressed in front of him. The entirety of my sexual history is made up of three disappointing experiences with the only man I’ve dated as an adult. All three times were fumbling in a dark room with neither of us managing to get off before awkwardly vowing to try again another time.

The third time, the guy cried and told me he had a porn addiction. I broke things off on the spot when it became clear he was upset by the effect on his attempts at real-life sex, but not so upset that he intended to do anything about it.

I gave up online dating after that. Then I got too busy with work to even entertain the idea of dating.

I don’t have nearly the kind of experience that would make me comfortable undressing from my pajamas in front of a man. Especially not one who looks at me like he’s...

Hungry.

Goosebumps break out across my arms, and a chill shoots up my spine. I’m not sure any man has ever looked at me so intensely before.

“How long have you been watching me sleep?” I ask as I take in his rumpled clothes—the same outfit he was in yesterday.

“Hours.”

“Hours?” Alarm bells blare in my head. “Don’t you sleep?”

I wince as my own question sinks in. I blink rapidly to try to clear my brain, which is clearly not functioning optimally. Because whether this man slept or not is probably not the most important thing to wonder about after he admits to sitting creepily in my room watching me sleep for *hours*.

Frankie shrugs. “In general, yes, I need sleep. My organs don’t properly update or refresh until I sleep, but I can go a few days before it causes any disruption to my system.”

What? Is my brother living with a runaway from the nearby psych hospital? He sounds delusional, almost like he’s describing himself as a robot. The more time I spend around Frankie, the more unappealing the idea of returning home is becoming. At least my Baltimore stalker hasn’t gone any further than spying on my apartment and leaving anonymous gifts so far. Frankie is quite literally breaking into my bedroom. And while something in my gut is keeping me from reaching a full-blown panic over this weirdness, it’s just not normal.

“Frankie, you’re freaking me out.”

Something flickers across his face—a hint of guilt. Or am I only seeing what I want to see? He doesn’t so much as twitch a muscle as if to leave. My brother can be a little clueless sometimes, but this guy either takes that to a whole other level or...

He doesn’t care.

My brain is fully awake now, and I take in the way his lips are tipped up on one side, almost in a smirk. He knows I’m uncomfortable and he doesn’t care. In fact, that seems to be the goal. He wants to throw me off for some reason. And I don’t think I’m ready to face what that reason might be.

“You need to leave,” I announce more bluntly.

“Or what?” He crosses his thick arms over his broad chest. The words are challenging, but he somehow makes them sound more curious than anything.

“If you don’t, then I will. I came here because my brother offered to help me feel safe at home. If I knew I wouldn’t feel

safe here, I wouldn't have come. If you insist on continuing with whatever game this is, then I'm going to go home. Today. On whatever flight gets me out of here the fastest."

Whatever this thing is with Frankie is messing with my head far too much for my liking. If I have to, I'll reluctantly give in to Ivan's offer to pay for an early return flight. The week off from work could have been nice, but I *could* be back sooner to help resolve some trouble with the paperwork on a new hotel deal he's been trying to close for months.

I worked tirelessly on that paperwork, only for legal to apparently drop the ball the second I stepped away. You'd think there would be too much oversight for something like that to happen, but every once in a while, Ivan swoops in with this kind of problem and begs me to handle the tedious part of being the liaison between departments.

This is why I never get a break from work. The Ivan thing, not the Frankie thing. Though this time it's Frankie turning out to be the real dilemma. At this rate, he's going to send me running from my own childhood home.

"There's just one problem with that threat," Frankie muses, bringing me back to the present problem.

"And what is that?"

"It might be hard to get home without your wallet." His voice is deadpan, completely void of teasing.

My eyes dart toward the dresser where I set my purse last night. There's no trace of the small leather bag. My eyes widen with alarm. "You stole my purse?" A nervous giggle escapes me before I can swallow it down. My heart thuds in my chest as I continue, "You're psycho, but that's not going to stop me. I'll book a hotel from my phone and stay there while I replace my ID. Everything else can be replaced when I get home."

I scowl, though, already anticipating the work I'll have to put in to replace everything if Frankie is serious about hiding my stuff. Hopefully I'm calling his bluff.

Not so much, apparently.

He shrugs as his grin widens. “Might be a little hard to do that with no phone.”

My head swivels slowly toward the nightstand... It’s as empty as the space on top of the dresser. I just gape for so long that my mouth begins to dry out. How on earth did this giant of a man sneak around my bedroom without waking me up? I always thought I was such a light sleeper, jerking awake at the slightest sound—a dog barking from the street or a neighbor flushing their toilet.

“My boss is supposed to check in with me every day,” I intone seriously. Ivan will definitely freak when I don’t answer. Normally, that might bother me. Today, it feels like a saving grace. “The second he doesn’t hear from me, he’s going to seek me out. He’s having problems with a deal and needs my help.”

“Let him,” Frankie says simply.

“I could just yell for my brother’s help.” Even I can hear the doubt creeping into my voice. Who is this guy and where the hell did he even come from? He never left me alone long enough with Andrew yesterday for me to ask any questions, and my brother acted like it was just a given to have him hovering around constantly.

“You can try, but he’s in the basement working on his project. He soundproofed his workspace, and he has classic rock blaring, but you certainly are still welcome to try.”

This is insane—I didn’t run from a stalker just to get comfy here bantering with a lunatic. I’m sitting here like we’re having a friendly chat about him holding me hostage. Not only am I wondering what’s wrong with him, but now I’m also wondering what’s wrong with *me*.

I inch toward the far edge of the bed. As much as I want the blanket’s protection, I want space from Frankie even more. He’s too intense. And I’m... I’m feeling a weird fluttering in the pit of my stomach where I’m certain fear should be. This fluttering is something else, though. Something too close to excitement, or maybe anticipation.

Either way, I refuse to feed that feeling.

I slip out from under the cover and move immediately toward the wall to put my back to it. Frankie still hasn't moved, but I don't want to give him any opportunity to sneak up on me when he does.

Frankie's eyes run the length of my body, drinking me in with that hungry expression returning to his scarred face. The fluttering in my stomach multiplies, as if a small swarm of butterflies have suddenly taken up residence in it. I wouldn't ordinarily think of myself as a particularly sensual person, but the way he looks at me is making me feel more sexual than I've felt in the rest of my life combined. I might as well be naked before him with the way his eyes trace my subtle curves.

"I've waited a long time for this," he says before letting out a low whistle as his eyes rise slowly back to my face.

"To make a woman uncomfortable in her childhood bedroom?" I challenge.

His left eyebrows twitches with annoyance. His mouth forms the word *no*, but the sound is absent. It takes a second for him to get his words out. When he does finally speak, it's through gritted teeth, "I've waited a long time to lay eyes on you in person, to have you close enough to touch. To taste. Yet somehow, even in my wildest dreams, I wasn't prepared for the reality. You're more beautiful than I realized. More vibrant and full of just enough fight to make you a little sassy. You're even better than my fantasies, Chelsea, and finally I can make you mine."

My head recoils, knocking into the wall behind me. He's making my head spin. We've only just met, but he's waxing poetic in a way that makes no attempt to hide an existing obsession with me.

Frankie is friends with my brother, it would make sense to know of my existence. Especially since he apparently lives in my brother's house and the two of them are close enough that Andrew trusts him implicitly. But the rest of it doesn't make

sense. How could he act so sure of his interest in me without really knowing anything about me?

“You don’t get to claim someone for yourself just because you like the way they look.”

Frankie scoffs loudly. “Your looks are stunning, but it’s all of you I wish to possess.”

Of course there’s more to it than looks, but I’m fishing. His comment about being vibrant and sassy means he’s looking deeper than skin-level. But that’s still only a first impression. No one who spends any real time with me would ever think of me as sassy. In fact, I can silently admit to myself that my most defining personality trait is probably being a pushover.

Which probably also explains how I’m still standing frozen in this room with a maniac who clearly isn’t mentally stable. And I need it to be the *only* explanation. Because if I look any closer, I might have to acknowledge that the fluttering in my belly is trying to tell me something.

Something I have no business thinking.

Something daring me to let my own gaze wander and take in this man who has so calmly decided I’m destined to belong to him.

“I’m done with cat-and-mouse,” Frankie announces, taking a sizeable step forward.

I shrink against the wall. “What are you doing?”

“Claiming you.” A possessive growl tears from his throat as he continues stalking toward me.

There’s nowhere for me to go. My back is to the wall, he’s between the door and me, and on my other side is only a closet or the window. As my adrenaline spikes, I make a desperate move toward the bed. I try to scramble over it, but Frankie moves faster than I do.

He grabs my ankle and tugs, cutting off my momentum. I fall helplessly flat onto the bed, desperately scrambling at the duvet in my continued effort to get away. My efforts are in vain. Frankie moves his hand to my collarbone and presses

down just enough to effectively pin me in place. I'm on my back, staring wide-eyed up at him as I wait for his next move.

He leans down to whisper directly into my ear, his breath blowing across my sensitive earlobe and causing me to shiver, "You were mine the second you entered this house, pet. I'll destroy anyone who tries to let you out." He punctuates his words with a dark chuckle.

As he pulls back, I tilt my chin defiantly to meet his eyes. "You're a monster," I say with finality.

"Oh, my pet. You have no idea how right you are."

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHELSEA

The way he calls me *pet* is insulting. I know that beyond a doubt. So why is there a small part of me that softens just a touch over the reverent way he uses the demeaning pet name? Literally.

Frankie is getting into my head and under my skin. There's no use denying it to myself.

"You're hurting me," I whisper to see if it will make him back off.

"No, I'm not." His fingers flex against my skin, but the force of his grip doesn't change. He's right that he's not actually hurting me. His grip is firm enough to command attention without actually causing any pain. There's a sense of dominance to his touch, but it's not sadistic.

I'm seriously worried about what's happening to my own mental health the longer I share such intimate space with him. There's something happening to me that feels downright biological. Call it a need or an urge. Something that recognizes—and unexpectedly longs for—the outdated attempt to claim me for himself.

He's no better than a caveman. Truly a monster...

So why am I so turned on that my body is flushed? Overheated and squirming beneath his touch. I'm mortified by my reaction to him. How can one person's obsession with me terrify me while another's turns me on? It's irrational. Maybe I've spent too many nights sharing takeout with Hannah, listening to her talk about the scandalous anti-heroes in the dark romance novels she reads. She's fried my brain with toxic romantic gestures and graphic retellings of morally questionable smut. That can be the only explanation.

It's an easy excuse for my body's reaction, all wrapped up in a neat bow. It's an easy enough pill to swallow. I may be

good at lying to myself on occasion, but I'm not quite *that* good at lying to myself.

The truth is, I'm getting a genuine thrill from his interest in a way that feels a little sick and twisted. I know nothing about our interactions since the moment he approached me at the airport seems normal or healthy, but a part of me likes it.

I've always been a little awkward—Andrew and I both were growing up. He isolated from others to protect himself from ridicule, but I went the opposite direction. When I couldn't understand other people, I began to study them. I learned to read the nuances of their actions instead of trying to read the meaning behind their words. People don't always say what they mean—but their mannerisms almost always give them away.

The skill grew into a double-edged sword. It helps me be an efficient executive assistant, but it also tends to make me off-putting in normal social situations. I inevitably default to catering too much to others instead of being my own person. It drives most people away pretty quickly.

Not Frankie. He watched my weird mannerisms all day yesterday and still chose to wait up for hours, watching me and intrusively interfering with my ability to leave.

No one has ever been so intensely devoted to seeking my affection before.

“Do you know that your nose twitches when you're thinking really hard?” Frankie asks, leaning closer so that as he speaks his chest rumbles and brushes mine.

I swallow hard before answering, “No. I know my brother does that.”

I've never really spent much time thinking about my own mannerisms, despite how much time I dedicate to evaluating other people's. I've never considered what my own physical gestures might give away.

Of course Frankie would notice. He's used to my brother, who is so bad at expressing himself verbally that sometimes all a person can do is read his other cues if they want to

understand him. It seems Frankie has learned to do exactly that.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” Frankie commands.

I raise my eyebrows at him as I huff out a sarcastic laugh. “Does this usually work for you with women? The bossiness and the manhandling?”

“You sound jealous.”

“I do not!” Crap, do I? I play the words over in my head. They’re meant to be a dig at his lack of social tact, but maybe my tone got a *touch* defensive.

“The way you blush is very pretty.” Frankie’s eyes drift to the bit of exposed skin beneath his hand and just above the neckline of my top. “I particularly enjoy the way you’re growing flushed here.” His hand slides away from my collarbone to brush dangerously close to my modest cleavage.

“Well, this whole interaction is embarrassing,” I mumble. *Amongst all of the other reasons I’m suddenly finding myself unexpectedly overheated.*

“Why?” His eyes move to mine, studying me too closely for comfort. “Is it because you’re worried I can tell that you’re getting turned on?”

If only the earth itself could open up and swallow me whole to save me another moment of mortification. The man is too observant. Too blunt. It’s catching me off-guard, but it also makes me feel so *seen*.

“I never thought of myself as a monster, no matter what other people thought. Not until I got my first glimpse at you waiting outside of the airport,” Frankie says as his fingers caress my loose hair, slightly tangled from sleep. “I saw you, and I knew I would do anything to have you. Even if it makes me a monster. Even if you hate me at first. In time, I’m confident you may come to care for me even a fraction of the way I do for you, and that will be enough for me.”

“If you wanted me to care for you, you’d invite me to dinner to get to know each other. You wouldn’t break into my room to watch me sleep and then threaten to hold me hostage.”

“Oh, I’m not threatening anything, my pet. You *are* my hostage, at least for the time being.”

He says the words so casually, and my body betrays me in response. The muscles in my abdomen tighten and my thighs tense. A physical need builds within me as he hovers over me, close enough to be suggestive but not close enough to satisfy my growing curiosity.

My very, very inappropriate curiosity.

This isn’t why I’m here. Suddenly, I actually can’t remember why I’m here. In this town, in this house, or pinned under this man in my bed. All I can think about is how he’s so close to rubbing up against me, giving me the friction I need... A moan escapes from deep in my chest, the sound unmistakable.

“Are you suffering with the weight of your need, pet? I could take care of that for you.” He turns his hand to run the backs of his fingers down in a straight line between my breasts and down to my navel. The thin sleep shirt does nothing to disguise the heat of his touch.

My breathing grows ragged as Frankie’s gaze follows his hand, taking in my barely concealed body from close range. My nipples poke visibly through the thin material of the top.

“This has to go,” he mutters.

Frankie grabs a handful of my shirt and yanks, pulling it easily off of me despite my position on the bed. I can hear the fabric stretch when it catches slightly at my neck, but he still manages to get it right off of me. It happens so quickly all I can do is gape up at him.

“You have some nerve,” I chastise him, but there’s no bite to my words. No oomph.

He looks at me with a lazy grin. “I have a few nerves. The normal human body has trillions of them.”

I’m not sure what the hell that has to do with anything. My eyes wander down slightly, taking stock of the way he’s pressing closer and closer to me. I can see the bulge in his

pants from his erection, leaving it clear that he's as thoroughly affected by this interaction as I am.

I try to rub my thighs together discreetly, but he takes note immediately.

“All you have to do is ask, and I'll take care of that itch *properly* for you.”

“That'll never happen.” I have *some* semblance of self-control left. Barely. Marginally. Maybe.

“You're such a fucking brat,” he growls. “And if you want to act like a brat, then I'll treat you like one.”

I'm too caught off guard by the words to respond to them. Even when Nan got frustrated with me as a kid, I was never accused of being a brat. I've always been called a sweetheart and was often treated like the pushover that I admittedly have the tendency to be. It's only Frankie's behavior that brings the defensiveness out of me.

Treating me like a brat apparently means pulling away, leaving me squirming on the bed. A chill runs up my spine at the sudden brush of air conditioning across my exposed chest now that his body heat isn't radiating down from on top of me.

Frankie yanks his own shirt off and then shucks his pants off like it's nothing. He stands in front of me completely nude as I prop myself up on my elbows and stare wordlessly. His entire body is scarred just like his face, though I've grown used to that so quickly that the sight of the body scars barely fazes me. His well-defined abs are drool worthy. His muscular chest just as much so. I'm intrigued by the tattoo that runs across one of his pecs, the eye even more drawn there because of the scar around that part of him. Convenient that whatever accident is responsible for his scarring doesn't seem to have damaged any of the ink.

“Come here.” Frankie grabs the sides of my shorts and tears them down my legs as I try to kick out at him reflexively. It isn't effective at all.

Being stripped of my shorts has an unfortunate consequence that I'm certain doesn't escape Frankie's notice,

considering he drops his head with a groan and inhales deeply. The smell of my arousal is now thick in the air between us. I'm so wet the room smells like sex instantly as he tosses my shorts aside.

"I didn't ask for this," I remind him with a hoarse voice.

He shrugs moodily. "Haven't told me to stop yet either."

Such a jerk. I'm about to snap back at that, but the words die on my lips as he abruptly grabs my hips and lifts me to turn me over on my stomach on the bed.

"Ass up," he commands.

When I don't immediately follow directions he huffs and grabs me again to position me how he wants me. My lower body stays flat on the bed, with my back arched and my butt high in the air. He doesn't give me time to react or participate, even if I want to. My brain feels sluggish from the inappropriate arousal I'm feeling, and I'm not thinking clearly enough for this.

I yelp as he swats my ass firmly with his palm, the sting of pain unexpected.

"That's the only warning you'll get. Stop mouthing off just for the hell of it or I'll spank you for real."

For real? My entire face flushes at the thought that he considers that only a warning and not a real spank. I can only imagine what the real thing would feel like if that swat had no muscle behind it. I shudder slightly. There's no lying to myself on this one—the shudder is more anticipation than fear.

"That's better," Frankie praises when I stay silent.

I bristle slightly, but I keep silent. I refuse to cave to that anticipation and goad him into spanking me again. This is already too much, and I'm not actually doing anything to stop him. In fact, Frankie doesn't have a finger on me at the moment, yet I make no attempt to move.

His fingers connect with the back of my thigh a moment later, and I jerk in surprise. I tense in anticipation of admonishment, but none comes. Seconds later, his mouth is

too busy for words. I gasp as his tongue parts my seam, dipping to taste my arousal with a hum of approval. The vibration makes my core clench tightly. I've barely received oral sex before, much less from behind like this. It's a heady combination of not knowing what he might do next as my willpower finally falls away completely.

Frankie is thorough in his exploration, first with his tongue and then his mouth when he sucks lightly at the sensitive *button* between my legs. My back naturally arches more as he nips me with his teeth. I cry out unexpectedly from the sensation.

"Beautiful," he mumbles between my legs, pausing at the worst possible moment.

"Frankie..." My voice is a mere whine.

"Yes, my pet?"

I squeeze my eyes shut as embarrassment floods me. "I... I need..." I can't say it. I can't beg or plead for anything in this situation. I just can't allow myself. A frustrated whimper falls from my lips instead.

"Shhh." He runs a soothing hand down my lower spine, feeling the straining curve of my back. "It's okay, I won't make you say it. We both know what you need."

I turn my head until my face is buried in the mattress. Frankie puts his mouth back to work between my legs, and in almost no time at all is taking me to the peak of pleasure until I crash over. My entire body squirms from the sensation as I moan against the mattress until my mouth is bone dry.

As my orgasm subsides, he continues. The sensation is becoming too much. I relax my back in an attempt to get away from his mouth. Instead of giving me a break, he doubles his efforts. I'm not at all prepared for the second orgasm that rips through me with far more power than the first. I buck my hips at the overwhelming sensation as he teases out my second orgasm as long as possible until tears prick in my eyes from over-stimulation, and I have to turn my head to beg him, "Please. No more. Please."

He pulls away, and I cringe a little at the wet sounds between my legs as he removes his mouth from between them. At this point, I'm completely soaked between my thighs.

"You've been acting so tough but then you taste so sweet, Chelsea. You make the sweetest sounds too." Frankie's voice is so warm that I turn my head so I can look back at him. Our eyes meet immediately. "Look how hard you make me, my pet. Look at how much I want you."

Curiosity leads my gaze down, down, down...

He's so hard that his length juts out in a nearly straight line. His size—in length in girth—is enough to make my eyes widen as I take in the slight upward curve of him. There's a smattering of hair around the base of his cock that's deliciously masculine. My bottom lip trembles slightly.

"Turn over, Chelsea."

This time, my brain gives in to my body. I turn over on the bed to be face-up, my thighs naturally parting for him. He fills the space instantly, his broad thighs forcing my legs even further apart to accommodate the size of him.

"Good girl," he praises as he presses his chest to mine and settles his hardness between my thighs.

Frankie's mouth moves toward mine with intention. Flinching, I turn my face to the side to avoid him. He stops short and grabs my face, his fingers digging into my cheeks. A rush of fear goes through me as I realize how truly in control of this moment he is. Giving me any illusion of participation is really only a gift—especially considering that he could do anything he wanted to me right now and I would have very few options to attempt fighting back. He must realize it, and still, his first focus was to give me pleasure; there's something endearing to that. Probably in an unhealthy, problematic way. But also in a way I can't ignore as my brain circles between anxiousness and sexual desperation.

"Relax," Frankie tells me harshly, no doubt reading the anxiousness in my eyes as he stares into them. "I want you to tell me that this pussy belongs to me, my pet. Then, I'm going

to kiss you and you're not going to fight me." There's a challenge in his eyes as he releases his grip on my face.

I inhale.

"This pussy belongs to you," I whisper in a barely audible voice.

It's enough. His mouth descends on mine and this time I don't dare move. The kiss is softer than expected as Frankie explores my mouth the same way he did my pussy. I can tell he's quickly taking stock of what I react to most and leaning in to whatever seems to work most on me. Despite the aggressive undertones, he's an attentive lover.

It's while I'm lost in the kiss, tasting myself on his tongue as it brushes with mine, that he pumps his hips to push his cock between the lips of my pussy and notches himself at my entrance. My body resists his girth at first, but it doesn't stop him. He nips at my bottom lip as he gives a short thrust, pushing past the resistance to get his cock inside of me.

I pull away from his kiss with a gasp and let my head fall back against the bed. It's a struggle to catch my breath as my body works to accommodate his size. I can feel the stretch of my body giving way to him as I lift my legs to give us both a better angle. He groans his appreciation as he sinks deeper into me.

I'm wet enough to make up for my lack of experience with his size. The moment my body drops a slight bit of resistance, he takes advantage.

"You're mine. All mine. I wanted you so badly, and now look how wet you are on my cock. Say my name, Chelsea. I want to hear you say my name and know you can't imagine it's anyone else fucking you."

I'm struggling to even register his words as he speaks to me, thrusting lazily at the same time. The fullness of him inside of me is creating a storm in my lower belly, and I've already doomed myself emotionally, knowing I'll be coming yet again for this man. I don't want him to stop, so I give in completely.

“It’s you, Frankie. It’s your pussy and you’re the only one fucking it. I’m not thinking of anyone else,” I admit in my weakest moment. He just feels too good filling me and staring down at me with such tenderness and want.

My words spur him on. He grabs my thighs and digs his fingers into my flesh, making me gasp as the feeling creates additional pleasure. Feeling him handling me so roughly... *I like it. I don’t want to even think about why I like it.* He’s able to fuck me harder with the grip, easily forcing my body to meet his thrusts the way he wants so that his cock pumps deeper inside of me.

It’s incredible. It’s too much. It’s everything all at once.

He tips me so easily over the edge, his eyes meeting mine when I tuck my chin slightly so I can watch him as I lose my last bit of control and give my body over to him completely. As the third orgasm hits, there’s no denying his ownership of my body. It’s only a moment—completely and totally temporary—but undeniable. My pussy squeezes around him, eliciting a groan from deep in his throat as I let go.

“Frankie!” I cry out, wrapping my arms around his broad back for something sturdy to cling to as my entire body shakes with overwhelming sensations. My bloodstream hums as heat flows through me, and I orgasm so intensely that I can feel myself growing lightheaded as I ride out the sensations.

Frankie grunts and mutters, “I’m going to come.”

I shake my head slightly. “I’m not—”

“Fuck.”

Warmth coats the inside of my pussy as Frankie jerks, and I realize it’s too late to finish my sentence. I’m on birth control, but I’m not all that comfortable with him finishing inside of me. A little late for that now, though. Crap.

Frankie’s hips jerk again and then he stills, blowing out a long breath. I’m panting, and I did less of the work, so I can’t believe he’s not panting too. His breathing seems pretty normal as he carefully pulls his soft cock out of me before rolls off of me and onto the bed beside me.

I wiggle over slightly under the guise of making room for him when I really just need space without physical contact for a chance to clear my head. That's asking for too much, though, because a moment later, his arm snakes out and he clasps my hand in his.

I don't have the energy to fight him on it. I leave our hands clasped together and focus instead on trying to get control of the tornado of thoughts circling in my brain.

How did I get here? Or maybe more importantly, how did *he* get here?

"Where did you come from?" I blurt out. This isn't exactly the kind of town that appeals to transplants, and I know for a fact that he's not a local. Everyone knows everyone in town.

"Your brother's lab."

I blink. He blinks. Somewhere in the distance, a train whistle pierces the silence, which only seems to make the silence louder somehow.

"What did you just say?" Because I know I must have misheard him.

Frankie's face loses all traces of the satisfaction from a moment ago and turns gravely stoic. His Adam's apple bobs in his throat with the effort of a long swallow before he speaks again. "I came from your brother's lab. I was one of Andrew's experiments."

My eyes dart, unfocused, from scar to scar, taking in all the slightly mismatched details of his skin and physical features. His eyes aren't different colors. They're different *eyes* altogether. My stomach roils as reality sinks in.

His friendship with my brother.

The living arrangement.

His name, for fuck's sake. *Frankie*.

I feel completely disconnected from my own body as my lips part and hoarse words float off of them. "I just got fucked by Frankenstein?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

FRANKIE

“Actually, Frankenstein would be your brother in this scenario,” I correct her as Chelsea scrambles off of the bed and launches herself to the opposite side of the room.

Her whole body shakes slightly. I’m sure the shock of my abrupt reveal hit her nervous system hard. I shouldn’t have blurted it out like that, but I didn’t want to lie with her. And after feeling her pussy clamped around my cock while I watched her head roll back in ecstasy...

I need sweet Chelsea to see the full picture of who I am. I need her to ultimately *choose me* for exactly who I am.

“What are you talking about?” she asks, her voice cracking.

“The characters in the Mary Shelley book are Victor Frankenstein, a mad scientist, and Frankenstein’s monster. So technically, you can’t be upset about fucking Frankenstein. More accurately, you’re upset about fucking Frankenstein’s monster.”

She tilts her head slightly while listening to my clinical tone, and I consider that a small win. I’m quickly learning that her head tilt indicates some level of interest in hearing me. Even if she isn’t quite ready to accept the reality of my creation and her brother’s role in it. If I can just keep her here, I’m confident she’ll grow more comfortable in time.

She has to.

“I didn’t fuck you, you fucked me!”

“Semantics.” I shrug as I sit up slowly. I don’t want to startle her out of the room yet. Her brother’s work area is well soundproofed, but inevitably, he’ll come out to spend time with his sister, and I haven’t quite figured out how to deal with that variable yet.

She breathes out a shocked laugh. “Semantics? Semantics.” She shakes her head. “I didn’t come here to fall into bed with a stranger. A stranger who isn’t even human! I wanted to come back to my childhood home and feel *safe*, Frankie. And instead, you’re scaring me.”

“I don’t want to scare you; I just want you to stop fighting me.”

“Frankie!” Chelsea exclaims, throwing her hands up in exasperation. “I have every right to fight you on you trying to make decisions for me. It’s not your right. I don’t belong to you, no matter how much you seem to think otherwise. I have every right to fight someone who is forcing themselves on me.”

Her words are like a punch to the gut.

Sure, I was rough with her. And she’s been a little resistant to my affections. But... The way she writhed under me. The sound of her moaning my name. She might have wanted me to leave her room when she woke up, but she seemed perfectly satisfied by having me in her bed.

If I’m honest with myself though, it doesn’t matter. No matter how good we might be together in bed, it won’t mean anything if we can’t share an equal emotional attraction. I want her to *want* to belong to me. It’s not enough for me to demand it if she resists. I want... her submission? No. Not quite. The thing I want most from her... The fantasy I’m most consumed by...

I want Chelsea to love me.

And haven’t I read enough books to know that love is given not taken? Suddenly, I realize I’m pushing my luck too far. I *have* to keep her here long enough to give things a chance, but it won’t do any good if she can’t see past the monster in me.

“Put some clothes on,” I tell Chelsea in a flat voice as I stand and redress.

She scrambles into her discarded clothes with awe-inspiring speed. You know, if she were dressing for any other

reason than in the hopes of getting away from me as quickly as possible.

“Your purse and phone are in the turret.” It’s not technically a lie.

I walk to the door and do my best to ignore the way she follows only at a distance into the hallway. So long as she thinks I’m about to give her back her things, I’m confident she *will* follow. I use that to my advantage to lead her to the stairway at the end of the hall that leads up to the third floor of the house.

The turret is a small room, but it’s always been my favorite. The ceiling is the height of two stories, with windows lining the walls up high so that natural light floods in. The windows at normal height give both a wonderful view of Susan’s garden and also out at the road leading up to the houses. In the distance, you can even see part of the town.

“Do you live in here?” Chelsea asks. There’s some part of her clearly still intrigued in me in some way. It’s the only thing helping me hold onto a sliver of hope.

I shake my head as I step to the side to let her into the room. “I use Andrew’s old bedroom now that he’s moved into the main bedroom. This has become a living area of sorts. It’s warmer than the formal living room downstairs.”

Chelsea wrinkles her nose. Apparently, I’m not the only one who finds the room downstairs sterile and unwelcoming. Their aunt had an affinity for stiff furniture and itchy fabrics. Up here, Andrew has gifted me a plush couch, a hand-me-down desk, and an expensive desk chair that he never touched because the man almost never sits still while working.

Andrew has treated me well since creation. I would do anything for him—except leave his sister alone. The stakes are getting higher with every passing moment that I don’t figure out how to keep Chelsea from telling her brother what I’ve done. He’s going to come out from the basement *eventually*.

“I need to talk to your brother,” I tell Chelsea as she wanders further into the turret room. She pivots to face me as I

step out of the doorway and back into the small third floor hallway. I can see the concerned question in her eyes as I reach for the door handle. “Sorry,” I mutter as I slam the door on her.

Her hurried footsteps are no use. There’s a latch on the outside of the door that I slide to lock her in before she even gets close enough to jiggle the door handle.

The latch is an Andrew addition to the house. He finds the turret creepy for some reason, and he closes the room up any time he needs to come up to the third floor. Not that he does so often. He mostly sticks to the basement, the kitchen, and his bedroom.

“Are you kidding me, Frankie?” Chelsea cries out, slamming what sounds like her whole body against the door. “Don’t do this!”

I can’t stand to hear the way her voice cracks with renewed fear. Not the reaction I ultimately want, but I need to talk to Andrew before I decide my next move. I’m not ready to broach the topic of my interest in his sister—or the fact that I’m currently holding her against her will—but there’s something else I need answers about.

Something about me that only Andrew, as my creator, might be prepared to answer.

CHAPTER NINE

CHELSEA

The doors in this old house are solid wood. I could be holding an axe, and I would still be at a disadvantage trying to escape this room. If we were on the second floor, I might try to go out through the window. Up here on the third floor, the drop is too significant to even entertain the thought.

“This is insane,” I mumble to myself.

How did I escape a stalker only to wind up being held hostage in my own childhood home? And with my brother under the same roof, no less. Though knowing the way my brother works when he gets particularly excited about a project, this situation could drag on for weeks before I manage to signal to Andrew that something is wrong.

Maybe longer if Frankie chooses to keep me locked up here in the turret. Andrew would probably assume that I ran back to Baltimore, ultimately refusing to face our hometown the same way I did when our great aunt passed away.

It wouldn't be such a stretch since I neglected to return home even for the funeral. In my defense, the only reason anyone attended her funeral was likely to gawk and gossip. Andrew even admitted so himself afterward in one of the few phone calls we shared after my perceived abandonment of family duty.

“Frankie could text people from my phone pretending to be me and no one would be the wiser,” I admit to myself with a nervous laugh. I need to hear the words out loud to digest them.

The truth is Ivan might flip his lid, but Hannah is the only person I have in the city who would really care if I didn't return as planned. Spin the right story about missing home, though, and I don't think my odd-but-fun neighbor would ultimately ask too many questions.

We've shared some takeout and nights of drinking. Nothing significant enough to suggest Hannah would seek me out in my small hometown.

"I'm going to make more friends when I get home," I mutter to myself as I scan the room. I'm already talking to myself, so I clearly won't make it long being isolated like this.

I've grown too used to being surrounded by people at work all day. And sure, I cater to my boss' and co-workers' needs all day, every day, but at least there's socialization in that. Socialization that isn't with a science experiment my brother brought to life.

I shudder a little because what was my brother thinking? He impulsively decided to create life... how? And where did he get the parts? I probably don't want to think too hard about the logistics. Especially not after how this morning panned out.

The sex was incredible. Beyond anything I could imagine based off of my experience giving myself orgasms. Frankie took me to a completely new dimension of pleasure. I didn't dare admit the depths of my satisfaction to him, but my toes are still slightly curled against the dated green carpet up here. My entire body was tight like a coil for him, and my toes are resisting returning to normal while the vivid imagery of his well-defined abs hovering over me is still so fresh in my brain.

"Stop it," I chastise myself. Out loud. Fully out loud. Like not even a whisper out loud. "And stop talking out loud to yourself."

I'm losing my mind, *obviously*. Yet, I'm clearly still the sanest person in this house; at least I have *something* going for me.

Okay time to breathe and focus, Chelsea. What do you see? Pay attention.

The room isn't very big, so the furniture is sparse. An overstuffed navy couch, a black, leather desk chair with a worn seat, and a wood desk with two drawers. Clearly, Frankie

used my phone and purse to lure me to the turret, so I bet those things aren't even in here. It doesn't hurt to check, though.

And honestly? If Frankie didn't want me to have free rein to snoop through his things, he shouldn't have locked me in here in the first place.

The logic checks out.

I beeline for the desk first since it's the only obvious storage in the place. I open the bigger, bottom drawer first and come face-to-face with file folders galore with a few stray leather-bound notebooks shoved in between. The worn spines look vaguely familiar. My head tilts to one side as I pull one out and take in my own handwriting—albeit a little sloppy with the evidence of my youth.

Today, the teacher's face was red, and she was loud a lot. Angry. Under her eyes was all dark looking. Puffy. Tired.

I nibble at my bottom lip as I read a few more lines of similar notes. I couldn't have been older than eight or nine and was already starting to latch onto the telling details that would reveal a person's mood or intentions. It's how I learned to survive in a world where people don't always say what they really mean. Or tell you how they really feel.

I don't want to re-live those years, so I choose a different notebook.

Andrew applied to the University of Maryland to be close to John Hopkins University. He swears he isn't going to leave me behind, but I don't know how I can afford to follow him. I've been saving my money, but Baltimore is expensive. I didn't apply for colleges because I have no idea what I want to do, and I don't want to waste money trying to figure that out by prolonging my time in school.

The teachers are upset I'm not applying to colleges because they think I'm wasting my potential. Just because I do well in school doesn't mean I enjoy it and doesn't mean I want to keep going indefinitely. Maybe I'll start applying for jobs in Baltimore, though. Just in case.

Andrew did end up going to the University of Maryland and briefly to John Hopkins. He gave it all up when he came home to take care of our great aunt at the end of her life. He made that choice before he realized I wouldn't follow him that time.

The first job I got in Baltimore was working as an executive assistant for a very nice lawyer. She gave me a chance despite my complete lack of experience doing office work, and she taught me how to be efficient doing the job. When she retired, she made a point of helping me search for my next job. She wasn't thrilled when Ivan approached me, warning me that he had a reputation for bleeding his assistants dry. I took a chance anyway when the offer turned out significantly better than the few others I received.

I had only been working a few weeks for Ivan when we got the call from the hospital about my great aunt's health. Andrew went home. I buckled down.

"This asshole has been reading my journals." I shake my head in disbelief. I can't think of anything more intrusive. Especially since I know these were well hidden under the loose floorboard by the window that I discovered as a too-curious-for-my-own-good child.

I drop the journal to the desk with a thud.

The files in the drawer turn out to be every bit as intrusive. Frankie has clearly helped himself to my great aunt's collection of files. He has my old report cards and even my birth certificate. There are also letters I forgot I'd ever written. Ones when I first moved to Baltimore and tried to keep in touch with Nan. She never wrote back, and I eventually stopped trying.

I'm surprised she even kept them. I wouldn't believe it if I didn't see them now for myself.

Waves of long-compartmentalized emotion threaten to consume me, but I do my best to fight that urge. Nothing I've found so far is actually of any real help to me. Frankie has already made his fascination with me very clear. This only confirms what he's already told me himself.

The smaller drawer doesn't turn out to be any more useful. Though it's unsettling enough to give me even more pause than the journals. There are photos of me. Ones that were clearly stolen from somewhere in my room since they're of me from high school. But also some that I think might have been pulled from my social media accounts. One or two I don't recognize at all but look like they're from times I've attended events with Ivan when he needed a date. And since he rarely takes a proper date to work events, too worried they might reflect poorly on him if they make so much as a single misstep, I've been to more than one with him.

Beneath all of the photos is an electronic tablet, but it prompts me for a password when I attempt to snoop further into it.

I leave the mess and retreat to the center of the small space to catch my breath. Frankie has made himself quite the collection on me, and I... I need to come to terms with an unwelcome possibility. Frankie *could* be my stalker.

Technically, the gifts could be delivered by anyone. There's no way to know if my stalker is dropping them off themselves or using a delivery service. And didn't my brother say Frankie is technologically inclined? In context, I realize now that my brother might mean those words in a bigger sense. After all, for Frankie's existence to be possible, he has to be part computer. Robot. Artificial Intelligence. Whatever he is.

Couldn't he have hacked my computer at home to spy on me or something? Or does that only happen in movies? I'm not entirely sure, and I don't have my phone to research that kind of thing.

"Ugh." I hate this. All of it. Most of all, I hate that I feel relatively calm given my current circumstances. I can imagine my adult journal entry now.

My brother made Frankenstein's monster, and the monster is obsessed with me. I'm not sure I'm ever going to leave this place or see daylight again, but the sex was good, so I guess that's something. Well, I better go hide this journal now so my

stalker husband-to-be can find it later and add it to his collection. I'd hate to leave him with nothing new to read since my existence seems to be his sole source of entertainment.

I can't help myself... I laugh.

There's humor in this. Dark, deranged humor, sure, but humor nonetheless. I came home for safety and found captivity instead. I never wanted to come back here, came back willingly anyway, and now I might never leave again. My life has become a bigger mess than usual. And if I knew I might not be going home as planned, I would have cleaned all of the leftover food out my fridge back in Baltimore.

I snort another laugh. What a ridiculous thing to be thinking of right now.

There's only one other place to *really* snoop in this room. One I'm quite familiar with and which Frankie seems to have found as well. I walk to the window furthest from the desk and drop to my knees. The board is light in my hands as I pull it out of place and set it aside.

Inside the hiding place, a thick stack of mail rests bundled together. I purse my lips as I pick up the collection. A quick flip through the mail shows different handwriting on most of them. About half of the envelopes appear to be addressed to Frankie. The other half are blank on the outside.

I choose an envelope at random from the middle of the stack and slide it out to examine the contents. There's a letter inside written in harsh, dark lines of ink. There's a lot of force behind the handwriting, and I realize why when I actually read the words.

You shouldn't exist. Kill yourself before the town takes care of you itself.

My head reels back at the jarring message. It's a horrific thing to write, regardless of the intended recipient. Someone wrote this to Frankie? A pang sweeps through my chest. He is a monster, but he also has feelings... At least, he sure seems to have genuine thoughts and feelings, as much as me or any other regular person.

I open another.

Get the fuck out of our town, Frankenstein.

“Frankenstein is the scientist,” I mutter in annoyance as I avert my gaze quickly. Looking at the words in slanted, red print makes me feel deeply uncomfortable. I don’t know what Frankie could have done to make seemingly quite a few enemies, but the letters are beyond cruel.

And finding these letters only confuses my head further. I need to hate Frankie to get out of here—and to avoid repeating the bedroom mistake—but it’s hard not to feel sorry for the recipient of these letters.

I sit in the floor opening letter after letter. Not one gives any indication that there’s any justifiable *reason* for the hatred spewed within them. If anything, all of the letters feel generic and pointless. As someone who grew up in this town, I know all too well the fear the people here have for *different*. So I think I know exactly what Frankie has done to upset these small towners with their mob mentality.

He’s existed—not as the man I took him to be but rather as the monster the town sees him as. The monster I, too, accused him of being. The question remains then: Is Frankie more monster... or more man?

CHAPTER TEN

FRANKIE

“That’s not an easy question to answer, Frankie.” Andrew scribbles nearly illegible notes into a notebook as he studies two different views of some sort of 3D model on the two computer monitors in front of him.

Why did you give me the capacity to do bad?

Such an innocent sounding question without context. The context in this case being how I’ve treated my creator’s sister both yesterday and so far today.

I didn’t anticipate it would be easy to answer. I also know Andrew well enough to know it’s something he definitely would have thought about before beginning the experiment that ultimately led to my existence. He might play to the stereotype of a mad scientist in some ways, but the man has morals. Ethics. He cares about his work enough to think about the complexities of the impact of it.

“Can’t we talk about this later?” Andrew asks with a sigh. I’m interrupting him in the middle of him adjusting the mechanics of his odd aging process. I’m surprised he even allowed me into the lab at all at this point.

I shuffle my feet. “I need to know,” I answer firmly.

Andrew huffs and tosses his pen down on the desk. His eyes are bright and focused as he reluctantly gives me his full attention. I’ve probably set him back weeks with this brief interruption—he doesn’t do well returning to his flow state once interrupted. I’m really fucking up with both of the Snyder siblings today, it seems.

“Every project starts with a model.” Andrew crosses his arms over his chest as he gets a faraway look in his eyes that confirms there’s some real thought in his answer. “To create human-like life, I needed to base you off of a human model. You needed to possess all of the traits of any other human

man, like the ones who's spare... *parts* we utilized. Well, the traits those men had when they were alive anyway."

I'm well-versed in the history of my body parts, all questionably sourced from unusable donated limbs. Andrew struggled to make friends in his hometown, though he had an easier time in a bigger city, with more like-minded people around him. Thankfully, he still benefits from some of those fringe friendships leftover from his Baltimore days.

There are plenty of critics of Andrew's work.

But there are a lot of fans too. Fans with access to body parts that would have otherwise been cast to kiln and turned to ash. Such a waste that would have been.

"But you could have improved upon the model," I point out. He could have completely eliminated the capacity for evil when he designed me.

Andrew curls his nose as he scoffs out a sound of disgust. "Taking away a being's free will wouldn't be an improvement on anything. It's not my job to moderate right and wrong. That's something individuals have to learn and decide for themselves with time and experience. Free will isn't a *flaw* of your system, Frankie. It's the primary function."

"But do I really have free will?" After all, a good chunk of me *is* made up of computer parts that Andrew designed to suit his own needs. "Did I have the free will to leave here if I didn't want to do what you designed me to do?"

Andrew's mouth morphs to a thin, flat line. He picks his pen back up and flips a page in his notebook to scribble another note. I have no doubt this note is something about me. Potentially a reminder to himself to update something in my system after how this conversation is going.

"Do you want to leave, Frankie?"

"No."

Andrew blows out a long sigh and then rubs the bridge of his nose. "You've always had the power to leave. Any time. You could walk out of here right now, and I wouldn't stop you. I created you so that I could have a companion who might

understand me a little better than the people in this town ever did. And you have been a wonderful companion. Far more understanding and patient than I could have imagined. Not because I designed you that way but because you've chosen that path yourself."

"Thank you," I say in surprise. I didn't expect a compliment after what I insinuated with my question.

"Don't mention it." I'm sure Andrew means that literally—this talk is clearly making him uncomfortable as he shifts anxiously in his desk chair and taps the pen to his teeth.

It's hard to digest what Andrew is telling me. "So you're saying if I do something evil..."

"It's because you have free will and made the choice to act that way. You're more than a basic string of computer commands, Frankie. I worked hard to bring you to life, and I think of you as a friend not a child. You don't need me to make decisions for you. I want you to make them for yourself—always have wanted that and always will." He shrugs, eyes already trailing back toward the computer.

"Andrew?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you consider me a monster?"

Andrew shifts his full attention back to me and frowns, his brow furrowing. "How could you ask me that?"

"I just need to know," I admit. "So many people believe that I'm a monstrosity. That my very existence is unnatural and wrong. I don't care about most of those opinions, but I do care about yours. So, Andrew... do you think of your creation as a monster?"

He raises his eyebrows and leans forward as if to accentuate his sincerity. "No more so than any other person, Frankie. No one is all good or all bad, because the very existence of human nature relies on us being both. All people are capable of becoming monsters, in theory."

The answer is not a clear yes, but it's also not really a no. I believe the answer is also fair. Haven't I proven with my treatment of Chelsea that there is some kind of darkness lingering in all of us? That the wrong circumstances can bring that out?

"Thanks for letting me interrupt your work. This was helpful." I nod to Andrew and turn to leave his workspace, giving him his peace back. There's also a matter of a woman in a tower that I need to tend to, but I don't make it very far.

"Frankie," Andrew calls out to stop me.

I spin slowly, heavy with the weight of a discussion that's left me feeling like I don't quite have all the answers I seek. Sympathy shines in Andrew's eyes as he tilts his head in a way I immediately associate with Chelsea now.

"No matter what other people say, the only person who gets to decide if you're a monster or not is *you*."

* * *

"Threatening me with gardening tools feels like overkill for leaving you alone for an hour. Did you miss me that much?" I joke even as I keep a careful eye on her shaky grip. I can't predict enough about her yet to be sure she won't actually try to take a stab at me with them.

"You locked me alone in here with nothing to do but look for a way out." Chelsea's voice is harsh. She was frustrated with me before, but there was a softness to it. Vulnerability. Now her eyes look guarded and shut off, no longer the expressive baby blues I stared into while deep inside of her.

"I wouldn't lock you in if I could trust you not to leave," I point out.

Her cupid's bow twitches as her lips pull down into a tight frown. "And how will you explain to my brother that you're keeping me locked up for the rest of my life?"

"Let me in between your thighs a few more times and maybe you'll be ready to stop fighting me." So much for

trying to be less shitty to Chelsea, speaking to her as if she's no better than a common whore.

Her jaw drops slightly, and for a moment, I get a glimpse of that softer side again. Interesting. As harshly as she's trying to reject me, there's something about my sweet pet that likes the harsh words. No wonder she was soaking wet for me when I got between those soft thighs the first time.

"I never want you to touch me again." She jerks her chin up defiantly, the softness receding once more. "It was you all along, wasn't it? You're the stalker sending me all the creepy gifts!"

The accusation catches me so off guard that I can't fathom where it even came from. Then my peripheral vision starts to take note of the turret's disarray. Dread works its way through my manufactured nervous system, hitting me like an electric shock to the part of my brain responsible for developing social affection.

"You looked through my things," I state plainly.

"Don't you mean *my* things?" she retorts. She gestures sharply toward the desk facing out one of the turret's windows.

The two desk drawers are open. The narrow one where I kept a few stray photos and the tablet I use solely to follow her online activity has been pulled out so far it hangs haphazardly over the lip of the drawer below it. The one where I keep the old journals I stole from under the floorboards in here and a whole collection of personal documents their great aunt left behind when she passed. Andrew has no use for those things, and I figured the chances were low he would ever go looking and find it all missing. There are things like Chelsea's original birth certificate, her school records, and even a few handwritten letters she wrote to her great aunt when the Snyder siblings first fled to Baltimore.

"You've been stalking me," Chelsea accuses again.

Technically, that is kind of what I've been doing, but...
"I'm not your stalker."

I've watched her online, but I've never inserted myself into her life before now. And I've certainly never sent any gifts to scare her like the ones she told her brother she's been getting.

"Prove it," Chelsea challenges.

"Happily." And probably easily considering how sloppy most people get with their digital footprints.

Chelsea looks skeptical, but this is the kind of opening I've been looking for. A chance to bargain. To buy myself time. A temporary white flag of sorts so that I can reassess how to win over this woman. There has to be more I can offer to entice her into staying with me and giving me a real chance. Deep in my gut, I believe there's something between us. A potential she just hasn't opened herself up to yet.

"Let's negotiate, Chelsea. All I want is a little of your time, where you're *choosing* to stay of your own free will. If you'll agree to finish your planned stay here, I *will* find your stalker." I work my jaw for a moment to try to moderate the anger that leaks into my voice as I add, "And then I'll deal with your stalker personally."

"What do you mean *deal with* them?" Chelsea's face pales.

"You know what I mean." An animalistic growl tears from my throat at the idea of this stalker hurting her or even scaring her ever again. "When I find your stalker, they'll be relocating in a way they won't be able to come back from."

"You can't say that," Chelsea gasps.

I merely shrug.

"Don't you know what kind of trouble a person can get into for making those kinds of threats? You could ruin your whole life, and maybe even lose your freedom if that kind of threat got out."

"Sure." I stroll closer to her and am surprised to find she holds her ground instead of backing away. "But my pet, if I'm such a monster, isn't that exactly what you think I deserve?"

I'm close enough now to hear her breath catch. I've called a bluff I didn't even realize existed. Her silence speaks volumes about her real opinions. She might be resistant to me and uninterested in my desire to woo her, but she doesn't think of me as a monster. Or at least there's a part of her that doesn't want to.

And that means I'm in with a fucking chance.

"What do you say, Chelsea?" I ask, offering her my hand to shake.

She waits a beat but then hesitantly slides her hand into mine with a deep breath. She seems to strengthen her resolve with that intake of air. "You have a deal."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHELSEA

“You seem cheerful,” Andrew muses as he turns the wheel of his Jeep onto the main road that snakes through our small town.

Frankie took the route around the outskirts of town when he brought me home from the airport in the bigger nearby city, so this is my first time truly being back in this town since I moved away. There’s something warming about the drive, taking in familiar street signs alongside a few modern updates of once-familiar storefronts.

“It’s nice to be out of the house,” I tell my brother, though I don’t elaborate beyond that.

“I get that.”

I’ve stuck to my agreement with Frankie of seeing my trip through as he works to locate my stalker’s identity. I was skeptical of him at first, but then he showed me one of the programs he planned to use that would track who viewed my social media pages.

Maybe it’s naive of me, but I believe him. I don’t know what’s going to happen at the end of our deal when he’s found the stalker and dealt with them, but I do trust that he’ll find the person. He seems to be very motivated. I can tell he’s taking my stalking personally, and though he has no real right to feel that way, there is some comfort in it.

“So, uh, Chels...” Andrew clears his throat twice. “Before we go into the grocery store, I feel like I should warn you that sometimes things can get pretty awkward.”

The memory of Frankie’s hate mail—which I carefully put back in its hiding place and haven’t mentioned to him—flashes through my mind. “What do you mean *awkward*?” I ask with dread already pooling inside of me.

“Well, I don’t know how much you’ve learned at the house about Frankie...” My brother’s cheeks turn pink as he trails off.

I idly wonder if this is the first time he’s had to address Frankie’s complicated origin so formally to another person. I decide to let him off the hook. “I know that you made him, Andrew. I don’t know the details about how, and to be honest I’m not sure I ever want to, but I know enough to understand. The town doesn’t like him, do they?”

Andrew’s shoulders slump as he pulls into the grocery store parking lot and maneuvers into a spot unnecessarily far from the door in the half-empty lot.

“No,” he says finally. “No, they don’t.”

“That must be really hard,” I say quietly as he turns off the ignition.

We sit in silence in the Jeep for a minute, both lost in our own thoughts. Two days is a lot of time to learn about someone when you don’t have much else to do. My agreement with Frankie didn’t get me my phone back, but by some miracle, my boss hasn’t shown up with a militia ready to force me back to Baltimore.

I’ve started to see the humanity in Frankie. Not just because of the letters, but because I’ve been noticing *him*. And in some ways, because I know what the sex can be like between us, I’ve caught myself *wanting* a few times.

I haven’t acted on it...

I’m not convinced I’ll be able to say that much longer, though.

Frankie’s given me a chance to bond with my brother, but he’s also been quietly attentive and also extraordinarily open. He’s talked casually about his love of plants and gardening. We’ve laughed about how mediocre we both are at cooking—after which, he proceeded to feed me takeout that seemed to materialize from nowhere. He anticipates my needs. He watches. It’s both unsettling and flattering, and I don’t know what to do about it.

Don't relationships have to be built on more than just a gut feeling?

I shake my head slightly. What am I doing? I don't need to be thinking anywhere even close in that direction. I could never have a relationship with Frankie; I live in Baltimore.

"Let's do this," I chirp with false cheerfulness to spur my brother and me on.

We both need the false confidence to drive us out of the car because I think we both know this visit to town was doomed from the start. People in this town always let us be treated as *others* because we struggled to keep up socially as kids. By the time we learned to compensate decently, that damage was already done. Add to that my brother's friendly science experiment, and we're definitely doomed.

In a way that makes me angry. That makes me want to do or *say* something. To chastise people for their judgement.

Calm down, Chelsea, I tell myself. No need to get worked up until we're actually facing a problem. Of course, I spoke too soon to myself. Only seconds later, as my brother and I walk side-by-side toward the grocery entrance, a woman whose face I vaguely remember as a young teacher from my high school gets out of her car as we pass and gasps audibly.

"Can't he stay up in that bunker with his freak where he belongs?" she mutters loudly enough to ensure she's heard. I glance over in time to watch the man with her laugh as the two of them hold back while we pass. They don't start to walk toward the entrance until a decent distance is between us.

"People suck," Andrew mutters.

He's too freaking right. I saw those letters. I've seen the worst of humanity in them, and it isn't coming from Frankie.

I tilt my chin up, refusing to stare at the ground in shame. We have nothing at all to be ashamed of. Frankie is probably better at being human than most people in this town. He sure as hell is better at caring about people. I've seen how good he is at being a friend to my brother, listening to him and anticipating the moments when my brother needs a break from

all things social. Even with me, though our relationship has healed greatly in such a short time.

Inside of the grocery store is far worse than the parking lot. Instantly, stares follow us as we grab a cart and begin to wander the aisles in search of a small stockpile's worth of supplies.

The extensive shopping list makes more sense now that I realize how much Andrew must try to avoid unnecessary shopping trips...Especially since this is how those trips go seemingly go for him normally.

"Freaks," someone chokes out with a low-effort, fake cough.

I roll my eyes openly. "How original," I deadpan plenty loud enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear me.

Andrew inhales sharply through his nose. "Chelsea, don't engage with them," he whispers through the side of his mouth.

"Why not?" I ask genuinely. "If they don't care about your feelings, why should I care about theirs?"

"Because some of us are *normal* and worried about what that *thing* in your attic could do to our property values," a man's voice snarks. I pivot to see a familiar man staring us down with a surly expression on his big, flappy face. Ah, the mayor. I remember him as the standoffish jerk who won the election only because he was essentially unopposed when elected.

"Funny, my neighbors haven't affected my property values at all," another voice chimes in.

A woman brushes past my arm, a thick waft of perfume following her. It takes me a second to really recognize Susan, the woman from next to Nan's house. She's dressed well in a blazer with a hat pulled low over her eyes. Her gray hair hangs in thick waves around her shoulders.

"I know you're bitter to no longer be mayor, Todd, but trying picking on someone your own size," Susan suggests.

Todd is a slight man, so I know she doesn't mean the words literally. She's taking a dig at him on my brother's behalf. Or maybe Frankie's. Or actually... *ours*. I realize suddenly that I'm feeling very much a part of a team with my brother and Frankie. Despite my rough start with Frankie, I want to root for him. And I want him to be treated kindly.

Todd splutters but fails to come up with any sort of response.

"Mhm." Susan tsks. "There sure are a lot of glass houses in this town for so many of you to take the risk of throwing stones." She looks around pointedly at all of the stares until shame settles in and does its job. People quickly avert their attention elsewhere, uninterested in going toe-to-toe with the woman.

Even Todd moves along with a muttered excuse about being late for something.

Susan's head turns in my direction, her hawk-like gaze sizing me up. "Sometimes you *do* have to engage with them," she says, clearly having heard my conversation with my brother about that. "Don't be afraid of the people in this town. They don't like anything that's too different, but they can learn. Don't give them space to judge while they're going home to their own freakshow lives."

I bristle at the insinuation that Frankie is freakshow related in any way.

Susan smiles slightly and reaches out to pat me on the shoulder awkwardly. "Don't worry, dear. I happen to like that freakshow of yours." She nods to my brother in acknowledgement. "He's a wonderful gardener. Such a gift since I can hardly get down to do the work myself anymore."

My eyebrows arch. It sounds like she's giving Frankie pretty thorough credit for her garden. I had no idea he was responsible for the flush growth next door. He doesn't just like gardening; Frankie obviously has a gift.

The monster seems to be becoming more human to me by the minute. And I admit to myself as my brother and I finish

our shopping trip with no more incidents, I don't mind that so much.

CHAPTER TWELVE

FRANKIE

It's been two days since we came to our agreement, and I already know the source of Chelsea's stalker problem in Baltimore.

It wouldn't have normally taken me nearly that long, except I dedicated most of my waking hours to spending time on the fringes of Chelsea spending time with her brother. I gave the two the space they needed to renew their bond, staying aside for them, but I didn't want to be out of Chelsea's sight for long.

My hope is that I'm desensitizing her to seeing me. If she gets used to my presence—and my very existence—it might become easier for her to picture herself by my side.

I haven't completely abandoned my plans of wooing her, though.

There's one quiet interest Chelsea has that's she's never properly pursued as far as I can tell... Jewelry. I've snooped enough to know that Nan made a fortune designing one-of-a-kind jewelry. Though by the time she was raising the kids, she was working with more costume jewelry designs than precious stones.

Nan seemed to enjoy the hobby based on the sheer number of pieces left behind after she passed. Andrew had to ask me to help store trunks full of tools and finished pieces in the attic after he created me. He wanted to move into the primary bedroom but not until he felt like he could make it his own.

Now, the best parts of the collection Nan left behind sit in the corner of the turret waiting for the moment I give them to Chelsea. I want to encourage her to do more than dream about making jewelry. I want to support the dream and give her the tools she needs to make it happen. There's no fathomable reason she should be working as an executive assistant in

Baltimore when she could be following her dreams of jewelry making right here at home.

It's a win-win for us both if you ask me.

My computer pings, drawing my attention back to the problem at hand. There's a new alert as this asshole scrolls her page yet again.

"Fuck off," I mutter as I type in the last of the coding instructions needed to fuck the guy's stalking up. In moments, it cuts Chelsea's social media page off abruptly, burying it as if it never existed. Not just for this guy but for anyone—just in case he decides to try using a different account to skirt me hiding her from him.

The reality is that if I had only looked at Chelsea's phone sooner instead of leaving it hidden, I probably wouldn't have needed the computer to figure things out at all.

Her stalker has grown severely unhinged, revealing himself quite thoroughly. I press the button to play the voicemail I've now memorized word for word.

"Chelsea," Ivan Rhodes' voice growls across the line. "I don't know what you think you're doing, but you'll have to be punished for this. I'm booking a flight now to come retrieve you and bring you back home where you belong with me. This is the last time you leave my sight."

There was a split second I where second-guessed myself and wondered if she might have a *thing* with her boss. Then I played a different voicemail.

"I've spent all this time picking out gifts for you with no appreciation. It's time you return the favor and take care of me now. Ready or not, Chelsea, here I come." The line cuts out abruptly on that call, made only a few hours earlier. Based on my tracking of Ivan—who puts zero effort into hiding his online activity—he's booked a private flight for late tomorrow and has warned his personally hired flight crew that his companion may be *difficult*.

The emails he sent are a blatant warning that he plans to take Chelsea on the plane home, no matter what she might

want. And worse still, his flight crew didn't seem at all bothered by the warning that he would be bringing a woman on the flight *against her will*.

I have a feeling Chelsea isn't the first woman he's taken an inappropriate liking to.

But she *will* be the last.

It was easy enough for Ivan to start stalking Chelsea after hiring her because it seems he put a program on her work computer to track her keystrokes. He had a file of all of her social media passwords, and he definitely had access to view her emails. It wouldn't surprise me to find out that her phone was company provided, thus making it easily tracked as well.

Rage fills me, threatening to consume me with every new piece of evidence that clicks into place. I want to squeeze the life out of the man who mistakenly thought he could covet the woman who is mine.

I have to be patient. I have to bide my time and lie in wait. A snake in the grass always waits to attack until its intended victim is within striking distance. Ivan Rhodes made a grave error in bringing this fight to my doorstep. Too bad he won't live long enough to regret the choice.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHELSEA

I can feel Frankie's eyes on me before I even open my own. I yawn and stretch a little under the covers as I struggle to wake up fully. I spent a long time last night tossing and turning as I struggled with some tough emotions.

Frankie was sullen last night. He apologized to me for how people acted at the grocery store, and I struggled to choke out reassurance that he has nothing to be sorry for.

That's the town's baggage. Not his.

"I'll go," Frankie offers as my eyelids flicker open and I finally look over at him.

"You don't have to," I tell him quietly. "Is everything okay?"

He rubs his palms together, staring down at them as he seems to gather himself before he answers. "I know who your stalker is, Chelsea."

"You do?" I shoot up in bed, heart beating wildly in my chest. I'm so ready to figure out how to deal with this issue and move on. Despite Frankie's threats, I would never actually let him do anything to take care of my stalking problem for me. Especially not if it would put his entire life in danger.

Who knows what it would look like for someone like Frankie to get arrested? I'm not even sure if he would have any rights since, in some ways, he's not really human. My brother has mentioned that multiple parts of Frankie are mostly... computer.

"I do." Frankie sighs heavily. "I wanted to keep an eye on you last night after what I found. The source of the stalking was... troubling to say the least."

That's enough to send a shiver up my back. "Are you going to tell me who it is? Or anything about them?"

“In due time. There are some things I have to double-check first. I want to cover all my bases before we talk about how to keep you safe going forward.”

“Thank you,” I tell him quietly.

Gratitude builds in my chest, joining the other troublesome emotion that seems to have settled in place there. An emotion that feels dangerously close to instant-love for a man who—by any scope of the imagination—hasn’t really earned that kind of affection.

Then again, love isn’t really a thing to be earned at all anyway, is it? It’s given freely. Sometimes without rhyme or reason.

“I would do it for you a thousand times over,” Frankie tells me earnestly. “Anything to keep you safe, my sweet pet.”

The pet name sends a shiver up my spine.

Frankie always watches me carefully, so I’m sure he doesn’t miss the reaction. He seems regretful as he stands. “Your brother asked for an extra set of hands today for the project he’s working on. He said it’ll only be about an hour or so. Then I believe he plans to work pretty nonstop today, so we’ll have to entertain ourselves.”

There’s no mischief to the words, but my brain inserts the suggestion anyway.

“I can think of some ways we could entertain ourselves,” I suggest coyly, sitting up straighter in bed.

“Is that right?” Frankie’s voice lowers an octave. His feet stay planted, though, where he stands as far away as possible in this room.

I smile nervously. “After you finish helping my brother, will you meet me in the library room upstairs?” I rub the duvet between my fingers as I wait for his response.

“Of course.” He finally crosses the distance and leans down over the bed to plant his mouth firmly over mine. “See you soon, my pet.”

* * *

He's not coming.

I squeeze my eyes shut to try to put off the inevitable wave of tears threatening to spill from the corners of my eyes. Far more time than the promised hour has passed by this point, and there's still no sign of Frankie. I made myself vulnerable to the only man who has ever stirred my sexuality fully awake, and now he isn't coming. I said so many awful things the last time he took me—of course he isn't interested in a repeat performance.

“What was I thinking?” I whisper to myself.

There's a desk that faces a bay window looking out at the front yard. My great aunt used to make me sit at the desk to do my homework, adamant that a view of the outside world would encourage me to work faster so I could earn my freedom back.

It worked. Of course it worked. Back then, I didn't want to believe anyone knew better about what I needed than I did. My great aunt found ways to prove me wrong, but here I am... Still learning the same lessons with Frankie. Aren't I? Hasn't he proven he wants the best for me while I fight him every step of the way? He might be a little misguided by how he expresses himself, but I don't think he's ever actually intended to hurt or scare me. That much has become abundantly clear.

Oh, how full circle this trip home has become. In so many ways.

“I should apologize.” I whisper again, even though there's no need. I'm all alone in the library. Miserably alone.

An idea strikes me, though. I'm desperate for a release, and it looks like I'm going to have to take care of that myself. I run my fingers across the wood of the empty desk as I round to the right side of it. I nip at my bottom lip as I turn and lift onto the top of the desk, sitting at the edge and letting my feet dangle.

Oh, if Nan could see me now. She'd be horrified, and that is a thought the rebel inside of me relishes.

I lean back so I cover the length of the desk, pushing my hair back so it dangles off of one side while my legs hang from the other. I spread my legs slowly, my exposed body welcoming the hint of air conditioning that blows across my bare legs, teasing the hem of my dress. I'm bare under my dress, opting for no panties since I thought I would be sweet talking Frankie between my legs this afternoon.

Never mind that now, though. A girl has to know how to take care of her own needs.

I skate my fingers down my midsection toward the short hem of the dress that I outgrew a few inches of height ago. Anticipation swells low in my belly. I'm already so wet between my thighs that I whimper at the first dip of my finger against my slit.

"Starting without me?" Frankie's voice rumbles.

I startle with a gasp. I didn't even hear his footsteps on the stairs, or the creaky library door opening, in my haze of emotion and need. My fingers still even as he tips his chin and says, "Keep going."

"I want you to do it," I tell him. My voice is lower than usual and husky with the weight of my desire. I sound a bit like a sex phone operator, and I love the way the sound makes Frankie's eyes go hooded. He palms himself openly through his pants, adjusting himself as he stiffens. "*Please.*"

"Chelsea," he groans my name like a warning.

It's a warning I don't want.

"Frankie, please," I whisper. "I need you so badly. I'm aching, and I need you to make it stop." My voice is breathy with my neediness. There's no hiding the legitimacy of my want for him. You can already smell the faint hint of my arousal in the room. There's no point in pretending I'm anything but desperate for him.

He looks torn. "Last time—"

“Forget last time,” I plead. “Be in the moment with me, Frankie. In *this* moment, I need you so badly.”

“Oh, fuck.” Frankie doesn’t even bother with his shirt. He rips his pants down his legs and immediately gives himself a few relieving strokes of his cock as his steps eat up the distance between us. He shoves the skirt of my dress out of the way and stares down at my exposed pussy and stilled fingers.

He leans in closely and brushes my hand away. He inhales deeply, maybe calming himself or maybe just inhaling my scent. Either way, it makes my thighs shake in anticipation.

“Who do you belong to, Chelsea?” he asks gruffly.

My core tightens as his breath blows against my sensitive flesh. “You.”

“Say it,” he growls. “Make it a complete sentence. Tell me how I own you.”

“You own me completely, Frankie. All of me. My mind and my body. I’ve been walking around this house desperate for you, needing you, slick with want for you. No one can fill me the way you can. No one touches me the way you do.”

“Fuck right they don’t.” His expression turns to a snarl at the mere idea of comparison.

My brain falls numb as his mouth descends on my pussy with the same all-consuming passion as last time. I’m so turned on that my orgasm hits in what feels like no time flat, as if only waiting for his arrival to make an appearance. I shake so hard on the desk that the whole thing groans under my weight.

“Again,” Frankie commands. “You’ve made me wait too long to have you again. Thank me for showing up by giving me your pleasure again.” His thumb presses against my clit and works the nub with the precision of a man who has noted my every reaction and is already so familiar with what I like.

I don’t stand a chance of holding off the second orgasm that sweeps over me just as powerfully and overwhelming as the first. “Frankie!” I cry out his name as my muscles all clench to help me ride through the waves of pleasure.

He moves his hand and steps between my legs while I pant through aftershocks of pleasure coupled with a wave of emotion that also decides to slam into me at precisely the same moment.

Frankie enters me so gently it's hard to believe this is the same man who terrified me a little at our first meeting. I writhe against him, desperate for more. I tell him so. "Please, Frankie. Fuck me like you mean it." I'm not sure who is more surprised by more words—him or me. I'm never so vulgar. He just seems to bring it out of me.

"That's right, Pet. Tell your big, scary monster to fuck you like he owns you."

A whimper tears from my throat. "Please, Frankie. Please. Fuck me like you own me because you do. I'm all yours. Only yours."

This time his growl is full of satisfaction. He puts his palms flat on the desk on either side of my waist and drives his cock into me with the force I was looking for. Like the first time, he can't seem to help himself once he gets going. His motions are jerky with no discernible rhythm, and *I love it*. I've never felt sexier or more cherished somehow.

"Oh, pet. This pussy has been waiting a long time for me, hasn't it? That's why you kept it all to yourself... You needed a monster to fuck this needy pussy the right way."

I reach up to stroke the fading ink of the tattoo on his right pec. Rough chest hair tickles my fingers, and I suck in a ragged breath. "You're my monster," I tell him softly.

"Fuck." He throws his head back as he pumps into me, his groan almost a roar as it tears out of his throat recklessly.

It's a good thing my brother went into town. Otherwise, we'd easily be giving ourselves away. Though if Frankie gets much louder, people might hear us all the way to the other side of town anyway. He seems to revel in the fact that he doesn't need to be quiet. The sounds that escape him as he takes me are so animalistic and raw...

“I’m so close,” I whimper to him as I squeeze my eyes shut against the building pressure in my core.

Frankie’s hand grips my jaw, and I pop my eyes open to look up at him. “Eyes on me, Pet. I want to watch your face this time when you come all over my cock.”

It’s his words that tip me over the edge. I gasp as my entire body coils and then releases, waves of pleasure crashing over me in the way only Frankie has ever given me. Masturbating will never be able to do the trick ever again... not knowing he can make me feel like *this*.

I give myself over to the feeling, my back arching in a way that helps him drive deeper into me. The feeling prolongs my orgasm, my body squeezing his cock like a vise-grip.

“That’s right, Chelsea. All your pleasure belongs to me, doesn’t it, my pet?”

“Uh-huh.”

Frankie hums his satisfaction with my distracted response. Good. I couldn’t be expected to make a complete sentence right now, even if I wanted to.

“You’re such a good girl for me.” Frankie squeezes my hip as another orgasm starts to build where the last one left off. I whimper against his tight grip. There’s something incredibly sexy about the way he can treat me so delicately everywhere else but be so rough with me when it comes to sex.

I crave it. I crave him.

“Frankie,” I whine his name as I reach up to clasp at his shoulders, desperately trying to pull his body weight on top of me.

“I’ll squish you, my little pet.”

“Good.”

The second he lowers himself over me my lips are on his. I flick my tongue against his and he melts, letting his weight settle over me as he continues to pump his hips. The kiss is sloppy and wild, our tongues dancing and teeth crashing together carelessly.

My legs squeeze around him as my fourth orgasm of the afternoon hits. I tip my head back for a moment before jerking back so that I can look up at him, remembering his words about watching my face.

“You look so beautiful like this, my pet,” Frankie groans out as his movements become less controlled. This orgasm seems to be the catalyst for him to lose himself in his own pleasure. Moments later, he jerks as he comes while buried deep inside of me, his hips pressing forward to keep me full of him. I can feel his seed spill out slightly as I’m so thoroughly filled.

This time when he pulls out and moves his weight off of me, I don’t feel conflicted. Or like I need distance. I reach a hand up to him so that he can help me stand... And then I launch myself into his arms in a tight embrace. He carries me over to a wing-back chair and sits with me curled in his lap.

I’m struck by the thought that I’ve never, ever felt safer.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FRANKIE

I don't know what I did to deserve this moment, but I feel like I've grown ten feet as Chelsea clings to me. I've been such an asshole to her, and still, she's managed to find her way to me willingly—just like I hoped she would. Just like I wanted her to.

Fuck, this moment feels so incredible.

“I should shower,” she eventually mumbles sleepily. “And fix us something to eat.”

“I can fix food,” I offer. I don't want to shower right away. I want the scent of her and our lovemaking to linger on my quilted skin for a while longer. I want the scent to remind me that I'm the luckiest bastard alive. The way my pet gets so wet for me and calls my name out so sweetly.

Hell, I'm getting turned on again just thinking about it.

Chelsea laughs and pulls her head from my shoulder to look at me with a lighthearted grin. “I actually can cook breakfast fairly successfully. After what you did to spaghetti, I think I'm the safer bet for cooking this time.”

“Fair enough.” I snort out a rumbling laugh. My tomato sauce somehow came out looking a little purple and very burnt. Cooking isn't my strong suit. To be fair, I'm a little better when not distracted by the sight of Chelsea leaned over the dining room table reading an old copy of a young adult fantasy novel she apparently loved as a kid. “I'll take care of some things and be down shortly to meet you in the kitchen.”

I grab her by the hips to help her stand and walk her to the door. I kiss her gently on the lips and then let her go, staying back to collect myself so that I don't follow her to the shower and jump her again.

As soon as the worst of that temptation has faded, I walk out of the library whistling low under my breath and head for the turret room. I still haven't cleaned up the mess Chelsea left

from snooping. Something that I'm not mad about in the slightest—I'm glad she was intelligent enough to rifle through whatever she could find in the hopes of finding information or an escape. I'm also glad it didn't work for the latter.

I'm so caught up in post-sex bliss that I don't immediately realize I have company as I step into the turret room.

"You betrayed me," Andrew accuses in a deadpan voice.

I turn to see him waiting just inside the door, arms crossed over his chest and a haunted look in his eyes.

"Shit," slips out.

He scoffs. "Yeah, I guess you didn't think you'd get caught. All this time you were the one stalking her. My own sister. I gave you fucking *life* and you repay me by taking advantage of a scared woman."

"No, no." I wave my hands and shake my head erratically. "That's not what's going on. If you'll just let me explain."

"Don't bother," he spits.

"But—"

The look on his face is dark, brows furrowed as his clenches his fists at his sides. I think if he thought he could take me, he might actually throw a punch at me.

His voice is hard, the words stilted as he spits through clenched teeth, "I knew something was up when you asked all of those questions about humanity and evil. I should have asked more questions of my own. I should have realized that if you had to ask if I thought you were a monster, it was probably only to see if I'd realized you *are* one."

"Fuck, Andrew. Let's get Chelsea. Talk to her and you'll see—"

"No," he cuts me off abruptly.

I snap my jaw shut. To be fair, I can't be one-hundred percent sure Chelsea would paint me in a flattering light if asked. We just shared a beautiful moment together, but haven't I learned that sex and love don't have to be synonymous?

I already know her body wanted me—but that could be purely biological. She hasn't actually said anything outside of sex to indicate that she's offering me anything more than that. My stomach churns with the realization.

"If you were lonely, I could have made you a partner." Andrew dares to say the words with a straight face, as if all I needed was a warm body and any warm body could do.

The very idea makes me flush with anger. "I wasn't lonely," I growl. "I didn't go looking for a plaything. I stumbled upon your sister's diaries and was struck with fascination with her brain. Then I started looking her up online, and I—"

"Enough!" he cuts me off again.

We're not getting anywhere here. He's going to need time. The most important thing is that he knows I'm not the stalker she ran from.

I move swiftly to the desk and press the power button on my tablet. The battery is dead. "Fuck." He's going to need to see the proof for himself to believe me. "I'm not the one stalking Chelsea, and I can prove it. Let's go down to the bedroom to my computer and I can show you."

Andrew barks out a laugh. "Not a fucking chance."

"Come *on*. You created me yourself. You can't seriously believe I would cross that line and scare your sister like that and then offer to help find the stalker when she called you."

"I don't know what you're capable of." Andrew sneers, and my stomach drops painfully. Fuck, I'm getting this so wrong. "It turns out giving you free will was a mistake after all. You had all of the power to make any decision... You *chose* to become a monster."

He might as well deliver a blow straight to my gut with those words.

Andrew straightens and drops his arms. He makes a sound of disgust in the back of his throat as he moves to the door. I start to follow him, but he puts a hand up. I probably should give him space to take a breath. I can gather the proof while he

does that and be ready when he's capable of actually having a conversation.

“Don't you know the real reason I put such a sturdy lock on this particular door and none of the others in the house?” he asks as he turns to face me in the doorway, his hand grabbing the frame as horror washes over me. He nods with a cruel expression on his face that doesn't look anything at all like the friend I've known since creation. “That's right, *Frankie*. I took a chance on creating you, but I always knew the day might come when I would need to lock you away. I'll be back when I figure out the best way to destroy you.”

Andrew slams the door. I launch myself at the solid wood, but it's no use as the latch clicks into place on the outside. I'm locked in.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHELSEA

I feel like I'm walking on a cloud as I move around the kitchen. My entire body hums with satisfaction and I can feel the smile stretching my lips as I pull out the ingredients to make pancake batter.

Nan never particularly liked us under her feet in the kitchen, so I'm not super familiar with the organization. I'm pretty confident Andrew and Frankie probably haven't changed anything over the years, though, based on how little interest either has in cooking. The takeout containers in the fridge are pretty telling too, but I don't mind.

There's a version of me that would like to learn to really cook. A version of me that doesn't dedicate an ungodly number of hours to my work in Baltimore. Occasionally, I convince myself I have time to learn since it's not like I have anything to do when I do have free time. But my kitchen attempts always end in minor disaster, like staining my dish towels with spilled pasta sauce. Or wine.

It takes me longer than expected to find a mixing bowl, but I finally realize it's in the back of the cabinet beside the oven. I kneel down and have to practically crawl halfway into the cabinet to be able to reach the stack of glass bowls.

I untangle the bowl I want as I hear footsteps growing increasingly louder as Frankie finally joins me in the kitchen. "I wondered if you'd ever show up," I tell him as I carefully back out of the cabinet. My smile is wide as I slide the mixing bowl up onto the counter and turn to look to the entryway to greet him.

"Hi, Chelsea." Hannah waves her fingers as she leans in the doorway.

My heartbeat jolts and then skids to a brief stop. "Hannah? What are you doing here?" I grab the edge of the counter and slowly pull myself to my feet.

“Problem solving.” Her lips twist into a cruel smile.

I’ve always thought Hannah was such a sweetheart, though a little scatterbrained at times. Now though, all I can focus on is that she has full-blown crazy eyes.

I’ve learned to read people well. I know the danger that lurks behind eyes like that. She’s not mentally well, and that means she’s bound to be unpredictable. Unsafe. There’s nothing I’ll be able to realistically offer to talk her off of whatever ledge she’s moving toward. I need help, and I need it quickly.

Where the hell is Frankie?

“What kind of problem?” I ask in an effort to keep her talking. Crazy people are like superhero movie villains. They’ll typically tell you single every thought and plan if only you keep them talking long enough.

“You,” Hannah snaps.

“Me?” I rack my brain trying to think of anything I might have done that could upset her. The last time we were together, we drank enough that I guess I could have said something and not realized it was hurtful... Though that’s not really like me.

“Chelsea Snyder... Ivan Rhodes’ golden girl and perpetual obsession.” Hannah is a beautiful woman, but I’ve never seen such an ugly face as she sneers at me. “You ruined my career.”

“Hannah, I’m so sorry. I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about,” I admit. What does my boss have to do with her career? And what does she mean by calling me his *obsession*?

She tosses her long, blonde hair over her shoulder. “Of course you wouldn’t. You’re so oblivious and disinterested all the time. If only you’d responded to Ivan’s first attempts at getting your attention, I would have been free to enjoy the career he promised me. Instead, here I am turning down jobs to have to babysit and spy on you.”

I hunch a little as I try to untangle her words. The more she talks, the more unsettled I feel about dealing with her alone.

Every muscle in my body is on high alert, warning me that we're in physical danger.

“That’s right, you stupid bitch. That hot, billionaire, asshole of a man wanted you so bad, he was willing to promise anything for help getting close to you. It was like making a deal with the devil. I handed information about you over on a silver platter, and in return, I finally started to get calls for jobs. *And* a beautiful apartment in a nice area instead of the shit-box I was in before with six roommates and two bedrooms.”

Flashbacks of my first year working for Ivan flood my brain. The way he lingered at my desk so often that my co-workers started avoiding me unless absolutely necessary, not wanting to deal with the boss any more than necessary. And I faced so many sidelong looks for that only to dismiss it as professional jealousy. How dense was I?

And then there were the little gifts—candies and office supplies. Nothing major, but always highly specific to brands I liked. Then the constant offers to take me to dinner to thank me for all my hard work, which I declined out of a sense of professionalism that my first boss had instilled in me. Sure, he was frustrated a few times when I said no, but it never seemed like a big deal.

I don't remember Hannah moving into the apartments right after me, but I do remember plenty of occasions spent wondering how she afforded the place.

Reality hits me hard. We live on the same floor in similar apartments... in a building known for employee housing. Of *course* her apartment would be one of Ivan's. Was I really so desperate for some semblance of friendship that I asked so few real questions about my casual friendship with the flighty model down the hall?

And the gifts... always delivered when I was away. Never any record with the front desk of a delivery person signing into the building for me. They could have been signing in for Hannah instead. Or she could have been helping to leave the *gifts* all along.

“Oh, look, you’re finally starting to catch up.” Hannah tilts her head back to let out a cackling laugh. “Did you really think you were just *that* great of an assistant? That your boss wasn’t actually trying to get under your skirt the whole time?”

She’s trying to taunt me into a reaction. I’m careful not to take the bait. Letting myself get too emotionally charged will only likely escalate her as well.

If she’s going to hurt me, I’m sure as hell not going to help make it easier for her.

“It’s really hurtful to know that’s all Ivan ever wanted,” I acknowledge, choosing my words carefully. “Obviously, I won’t be able to go back to work for him. You shouldn’t either. We shouldn’t let anyone get away with behavior like that.”

Hannah rolls her eyes. “I don’t care about how he behaves. I care about the fact that he promised me a lucrative career as soon as things were settled with you. Now here you are running from him, shacking up with some scarred freak, and leaving me stuck following you when I could be on a beach somewhere drinking cocktails on Ivan Rhodes’ dime.”

Gross. In so many ways.

“I don’t imagine he’s agreed to keep paying for vacations for you once he has me, though.”

“Of course not. But he did promise me one hell of a bonus payout if I ensure you make it back to Baltimore to him, where you belong.” There are practically dollar signs in her eyes already.

“And if you don’t?” I already suspect where this is going.

“Then I get no bonus, and he has hours of footage of me giving him intimate details about you that he’s claimed to blackmail me with.” Hannah stomps one foot angrily on the ground, like a frustrated child.

“How could he blackmail you with that? You’re telling me yourself now that you’ve done it, and no one else is going to care about you being a nosy neighbor.”

“Don’t be so stupid. I admit to *everything* in those recordings. Bugging your apartment. Leaving hidden cameras occasionally set up. Even taking some photos of you naked and drunk a couple times after you had stressful days at work.”

I wrap my arms protectively around myself. She’s talking about fully overstepping all boundaries of my privacy. In every possible way.

“One time, I got you so drunk you were practically comatose, and I let Ivan take you home. I thought he’d fuck you out of his system then, but all he did was put you to bed and jack-off over your sleeping body.” Hannah makes a sound of disgust again—as if me being violated instead of assaulted is such a letdown.

I’m not just dealing with crazy eyes here. I am entirely out of my depth and dealing with a truly dangerous woman. Her complete apathy about my safety would be telling. Her desire for me to be *hurt*? I know what kind of problem solving she’s planning to do.

Hannah plans to kill me.

“If Ivan is so obsessed with me, you’ll never get away with hurting me,” I point out. I’ve seen the way his anger overtakes him during and after difficult business meetings. The scenario she’s painting... Ivan won’t just roll over and forget about it. He’ll be determined to punish her.

Hannah only smirks.

Not a good sign. “What?” I prompt warily.

“Don’t be silly, Chelsea. I would never hurt you.” Hannah’s sugary-sweet tone doesn’t even try to be convincing. “I’ve been trying to keep track of you these past few days, but it’s so hard. Your brother’s roommate is just *so interested* in you. Obsessed, even. So obsessed that once you text Ivan that you want to come home because you miss him so much and think your relationship should be *more*... The scarred freak loses his shit and kills you in your own backyard. A crime of passion.”

“That’s sick.” My voice is barely a whisper. My body feels so cold. I tremble as I try desperately to think of a safe way out of this. Some way to convince her that there’s a better plan—one that benefits her more than killing me would.

Hannah shrugs. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure to console the sad billionaire when you’re out of the picture.”

Oh... fuck.

I won’t convince her of anything. She doesn’t just plan on getting rid of me, she plans on capitalizing in a big way. Ivan is filthy rich and powerful. Sinking her claws into him would leave her set for life, and it certainly sounds like the two of them deserve each other.

“Come on now, Chelsea. Let’s take a little walk.” She jerks her head to indicate toward the door along the back wall of the kitchen.

I shake my head. There’s no way I’m going willingly with her. At least in here, there are two people who are bound to wander around the house eventually. Though at this point, if Frankie hasn’t materialized yet, I’m not sure what he could possibly be doing. It hurts my heart to think he regrets the sex, but I can’t exactly dwell on that at the moment.

My brother is probably lost in an experiment. Odds are low either man hears me shout from the basement or third floor, but I have to try.

I glance toward the knife block mere feet away.

“Don’t even think about it,” Hannah warns. She lifts her silk blouse to show off a gun at her hip. “I’d hate to draw that kind of attention to this whole ordeal, but I will if I have to. Of course, then the freak would have to snap and kill your brother too before committing suicide over what he did.”

This new threat makes me freeze. If Andrew is working in the basement, it would all too easy to corner him. He would be a casualty of my carelessness.

All this time, the little details didn’t add up, and I ignored that. I didn’t want to acknowledge the red flags because I was comfortable fading into the background, hidden amongst a life

in Baltimore that didn't fulfill me at all. Convinced being good at my job could be enough. Not wanting to take the risk of actually caring about anything more than the bare minimum for fear it wouldn't work out or I wouldn't feel deserving.

Tears prick in my eyes.

“Don't cry,” Hannah snaps. “Just get your ass outside. You don't have any choice, unless you're ready to sacrifice your brother right this very second.” She raises one eyebrow with a smile, taunting me. I don't think she'd care if I did sacrifice him. I don't think she feels any hint of remorse or guilt about what she's doing.

All she sees are dollar signs and the potential for fame. Ivan used her, and now she's ready to thoroughly return the favor.

I'm the only thing standing in her way.

My only hope is to try to take advantage of my familiarity with the surrounding area. There are woods just beyond the backyard. If I can force her to chase me, I might be able to circle around and lose her long enough to get back here and try to create safety for myself *somehow*.

It's not a solid plan, but it's all I have.

I side-step toward the door, keeping my eyes on Hannah as she nods encouragingly. She smiles smugly as she taunts, “Oh, what a good girl you've decided to be. Personally, I don't think your brother is all that. Scarface, either. But it makes it so much easier to get people to do what you want when *they* think they have something worth losing. Eh, there's no accounting for taste.”

I pause my steps. The taunting is really starting to piss me off. She seems to enjoy creating more chaos, and I know I'm in danger of losing my forced calm and going after her in a very dangerous way. It's tempting. But *that* plan would be more effective outside.

If I want to go after her physically, I have to separate her from her gun. Outside, if I can get ahold of it, I have a shot at

throwing it out of reach without as much worry about it going off or winding up too easily within reach.

“You’re moving too slowly,” Hannah complains, finally tiring of the game of cat-and-mouse when she realizes I’m remaining stoic.

Hannah leaps toward me and grabs a handful of my hair. I gasp in pain as she uses her grip to drag me more quickly to the door. She shoves it open and pushes me out ahead of her but doesn’t release my hair. She laughs cruelly as her grip jerks me backward, yanking so hard at my scalp that stray tears fall and roll over my cheeks.

I don’t make another sound. I’m determined not to give her the satisfaction.

She’s entertaining herself, which is just enough of a distraction for me to catch her off guard. I lean into her grip and let her drag me closer. Just as she puts a hand between my shoulder blades to push me again, I pivot and go immediately for her waist, ignoring the searing pain as it tightens the pull of my hair.

“What the fuck!” Hannah releases my hair to try to slap at me to fend me off.

I take the hits. Adrenaline does me the favor of muting the effect as I grapple with the gun holster on her waist. It’s only a snap that keeps the gun in place. In moments, I yank it away and launch it with all my strength toward the side of the house. If she wants to retrieve it, it’ll slow her down enough that I can make the run for the woods.

“That was really fucking stupid,” she grounds out. She reaches behind her, and I realize I shouldn’t have assumed it would be her sole weapon considering she was so clear about the fact that she would prefer not to use the gun unless she had to.

I’m light enough on my feet to create a little distance but not quite enough. White-hot pain tears through me as she slices at my arm with a hunting knife. Blood beads over the wound instantly, but she doesn’t cut deep enough to create a

wound significant enough to incapacitate me in a significant way.

Running into the woods isn't going to work, though—that much is clear. I'm going to have to fight back.

I scramble to get my feet moving as fast as I can, turning my body toward the side yard where the gun landed in the grass near a bush at the corner of the driveway. Hannah moves just as quickly, only a step behind me as the fight turns into life-or-death for *both* of us.

I wince as pain jolts me again, this time in my lower back. She's managed to hit me again with the knife, though it's more of a stabbing than slicing pain this time. I can't stop to take stock of the wound, so I push on and hope like hell if I survive her that she hasn't hit any major internal organs.

I'm so close to the gun that I dare to hope for survival. Three steps past the corner of the house and it's within reach. Just three...

Hannah launches herself at me, shoving hard enough to make me lose my balance and skid. I fall just short of being within reach of the gun. Hannah has to slow to accommodate a deep, hate-filled laugh. "Stay down, you stupid bitch."

Despite the lingering pain, I refuse to give up. I plant my hands in the grass and try to push myself up enough to crawl toward the gun. Hannah side-steps my body and starts to go around me. I'm so focused on my task that when a loud thunk rings out, it takes a second to register what the sound is.

I wrap my fingers around the handle of the gun, hand trembling, and turn desperately pointing it up at where I expect Hannah to be. Only, she's not the one standing over me.

My gaze drops to her crumpled form on the ground. I can't tell if she's breathing. I don't think I care.

"I guess I ought to stop fussing at Frankie for leaving the tools out once he's done working in my garden. These things come in handy sometimes."

My eyes struggle to focus as I shift my gaze to find Susan standing with a hand on one hip, a scowl on her face, and the

handle of a metal shovel in the other. There's a splatter of what looks like blood on the shovel. I dart my gaze back to Hannah's unmoving body and realize blood pours from the side of her head.

I struggle to swallow around the fear, emotion, pain, and *relief* clogging my throat.

"Oh, poor girl." Susan looks down at me with sympathy clear in her vibrant, expressive eyes. She takes a step toward me as if to offer comfort, but then the back door bursts open so hard it bounces off the back of the house.

"Chelsea!" Andrew shouts, crossing the yard so quickly it makes my head spin. He drops to his knees and wraps me in his arms. "What the fuck? I came up from the basement to talk to you, and I heard something..." He glances down, and his face pales. "You're bleeding."

I can only nod my head, numbness settling over me.

"Well, the other woman is definitely dead," Susan announces without any hint of remorse or care. "Based on the way she was chasing your sister, it seems the roles were meant to be reversed."

Andrew trembles. "Fuck, Chelsea. We need to get you looked at by a doctor. We have to go to the hospital."

I shake my head. "I need..." My throat feels raw.

"What?" Andrew prompts. "Anything. I'll get you anything. What do you need?"

I squeeze my eyes shut and force the words out around the pain to tell him, "I need Frankie."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FRANKIE

It's a good thing regular breathing isn't actually a necessary function of my system because I'm holding my breath as I stand with my head pressed to the window, trying desperately to catch a glimpse of fucking *anything* out there. Susan was picking up the garden, probably mumbling about me not doing it myself, when she disappeared after seeing something in the direction of the backyard of this house.

I was trying to wave to get her attention in the hopes of getting some help escaping this fucking turret. Chelsea probably thinks I'm shit for disappearing after sex like this. And I *hate* the idea of her jumping to conclusions.

I need to tell her the truth. And I need to warn her about her fucking boss, considering the guy's flight will come in hours from now and he'll be headed straight here for her.

She needs to know the kind of man he is. The obsession he has with her.

And *I* need to know what the fuck in the backyard drew Susan's attention so thoroughly that she still hasn't returned. At this point, I can't take any more. The risk of damage from a three-story fall is significant, but if I don't take the chance... Well, I'm not sure Andrew will let me out of here intact regardless.

I jerk one of the windows open and glance down. "Fuck," I mutter.

I try to steel my resolve to jump. If I can try to roll upon landing, I might manage to keep the most important of my computer parts in usable condition.

It's a horrible fucking idea. I prepare myself to do it anyway because I don't have any others. I'm out of options, so here goes. I grasp the window frame and prepare to climb out but then pause.

My head snaps toward the door at the sound of footsteps pounding up the stairs. More than one set, it sounds like. I release the window, and I'm already beelining for the door when I hear the telltale sign of the latch being drawn open on the outside.

Nothing could prepare me for the sight that greets me.

Chelsea shakes as she stands before me in dirty clothes, blood smeared across her arm and drying on her chin. She looks at me with slightly hollow eyes, but there's a spark of emotion that flashes when we lock eyes. Relief.

"What the fuck happened?" I roar, eyes on her and her alone. I'm faintly aware of Andrew standing somewhere behind her, but she's all I can focus on.

My voice—albeit full of fury—snaps Chelsea into action. She throws herself at me, and I catch her midair to cradle her against my chest. She wraps her legs around my waist and clutches me so tightly I'm not sure she can get a good breath in between us.

I wrap my arms around her waist at first, but she inhales sharply and winces.

My hand is wet, warm, and sticky as I pull it away.

I glance over her shoulder to find my hand stained with blood. Based on her wince, it's *her* blood. "Oh, pet." I cup her ass instead since her back is injured. I can feel how weak her limbs are and don't need her trying to keep herself up when I can easily take the burden for her. "What happened? What the hell happened? I wasn't there. I'm so fucking sorry I wasn't there."

Susan wouldn't have done this to Chelsea, which means that whatever she saw brought her into our yard with a protective instinct. The woman isn't that friendly, but she likes me. And under her surliness, I know she's a truly good woman with a soft heart for those who are hurt or hurting. The disadvantaged and bullied. Outcasts. Freaks. *Monsters*.

I'm going to double that woman's garden size next year if I'm right and she crossed our yards to defend Chelsea.

“I’ve been tracking Ivan. He shouldn’t have gotten here until tonight. I was going to have plenty of time to speak with you about him and develop a plan.” It pains me to think he must have come early. Somehow, he must have known I was watching and...

“It wasn’t him,” Chelsea murmurs tearfully. “It was, but it wasn’t.”

“What?”

“Hannah. My neighbor. She was helping him stalk me. She didn’t want to do it anymore because she wanted his attention on her. She was going to—”

“Shh.” I stroke the back of her hair with careful softness even as my rage multiplies by the second. I’ll tear her limbs apart when I get my hands on this Hannah woman. I vaguely recall the neighbor. The closest thing Chelsea seemed to have to a non-work relationship in Baltimore. And she fucking betrayed my woman. “I don’t need the details,” I reassure Chelsea because I really don’t think I can handle it right now.

My woman is injured and shaking. I can connect the dots for myself and guess what Hannah’s plan was.

“You’re okay, I have you now. Nothing else will hurt you,” I vow. I don’t intend to let her out of my sight ever again if I can help it. Not for even sixty seconds.

If Andrew has a problem with it, he can fuck off. I raise my chin to meet her brother’s gaze over her shoulder. His expression is grim. I’m not sure how much of the look is over what’s just happened—while I was locked in like a fucking animal unable to keep her safe—and how much of it is still directed at me.

Whatever he’s feeling, he doesn’t interfere as his sister clings to me, desperate for comfort. Even when she buries her head in my neck and burrows closer in my arms. His nose twitches, but he stands stoic in wait.

Hope is a dangerous thing, but maybe there’s a chance for Chelsea and me yet. Someday. I’ll prove to her she belongs right here, and maybe in time ,Andrew will see that he might

have created me for a platonic companion for himself... But I was always going to fall for the sweet, beautiful, smart, creative sister hiding in Baltimore.

It's the free will of it all.

EPILOGUE

CHELSEA

Three months later.

“Chelsea.” Andrew touches my shoulder lightly.

My path to recovery after the emotional and physical trauma of my attack has been a hard one. Everyone has learned not to sneak up on me and to announce themselves if there’s any doubt about whether I noticed them enter a room with me. At first, Andrew could barely look at me for more than a few minutes at a time, hiding in his work more often than not. Now though, he’s stopped isolating as intensely and has done well with being sensitive to my still-heightened startle response.

“Hey,” I greet him. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Of course I’m here.” He looks down at me softly, taking in my hair and makeup. I’m not in my dress yet, but that’s my next step. It’s almost time.

“I wasn’t sure you’d really want to be,” I admit. It’s been a hard road getting him to accept my relationship with his pseudo-human creation. Just when acceptance seemed to be on the horizon, Frankie gave me a stash of Nan’s jewelry making supplies and some of her beautiful, unsold pieces, and then encouraged me gently to follow my dreams. He just didn’t realize that most of my dreams start and end with being with him these days.

Thanks to Frankie, jewelry making *is* what I’m pursuing now, but when it comes to my personal life... It’s all him, all the time. So, we decided we wanted to get married, and that’s what renewed the conflict with Andrew over the past few weeks.

We’re not sure the wedding will ever be legally recognized, but we’ve accepted that *legality* isn’t the point. Frankie was right to beg me to give him time and a chance.

There are so many reasons to fall in love with someone. For some people, it's looks and shared interests. For others, it's strong family bonds and economic stability. Frankie and I, we fell in love from a place of acceptance. Giving each other some of our worst and finding ourselves drawn together again anyway. We learned to care for each other, and that in itself is a beautiful enough reason to love someone.

The world would be much softer and much kinder if we could all feel the kind of love that shows up in care. Protection. Safety. Stability. And hope. Hope that despite the odds, I figure out how to share the rest of my life with a *so-called* monster.

"This has been complicated," Andrew admits. "But you're my sister. You've been through so much, and I don't want to be the one stopping you from finally getting the chance to decide what kind of life you want. If that means taking a leap of faith with Frankie then... I never want to be the thing standing in your way. In fact, I only ever want to be someone you can come to when you need solutions."

"Solutions?"

Andrew nods, his nose wrinkling before his next words. "Frankie is as close to human as a lab could probably ever make, but the work isn't infallible. He'll need updates. Maybe changes if anything is ever damaged or if parts start to slow down their function or become obsolete."

"I have considered that," I admit quietly. Slowly.

"I've spent so much time thinking about it that I finally realized I would need to do more than just be here to help." Andrew sets a file folder on the vanity in front of me and opens it to the first page. There's a resume with a photo attached of an unfamiliar man. He flips the page to the same set-up but with an unfamiliar woman. "I've hired two aspiring inventors to come assist me in my work. They know about Frankie and are intrigued by that project, as well as others I'm working on. I'll be able to train them to help with Frankie if something ever happened to me before you."

I clutch my hands to my chest and feel my heart beating rapidly out of control. “Andrew, this is incredibly kind of you. Far beyond anything I could have asked for.”

“There’s one more thing. A wedding gift.” He rubs the back of his neck uncomfortably before flipping the page again to the beginning of a patent contract.

“What is this?”

“My aging treatment works. Now that I have the patent, companies are showing an interest in picking it up. It won’t be a widely utilized treatment, but there are people in the healthcare system who suffer from conditions that impact their ability to age. It’s possible they’ll someday find resolution in this project.”

“That’s wonderful.” It’s exactly the kind of person my brother is, creating something so niche that will help only a few people. But it’s the kind of thing that’s been so important to him for months that he’s dedicated himself to finishing the project regardless of the number of people affected.

“In the meantime, the prototype will be yours.”

I tilt my head and look up at him questioningly.

“There’s going to come a time in your relationship when you’ll be aging naturally and become all too aware that Frankie isn’t. I can’t make him truly human, but I always thought I might want something like this for my friend, so I wasn’t growing old alone. And now, I want this to be my gift to you. The ability to grow old with the man you love, however you choose for that to look, whether you actually use the aging treatment or not.”

His words choke me up. I have to swallow hard around the lump in my throat before I can speak. “This is an incredible kindness,” I tell my brother. I stand and throw my arms around him, squeezing him tightly even though I know he’s not the fondest of hugging. “For what it’s worth, Andrew, you never have to worry about growing old alone. We spent too long apart; I never want to lose you again.”

“You didn’t lose me, Chelsea. I think you lost yourself for a bit, but you found your way back.” Andrew’s words are sad, but they’re not wrong.

I’ve come to terms with the mistake I made by staying so long in Baltimore alone. I can’t go back in time to fix it, and I wouldn’t even if I could. That separation from my brother is what ultimately brought us Frankie.

“I’m back for good.” I need to hear myself say the reassuring words as much as I think Andrew does. Now that I’ve found my way home again, I never want to be anywhere else. The small town I grew up in might have its flaws, and there are people here who lack basic kindness, but it’s getting better every day.

I have a feeling Susan’s severe shaming of anyone who so much as shoots us a dirty look has helped a lot with that. Even Frankie has finally been able to start venturing into town occasionally and existing in peace at my side.

We’re all learning to live with the differences. From me to my brother, to the people in town. That’s what it means to be human, isn’t it? Growing. Doing better. Challenging what we’ve always known to find love and joy in the most unexpected places.

Sometimes fear gets the better of us—but we can always do better.

I squeeze Andrew once more and then release him just as Susan pops into the room.

“Chelsea, darling, your groom is getting antsy. If you don’t get out there soon, he might wear a hole in the ground from pacing. And considering what’s under that dirt, I don’t think that would make for an ideal wedding,” she teases.

That’s an understatement.

“Can you help me with my dress?” I ask her.

“Of course.”

Andrew excuses himself, leaving us to this last step before I go out back and marry the only man I ever have—and ever

will-love.

My dress is lacy but otherwise not too intricate. Susan helps me dress quickly and then ushers me toward the door. I'm barefoot, having chosen to forego shoes since we're getting married in the yard. It's a small event, only Susan, Andrew, Frankie, me, and a couple of new friends from town. Souls brave enough to embrace all of our weird and take us as we are. It's perfect. Exactly the way I would want to marry Frankie a hundred times over. I wouldn't change a thing.

Susan is silent until we make it to the kitchen door. I chose to do things this way on purpose, to give this space a new narrative in my life. I don't want to dwell on the bad days when there's so much good to appreciate and be thankful for.

"I overheard your brother giving you an unusual wedding gift," Susan says as we pause at the door. She reaches for the handle as I glance at her curiously. "I was thinking I might like to give you and your groom an unusual gift of my own."

"You weren't supposed to be giving us anything," I remind her. There's nothing in this world Frankie and I need except each other and the people we care about.

Susan waves my protest away. "This is as much a gift for me as it is for you. Life was getting a little dull around here. Your arrival spiced things up in a way that made me realize I have so much life left to live, and I should be *living it*."

"Okay..." I have no idea where she's going with this.

She pushes the door open for me, and I step out to get my first look at Frankie in his suit, even as I keep my ear trained to listen to her. He looks incredible. As handsome as ever. Scars and all. To some, he may look like a man of nightmares, but to me he'll only ever be the man of my dreams.

"Handsome," Susan remarks as we stroll steadily toward him in the middle of the yard. She finally gets to her point as she slows just ahead of my husband-to-be. "I own a lot of property in this town. It's why so few people want to question me. The old small-town politics are alive and well in many ways, and owning things comes with a lot of power."

I nod. It's certainly helped to have her on our side thanks to those kinds of small-town politics.

"There's a small house in town that I own. A distant relative was renting the place but decided they were ready for a big-city atmosphere. I've decided I'd like to be closer to town, but I hate to leave a beautiful old Victorian home sitting empty with no one to maintain it."

"Susan—"

She reaches for my hand and squeezes it in both of hers. "There's a lot of power in owning property in a small town. It's a way of telling people you won't be scared off so easily, that you're rooted in nice and deep." She shares a mischievous smile as a spark twinkles in her eyes. "You and Frankie are going to make a beautiful home there—and all of the grumbling critics down the hill can go fuck themselves if they don't like it!"

I gasp in surprise. "Susan!"

She releases my hand and swats me good-naturedly. "I'm sure we were all thinking it." She shrugs as she glances at the others. They all exchange sheepish looks and notably no one denies it. "Now put your Frankenstein out of his misery."

"Frankenstein's monster," Frankie, Andrew, and I all correct simultaneously.

I can't help but laugh as I give Frankie my full attention. "You look beautiful," he tells me, already reaching for me.

I clasp my hands with his. "And you're the most handsome man I've ever met."

"Are you ready to do this?" he asks in a quiet voice, as if to give me one last out.

I smile at my man. "Of course I am. I love you, Frankie."

"I love you too, my pet." He leans in to kiss me, even though we're completely disregarding wedding tradition at this point. I lean into the kiss for a little too long, until someone clears their throat and we will pull away sheepishly.

Together, hands still clasped, we cross over from the plush part of the backyard grass to the stretch of dirt that's just starting to sprout brand new shoots of grass. By this time next year, the grass will be full. But for today, we step onto the changing dirt in memory of what it represents.

The end of the old and the beginning of a new life.

Standing there, in the backyard of my childhood home, I marry my very own Frankenstein's monster, who turned out to be not a monster at all. Because the real monsters in my life?

Well, they just so happen to be buried about six feet down.

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