



Dark Corruption
Series

VOYEUR

K.M. MIXON

VOYEUR

A Stalker Thriller Romance

DARK CORRUPTION SERIES

BOOK 1

K.M. MIXON

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THE DARK CORRUPTION SERIES



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THIS ONE'S FOR...

**Those of you who not only survived the dark, but thrived.
May your wings be stronger for the journey.**

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CONTENT WARNING

This book falls in the realm of dark romance. There are things that might be bothersome to some readers. Such as, stalking, violence, mentions and on page descriptions of SA, mentions of trauma and traumatic flashbacks, breath-play, blood-play, sexual torture, bondage, praise, degradation, mentions of death, murder, graphic violence— not limited to sexual scenes with violence within them. This book also involves trauma healing. There could possibly be other things that you could find bothersome. Please take time to think about these things before turning the page.

Your mental health matters.

If you or someone you know has been sexually assaulted, there are people who will listen and can help. You can find those people by contacting the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673

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STALKER DEFINITION

**A person who harasses or persecutes someone with
unwanted and obsessive attention...**

But what is obsessive, really?

CHAPTER ONE

Anonymous

The way she chews her hair while she's thinking, reading, lost in thought, is what draws me into the enigma of her.

It's not why I started this voyeurism venture. No, what began the spiral into where I am now is much more striking. Running into her in the downtown market, literally, had set this madness into motion. And my foot has been on the pedal ever since.

She leans forward on the couch, grabbing for wine she finished ten minutes ago absently as she teeters the laptop on her leg. Working. She's always working. And I'm always watching. She doesn't know that, of course, but I'm her guardian angel. I lay in wait for my chance to pounce. But will I ever take that leap?

I wonder if I don't like the arrangement we have now. The one where she doesn't know who I am, but I know all about her. I know all her dirtiest, darkest secrets. Like how she's going to grope for that fucking glass four more times before she gets up and refills it. Or how she'll rest her head on the counter in the morning and glare at her coffee pot while it brews as she drifts in and out of sleep.

At first, I'd felt a little fucked up for watching her. Now, it's an obsession I can't kick. There's no cure for what ails me. Because nothing will cure the longing inside. Nothing except touching her. And that's out of the question. I'm nothing against the likes of her. She didn't look at me twice in the market when she collided with me, and her bag dropped to the concrete.

No, she apologized politely, offered to clean her pumpkin spiced latte off my shirt front, and then smiled as she sauntered off. She went about her day as if she had never met me.

I couldn't do that.

She etched herself into my brain that day. Wormed her way into my frontal cortex like a burned image on a fucking broken television.

At first, I'd decided she'd be mine, even if I had to force her to be. Then, I'd watched her chewing her hair subtly, fluffy socks on her feet and wine in her glass, and I wanted to know her.

But I'm no fool. I know she never gave a backward glance toward me. I know I'm not her type. I know I'm not on her level.

She yawns a weighty yawn of bone deep tiredness and closes her computer, sliding it off her lap onto the gray-blue couch.

Her orange tabby cat jumps up, seeing her lap empty finally, and stretches in a salacious way before lying down.

Her smile at the cat's action is something I move closer to the glass to witness. She lays a hand on the cat's back, rubbing as, no doubt, it begins to purr its approval.

Lucky bastard.

I shake my head at myself.

It would be too easy to take what I want. I've already been inside her home. I've already sampled what she tastes like. Well, what's left behind of her taste in her discarded underwear in the hamper at the end of the day.

She snores when she sleeps. And when she sleeps, let me tell you, she sleeps deeply. She's unworried and unbothered about the world carrying on around her.

All she does snore, surrounded by her three feline companions, unperturbed by the man who stands beside her

bed, her panties to his nose, dreaming of the day she finds him out.

Of course, in my dreams she's turned on by me and bares herself to me, and I fuck her deeply, hand over her throat, muffling her screams. But if she welcomed me, there would be no screams, would there?

See, this is why I haven't made my move yet.

My plan isn't formed enough. My plan of attack as well as my plan of what to do to her when I make my move has to be better laid out for the strike.

She stands and drops the cat to the floor, turning off the lamp beside the couch and leaving her laptop and empty glass behind. I'll plug her laptop up, clean the glass, and in the morning, she'll be none the wiser. She'll think she did it. Such is the flow of our nights lately.

Since she got laid off, she's been chugging away at job applications and interviews, burning the midnight oil in hopes of finding one job that others are sleeping on, literally.

Your time will come, sweet pet. Even if I have to slit throats to make it so.

I use the key that's under the mat—ignorant place for a key if you ask me—letting myself in to go about my nightly routine. I plug her laptop in, moving the glass to the sink for washing once she's fallen asleep. She'll be brushing her teeth now, slipping into one of her famed silk night outfits afterward.

I lick my lips as I lean against the counter to wait for her to get into bed.

The floorboard next to her bed has been loose—since I loosened it—so, I'll know the precise moment she enters it. She's the type to drift off smooth and rapid, so I won't have to stand here long.

In the early days, I'd stand here for hours, heart pounding away in my chest at the exhilaration of being caught. Now, I sigh and let myself in, taking care of my girl as she does the best that she can in the state she's in.

The floor creaks once as she gets into bed. The telltale sounds of her patting the top of the down comforter to beckon the cats up from the floor drifts down to me and I smile.

I smirk, imagining them all bounding for her—as any sane mammal would.

I was normal before her, I swear it.

But since her? Since her, I've become something wholly different, haven't I? Now, I'm the man who sneaks into a single female's home each night, watches her sleep, dreams of touching her, then follows her around every chance he can get.

What I'm doing isn't even legal, but that's something to worry about in the event I get caught. It's been almost a year, and she hasn't caught me yet, though. So, I think I'm safe.

That's when criminals get caught.

The thought settles into my brain, making me nervous. Maybe, I should start being more careful.

I turn, knowing she's already asleep and start to do the dishes. She never seems to question how they get done. I'm sure she thinks she does them in her wine-induced stupor. It's the only way I get away with anything I do around here.

Sometimes, I feel unappreciated.

Says the stalker washing dishes in the light of a nightlight for a woman who knows nothing of his existence.

I smirk at the thought.

I turn from the sink after finishing the last glass and look at the calendar on the freezer. Written on its whiteboard-like top are meetings with businesses for interviews, a cat's birthday, and something that says *call C*. I cock my head as I read it.

Who's C?

Seems my girl's been up to something unbeknownst to me. I don't fucking like that one bit.

I notice she's added a notepad to the right of the calendar with a pen on a magnet and I think about picking up the pen and leaving her a note, but I refrain.

Huffing, I stalk up the stairs.

Stalk.

I laugh inwardly at myself as I ascend to her room. She's in the middle of her bed, like always, surrounded by cats and sleeping deeply.

Her hair is across her face, shadowing her beauty to me. I reach down slowly, slipping it past her face and letting it drop down near her ear. Her blonde waves are thick and silky. The orange tabby picks his head up, sees it's me, and lies back down.

He's used to my presence now.

The first time I'd snuck in, he hissed and snarled something fierce. Over the course of a few weeks, however, I'd won them all over with some catnip and toys. They'd already had so many, she never even realized new ones had appeared.

Now, none of them bother me one bit. I'm a constant in all their lives. It's only her who doesn't know it. Not yet anyway.

When I finally leave, I return the key and whistle as I descend the stairs and move through the night.

I've watched shows and read plenty on men who stalk women in the night. They're all insane, though. I'm perfectly sane.

That's most likely what the insane think, too.

I scoff at the thought.

She'll know me one day. I don't need to stress her now; she needs to be focused. Although, I won't lie that her sadness and distress make me want to reach out and do more than move her hair from her face.

I straddle a thin line with my desire for her.

On one side of the line, is my desire to covet her, be there for her, become her everything. The other side of the line, however, is my immense desire to hear her screams muffled by

my hand, see fear racing in her eyes, and feel her heated skin as her body realizes she's being threatened.

It's a very, very thin line.

And I often wonder what it will be that throws me over one side or the other.

CHAPTER TWO

Emery

These fucking meetings are mind numbing. Suzanne goes on and on about figures and market polls. Sales quotas, sensitivity polls, and advertising quotas. It seems like I've been sitting here listening to her for hours. And upon checking my watch, I see that it has, in fact, been hours.

I signal for her to wrap it up, and she nods, reluctantly.

When she finally packs her boards and easel up, I turn and look out the floor-to-ceiling windows that surround the long table in the conference room.

“Was it me, or was her voice monotone the entire time she spoke?” Conner asks.

I smirk, my eyes finding those of my best friend and colleague, moving away from the city skyline. “Charlie Brown’s teacher type monotone.”

He hits me with a finger gun. “Yes, that’s the one!”

I laugh.

“So, I know you’re burnt out. We all are after that, but you promised you’d interview for the Ad Editor position,” he says.

I roll my eyes but remember I had, in fact, agreed.

“How many interviews have you lined up?” I ask.

He puts one solitary finger up, and I quirk a brow. I’d never known him to not line up multiple interviews for a position.

“Only one?”

He smirks. “I think I have the perfect girl for the position.”

“Ahh. What’s she look like?”

Conner and I have been best friends since high school, and it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out his hiring tactics. Any person with eyesight can walk through any portion of this building from the first floor to the top and see his hand in recruiting. Curvaceous women litter Stanner Enterprises.

Father had run this company my entire life, and his father before him. He groomed Conner and me to take over pretty much our entire lives. At least, as long as I can recall. He died two years back, leaving us in charge, causing both of us to damn near shit our pants. I’m thirty-five, I can do it. But not having Father to run shit past made life a lot simpler. If not, more efficient.

“It’s not like that...” he says, breaking me out of my thoughts. “This time, she was the only one who applied. Of course, you don’t have to hire her. But she’s all the hope we have at filling the position.”

I rub over my face once, feeling the slight scar over my upper lip from the night I try to forget. I look back at him. “Fine, but she can’t know she’s the only candidate. Don’t tell her shit before you get her to my office.”

He nods. “She’s here already.”

I groan, standing and buttoning my suit jacket and tugging the wrinkles out from sitting too long.

“Rein Suzanne in, would you? Her meetings are getting to be too fucking much. Simplify it, or find someone who can,” I tell him as I meet the door with my hand.

“Will do, boss.”

He laughs because he knows I’ve rolled my eyes even though my back’s turned. He’s given me shit about being his boss since I’d become it. Before Father passed, we both were on the same level in this company. But in one fell swoop, one phone call, I’d become more. He’s not my brother, but he’s close enough.

I love my job. But, sometimes, I want to go home at night when the rest of them leave. I wonder if Father ever felt this way. He wasn't the father who spent much time with us when we were in our formidable years. No, he stepped in once he knew he could groom and mold us into men whom he could leave his legacy to. Which ended up being only me.

I'm one of three boys, but I'm the only one who survived being a Stanner. Jace has been six feet down for years, and David is in the wind, most likely high on something under a bridge somewhere.

Conner—my best friend—is more like a brother to me than David ever could be. Even though he doesn't share familial blood with me. We've been friends since elementary school. When Conner's parents died in a car crash, Father took him in, never treating him any differently than he did me. He was my best friend, and he was alone, without other family to claim him. It was probably one of his single most shining moments as my father. One that I'll carry with me always. Sometimes, I think Father groomed him to become my right hand because his other two sons didn't meet the expectations I did. He wanted his three boys to take over his empire. Instead, he got Conner and me.

David only shows up every now and again when he needs money. Father had frozen his accounts soon after he found him strung out in the streets, begging for change. I, however, had unfrozen them since taking over. Thoughts of him plagued me until I did so.

Maybe freezing them was Father's way of seeing him. Because since releasing funds to David, I haven't laid eyes on him.

I smack my hand down on Christine's desk, startling her as she drags the nail polish she'd been applying across her knuckles instead of her nails.

"For fuck's sake, sir," she spouts.

"I'm ready for my interview, send her in," I tell her, continuing toward the door that leads into my office.

“Ms. Eder, come this way, he will see you now,” I hear Christine say as she holds the misted glass door open. A woman heads toward it, her heels click and alert me that she’s dressed for the occasion.

Christine moves back, giving the woman a wide berth to enter, and when she does so, *she* walks into my office. If I’d have been anyone else—Conner, perhaps—my jaw would’ve dropped.

She’s in a two-piece suit with pencil skirt that hugs her full figure. Bright red pumps lift her at least five inches off the ground. Her blonde hair is up in a clip of some sort, spilling over the top. She meets my gaze with her blue orbs, and I want very much to lick my parched lips, but I don’t.

I clench my fists, instead, trying to get my shit together as I prepare to interview the knockout. The woman, I mean.

I stand. “Nice to meet you, Ms.—” I trail off, hoping she’ll add her name into the gapped space.

“You don’t remember me? Oh, why would you, football stars rarely look away from themselves in the mirror, I guess,” she mutters. I startle at her words, grappling for what in the hell she’s talking about. She cuts my thinking off by putting her hand out. “Carina Eder.”

Why does that sound familiar?

I place my hand in hers, ignoring the slightest tingle of spark as our skin touches. “Nice to meet you, Ms. Eder.”

She sits down, plopping her briefcase on the floor before crossing her feet at the ankles and sitting at an angle. When her hands are placed very matter-of-factly in her lap, she looks toward me. Her features give me clues that she’s very put off by me—and very annoyed.

I don’t know what I’ve done, but I want to grovel at her fucking feet for whatever it is. And if I’m a good boy, maybe she’ll stomp on me with those sinful shoes. A shiver snakes through me. I brush it off.

I shake my head. No good can come of thoughts like that. Those are rabbit hole thoughts. They lead nowhere but the

deep darkness that dwells beneath.

“So,” I say, picking up her application that was strategically placed on my desk. “You look overqualified for this job. What makes you want to work here?”

I hadn’t really meant to say it in such a manner, but I had.

She lifts an eyebrow. “I need the money. We all need a job, sir. I don’t have one, and you have an empty spot.”

Well, this is going swimmingly.

“Have you done advertisement editing before?” I ask.

“I’m a professional editor with multiple degrees. I’ve worked everywhere from newspapers to publishing houses. Most recently, the publishing house I was working for, abruptly went under, laying off all employees.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that, Ms. Eder. Well, no, I’m not, because it’s my gain. You’ll be our only editor on staff, my father really didn’t believe in needing one, so you might be asked to work on other projects from time to time, but like I said, you’re overqualified. I’ll snag you up and hope you stay,” I tell her, standing and buttoning my suit like a pompous ass.

She notices, her blue eyes tracking every movement of my hands before she stands.

She reaches across the desk, and I hesitate before clasping my hand into hers.

“Thank you, sir.”

I’m caught in her alluring stare for a moment too long, and she lets her eyes drop first, rolling them before she picks up her briefcase.

I clear my throat. “If you’ll have Christine show you to Human Resources, they’ll get you all set up and ready to go for Monday. It was nice to meet you, Ms. Eder. I look forward to working with you.”

She mutters something under her breath I can’t quite hear, moving out of the room in a whoosh.

I slump down in my chair, loosing a breath as well as my suit jacket for the fiftieth time today. I twirl the chair to look at the darkening sky outside of my office, placing my hands on my head as I'd seen my father do a million times, if not more.

Perplexing women will do that to you, I guess.



IT BOTHERS ME THAT I DON'T KNOW HER, BUT THAT SHE seemed to know me. Her words hadn't gone unnoticed. But they'd registered in my mind second to her beauty—not to mention the way my body reacted. My cock stood the second she shifted her full hips sideways in that chair. Half of me had been jealous of the goddamned thing. And she'd muttered something about the football star, meaning possibly she knew me from school.

The rest of the evening was uneventful. I had two meetings I had to get through before I could do exactly what I'm doing now, sifting frantically through boxes in Mom's attic.

"I don't know why you need your old yearbooks at this hour, but I'm sure they're here somewhere," she keeps repeating as she finds random shit to stop and look at.

"Oh," she says, picking up yet another dust-covered piece of nostalgia from behind a box. "Do you remember this? Oh, look at it!"

I turn and see her holding up a moth-eaten Santa hat. One that Father had worn one year and scared the shit out of David with. It wasn't the hat that had done it, though. It was the hideous beard. He'd wanted white, of course, but it being near Christmas, they were out. So, Father had settled for a red beard—the only one left. He thought it was going to be festive and different. But it had been terrifying for David, and hilarious for the rest of us.

I smirk as I remember David's face buried in my mom's chest as she motioned for Father to remove it as she fought fits of laughter at David's expense.

"Wonder if it would scare him straight," I mutter.

"What?" she asks, clearly not seeing the same memory that I am.

"The beard."

It takes a moment for her to catch up, and she laughs before her face drops. It does that when she thinks of David. And when I speak of him.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..."

She cuts me off, "No, they're your memories, too. And I wish it was only that easy. I'd find that godforsaken beard and go run the streets with it on."

I smile, the imagery in my head of my mother running through the seedy downtown of Seattle with a bright red beard and Santa hat on plays in my mind.

"I'm sure you'd be arrested," I tell her.

She drops the hat into a random box, sighing. "You're probably right."

She turns and begins rummaging. I almost feel bad for making her come up here. For making her dredge down memory lane when she'd been drifting to sleep in her chair when I arrived. She looked peaceful, content. And then, here I came with my strange requests and tunnel vision at midnight.

"I'm sorry I came so late, Mom," I tell her, not looking back to see her face when she turns toward me.

"This is your home too, Em. You're welcome here whenever you see fit. Strange time to want a yearbook, but you boys always were on the wilder side," she replies. I hear her movement before she pats my back lightly in passing. "You know, I wonder if it's on the bookshelves in Father's office," she says offhandedly.

“Well, why didn’t you say that a while ago,” I ask, dropping a lamp back into a box of books I’d been rummaging through.

She shrugs, a slight smirk playing on her lips. “Some time spent with your old mother isn’t time wasted, is it, Em?”

I move toward her where she holds her hand out for me to help her down the attic stairs. “No, it’s not. It’s time I’d like to bottle and keep in my pocket to replay over and over, that’s what it is,” I say, kissing her hand and slipping it into the crook of my arm to lead her down.

“You always were my sweetest boy. I know those teenage years got a little hairy with the hormones and all, but you came back to me in the end, hmm?” she asks.

As we reach the last step, I stop us, turning to meet her eyes, and she pats my face lightly.

“He’d be proud of you, you know. But those bags under your eyes tell me you’re burning the candle at both ends, Em. You need to take care of you.”

I nod. “I know, Mom.”

Three... two... one...

“You know, if you got you a nice girl to settle down with, I wouldn’t have to remind you of these things, and you could give me a grand baby or two to keep me company. You know, keep me on my toes.” She grins.

I shake my head. “You’re something else, you know that?”

“So I’m told.”

The yearbooks were in Father’s office, between the Webster’s dictionary and the many encyclopedias Mom had bought us boys for school projects and reports in high school.

I sit down at his desk, flipping on the small lamp. The smell of pipe smoke is still fresh in the room, as if the wood soaked it into its core. It feels as if he could walk in at any moment, telling me to get out of his favorite chair.

He used to say his favorite chairs were the ones he made money in, this being one of them.

“I’m going to get in bed, Em. Lock up when you leave?” Mom says. She’s standing in the doorway in her plush, green robe, hair askew. She’s got her glass of warm milk she always drinks at night while she watches *The Late Show*. It’s nice to see that her routines live on... without him.

“I will. Goodnight, Mom. I love you.” I pretend to blow her a kiss as we always did, and she catches it and puts it on her cheek. Sometimes, she’d place them in her pocket. Rainy day kisses, she’d call them.

I find the E’s in the yearbook and strike out. I grab my senior book, starting with freshman year, and finding only the section with the last names nearest hers.

There she is.

Carina Eder. Bold type. Her large, awkward smile shows braces, probably freshly placed. Her hair is shoulder length and matted. Her shirt looks like it’s years old, and ill fitting. Massive, thick glasses sit on the end of her nose. They show overuse with the tape that’s visible and clearly holding them together.

I still don’t know her.

The only years I’d played football were these. My high school football career had come to a halt when Father decided business school was the direction I was going. I tried to beg him, make him see that football scholarship could be the way I go to school. But being that we had money—plenty of it—he wouldn’t hear of it.

Oh, Carina. Who are you?

I keep running my finger over her picture, wishing it was in color. The traces of this version of her are long gone. She’s filled out and filled in all the awkward cracks of childhood. And done so beautifully, if I might add.

In this photo, her body looked like neglect. Or the telltale markings of a child uncomfortable in their own skin. No, I can see it in her eyes. Even though she smiles at the camera, her

eyes swim with sadness. They're vacantly staring at a lens that's too one dimensional to capture the full vibrancy of Carina Eder.

I want nothing more than to find the next book and search for her, but I graduated this year... I trail off in thought as I recall that my brother, Jace, was a freshman the year after I graduated. I fly from the seat, pulling his yearbook out and finding the sophomore version of Ms. Eder to see how she changed over the course of her first year in high school.

I find her, and run my finger across the color photo of her. Apparently, it had only taken one more year for them to not cheap out and get color yearbooks. Just my luck, too.

She's in a yellow sundress with a rose print plastered on it. Like before, it shows years of use, probably a hand-me-down. I wonder if she has siblings. I find myself wanting to know it all. I want to know where she got this dress, why she chose it for picture day, what memory this photo conjured for her. I want to fucking know her for some reason.

It's unnerving, but I'm trying to ignore the idiocy of what I'm doing now and revel in the triumph of completing my mission.

Her smile is bright, her braces have pink and purple rubber bands on them, but her eyes are the darkest shade of blue, devoid.

What's the matter, little rose bud?

The thought startles me back to reality. I can't do this. I can't be pining after a member of my staff. We have a strict ethical code at Stanner Enterprises: no staff relationships.

I somehow had forgotten that I can't touch her, not while she works for me. I'd hired the one woman who has ever piqued my interest in my entire life.

I wonder how fast I'm allowed to fire her.

CHAPTER THREE

Carina

I got the job. I got the job.

The mantra repeats in my head like a static charge. I'm so thankful, but I didn't want to show *him* that. Of course, I'd called Conner—someone not so stuck up that they never noticed me. He'd told me there was a spot he was having trouble filling. Even though he knew it was below my station. Conner saw my qualifications and asked *me* if I was sure I wanted the job.

The salary was less than I was earning at the publishing house, sure, but it would pay the bills and leave plenty left over for me to do as I wished. Being as criminally introverted as I am, I don't do much. Though, the left-over cash from working as Stanner Enterprises' advertising editor would allow me a fair amount of money to order books off Amazon with.

“Carina, wait up!”

My finger had almost pressed the button to call the elevators, but almost doesn't count.

Inhale; exhale.

I turn around, tugging my lips upward as is societally necessary. If you don't smile, people think you're a bitch. Which, I'm not. I'm not used to being acknowledged. It's a new thing for me.

Conner is at the other end of the long hall, and I watch as he walks toward me. He hasn't changed much since high school. High school and college were lost years for me. I was

lost from the attention of the world. No one saw me. I was the girl with tattered clothes from goodwill. I had braces that a school organization helped my dad pay for when I was younger, and those were enough to solidify my standing in the school as an outlier. As I was the only one with them. I was a girl that if you bumped into, you'd genuinely be confused because you hadn't noticed me there in the first place.

Conner comes to a stop in front of me, winded as he'd obviously run to catch me.

"How did it go? Was he nice? I know he can be an asshole, but you're the best fit for this job," he tells me, smirking.

I don't feel any vibes off him to tell me he means any ill will. I'm always looking through people's veiled actions, searching for the reason they're speaking to me. Ever since Jennifer Skelly dumped half-mixed red Jell-o from a thermos onto me in the locker room freshman year, that is. She snapped a photo and posted it all over the school about how massively gross my period must be that my tampon had exploded in the locker room.

Conner's question replays in my head repeatedly, entangled with memories of the high school prank that put me on the map. Everyone in school knew about it, so I was surprised when Emery Stanner didn't know me as Bloody Carina.

Emery had looked at me as if he was astonished by the woman before him. I've gained weight. I've come into my own, and with multiple degrees I've been able to afford the finest designer clothes there are. It helps my outward appearance to the world, which makes *them* more comfortable associating with me. My teeth are now straight as a board, and my curves are in—according to Cosmo.

But he hadn't looked at me with recognition. He hadn't even known my name—he hadn't even taken the time to look down at my resume I could clearly see atop his desk.

"He was fine," I finally say in a smaller voice than I'd meant to use.

Conner smirks knowingly. “Was he, hmm? I bet I know why.”

I don’t step into the trap he’s leading me toward with his words. I’m not that girl. I’m not going to play dumb and walk right into a compliment about my body. I spent too many years as the ugly duckling to believe words from this type of man. Sweet words get you nowhere with me.

“I got the job. So, thank you so much for that,” I tell him, giving him my best smile.

He bows his head in fake embarrassment. “Oh, I’m happy to have helped. It’s the least I could do, Carina.”

I clear my throat, rocking on my heels before letting the pad of the shoe hit the ground.

“Well...I’d best be getting to Human Resources,” I tell him. When I turn back around, Christine is still standing next to the button I’d pressed for both of us to descend to HR.

“You know all the shit that happened...” he trails off, and I can see this time his embarrassment is honest.

“Conner, it’s the past,” I lie.

I know he knows it’s a lie, but we both silently agree to drop it.

He nods. “Well, I’ll see you Monday. We have a project going on now for a deodorant company, so you’ll be working with Suzanne closely on that once you get squared away.”

He smiles, and I return it.

“Thanks again,” I tell him, holding out my hand for him to shake it.

It’s a simple gesture, but he hesitates. When his hand brushes mine, there’s no tingle like there was when Emery shook it.

When I’m in the elevator, Christine eyes me as she blows on her wet nails.

“So, you know Conner?” she asks.

I nod, giving her nothing else.

As we descend in the elevator to the fifth floor, flashes of the incident Conner's sorry for flick through my brain, and tears threaten to fall, but I hold them at bay. I don't have time for falling apart today. I have to be stronger than in the past. It's something my mom always said.

I sigh. Remembering her is hard.

I look up and see Christine eyeing me as if I'm the strangest woman she's ever met. It's nothing new. I'm used to it.

I got the job.



HOME.

It's where comfort is. It's where I can open my petals and bloom into my true self without the judgmental eyes of the world on me. I kick my stilettos across the room and then think better of it, picking them up and placing them in the shoe closet behind the front door.

Cinnamon meows and stretches on the back of the couch where he's always perched when I get home. I brush his soft, orange fur.

“Hey, bub,” I tell him. He purrs and pushes into my touch.

He's the only man in my life that's ever been anything to me. Well, he and his brothers.

I'd found the three of them on Craigslist—yes, that's still a thing.

Piglet and Tigger are both huddled on the cat tree, snoring as they cuddle together. I give them both a stroke, and Tigger opens one eye, closing it promptly when he sees it's me.

Yep, me, guys.

After showering and removing the ridiculous make-up that makes me feel like I'm wearing a Halloween mask, I slip into sweats and shove my glasses back on.

I sigh, looking myself over.

There you are, Rina.

Human Resources had gotten me set up with a badge and gotten all my tax information done. I'd set up payroll, and she'd informed me Conner explicitly told them I wasn't getting a week held back. I'm thankful, but it also makes me sound like a charity case.

I move into the kitchen to wash the dishes I'd left behind last night. I was going to do them this morning before my interview, but I'd woken up late. I blame Netflix and the 'next episode' button.

When I get into the kitchen, I stop dead in the middle. It's clean. I wince, searching for the memory in my hazy mental filing cabinet, but come up empty. This has happened before, so I know it's probably red wine-drunk Carina at her old tricks.

I shake my head and move to the calendar, removing a few things and adding what time work is on Monday. After calling the local pho place and placing my usual order with Mr. Hei, I pour the remaining wine from the bottle into my glass and move to the living room. I unplug my laptop in passing so I don't ruin the battery.

Tonight is the first night in months—since the lay off—that I can relax and know that Monday I have a job to get to. It feels amazing despite the daunting feeling of starting over again.

I take a long sip as I flip through Netflix, even though I know I'll click on the same show. It's almost Fall, which means I'm going to click on *Supernatural* and start from the beginning as I always do this time of year.

Something creaks above my head, and I freeze, looking up as my heart pounds in my breast. I hold my breath, listening as hard as I can, waiting to see if I hear anything else.

I bought this house a year ago, and because it was built in the 1800s, it's always making noises. Sometimes, I can ignore them. Other times, like now, they unnerve me. I take a long drag of wine, and the doorbell rings, almost causing me to spit it out.

I open the door and pay Andy for my food, tipping him generously for the first time in weeks because I can now afford to.

“Hope you’re doing well, Rina. Have a great night!” he tells me, bounding down the steps, off to another delivery.

To hear Andy call me by my nickname makes me inwardly cringe because he’s the delivery guy for my food, and I’m closer with him than anyone else.

As I eat and watch Sam and Dean go look for their father who hasn’t come home from a hunting mission, I run my mind over all I know about deodorant for Monday.

It feels good to have less to worry about.

The floorboards above creak, and I look up, ramen hanging out of my mouth and steaming up the bottom of my glasses as I hold it so near the lenses.

I think about dialing Ryker but stow the thought. When something crashes to the floor, I spit my noodles back into the container, placing it down as silently as I can, pulling out my phone and texting Ryker.

Are you home?

Yeah, why? What’s up?

I’m probably nuts, but it sounds like someone’s in the house.

I’ll be right over. Make your way to the porch quietly.

K. Hurry!

I silently slink to the door and slip out, leaving it agape for Ryker who bounds up the stairs, gun in hand and into the

house like the detective he is, on a mission to protect his hare-brained neighbor from what's likely one of her cats.

He comes back down the steps, gun at ease, and I take a massive breath.

He shakes his head with a smirk on his lips. "Tigger again. He got one of your vases."

I sigh, gripping the front of my oversized sweatshirt.

He rubs my arm, looking down at me. "You okay?"

I nod. "This house freaks me out. The other night..." I trail off, not wanting to make myself look like more of a freak in front of the hot neighbor detective.

"What?" he coaxes.

I point toward the front window. "I swore I saw someone looking through that window," I admit.

He looks over and a thought crosses his face as he contemplates something.

"How about we install cameras? Maybe next weekend? It couldn't hurt. It'll give you peace of mind."

I nod. "Yeah, and then I can stop bothering you."

He smiles at me. "Oh, always bother me, Carina." He draws my name out, making it sound sinful. He pulls my hand into his, which usually I'd be giddy about. But tonight, I notice that the tingle I'd felt when Emery touched me is likewise missing as it was when Conner shook my hand.

What in the...?

"You know you're never bothering me."

I'd pined for Ryker for the first few months after I bought this house, watching him change his oil, wash his car, or mow his grass from cracks in the front window blinds.

One night, however, I'd run outside into the cold because I swore someone was in the house, and he'd been getting off shift. He'd cleared the house and told me that whenever I needed him to call or text.

We'd become close friends after, and I hadn't stopped pining after him. Until tonight, apparently.

He's tall, taller than my 5'5 frame. Dark hair and dark eyes, with a matching thinly trimmed beard. He looks as if he lives in the gym. Now, from my stalking of him through the window, I know he has a makeshift garage gym. In the summer, he works out with the door open, and I make sure to check the mail a few times on those days.

Once, he'd offered to train me. I'd taken it as him flirting and said yes. I hadn't walked right for a week after the session. I found it hard to even sit on the toilet afterward, when I'd never realized my toilets were so low beforehand.

"You should let me take you to dinner sometime, Carina," Ryker says, pulling me from my head. I realize he's still holding my hand, caressing the top of it with his thumb softly.

I open my mouth to decline but I stop myself because I don't have a reason to tell him no.

I nod. "I'd love that," I tell him.

He smiles. "How about next Friday night? Seven?"

"Yeah, that should work. I'll keep you posted. I start a new job on Monday, and I don't know what the hours will end up being."

He smiles big, excitement filling his face. "Oh, congratulations on the new job. So, we will be celebrating, then, hmm? Just let me know what time will work best for you. I'm off Friday and Saturday, so you can make the rules."

I find the last part of his statement strikes me a little strongly, but I brush it off. I've never dated. Shit, I'm probably the only thirty-year-old virgin in the city. Possibly the entire state.

I tell him I'll keep him updated and move back inside, locking the door behind me. Piglet is licking himself on the back of the couch and stops to eye me.

"I've got a date," I tell him.

He meows as if to say: 'sure, Mom, whatever.'

I lean against the door, letting excitement wash through me at the thought of getting to know the guy I've been watching through my window for over a year now.

I don't let too much excitement bubble up, though. I know how things usually go for me.



TODAY'S MY FIRST DAY IN THE OFFICE. THE ELEVATOR TAKES me to the floor I'd met Emery on for my interview. Christine sees me exit the elevators and smiles, waving me over to her desk.

"Happy first day!" she exclaims.

I do my best to fake smile back. "Thank you. Do you know where I'll be working?"

She nods, standing and locking her computer. She's gorgeous. Blonde hair is pinned up and she's in a similar suit set like I'm wearing, but hers fits her thin frame a little better than mine does. She has tattoos sneaking down the wrist of her half sleeve shirt, they run down to her hands, too.

On anyone else, I'd think they were too much, but not on Christine. They only enhance the shining beauty she already has that threatens to blind anyone who gets too close.

"Oh, Mr. Stanner wanted me to have you come and get some paperwork Suzanne sent over for you. She's out sick today."

I nod as I follow her toward the office where I'd felt my first tingles of life only three days ago when our hands connected. My good talking to at Human Resources about company policy flicks through my brain, however, and puts the kibosh on the things possibly going anywhere.

She opens the door and motions for me to enter before her.

“Oh, Mr. Stanner, I didn’t see you come in yet. You snuck right past me,” she says, moving toward the desk to get the paperwork.

I freeze near the door. I’m caught in a stare so powerful; I can feel my body fighting against it as the moments pass.

His dark blonde hair is expertly maintained, the slightest waves from where he’s combed it back can be seen. His jaw is so sharp that my fingers itch to run across it and feel its hardness. Full lips part as his tongue slips out and licks them. My eyes follow the gesture, flicking back up to his green orbs that are filled with something dangerous.

I press my thighs together —because let’s face it, they’re always touching.

“Leave us,” he tells Christine, and she fumbles for what to do with the paperwork in her hands. He stands, tugging it from her and dropping it onto his desk, glaring at her as she moves out of the room. When she passes me, she gives me a look of apprehension, as if this never happens.

Great.

“So, you weren’t going to tell me you knew me?” he asks, his ironclad jaw twitching as he tightens and releases it a few times.

It feels as if his presence standing before me leeches the air from within my lungs. I can’t seem to find enough oxygen to breathe, let alone speak.

“That’s my fault,” Conner says from behind me, sauntering in casually with his hands in his pockets. He’s chewing a toothpick in his mouth, something I haven’t seen a man do since my grandfather.

“How so?” he asks him, as I silently thank God for sending me Conner this morning.

After watching his tongue slip across his lips, there was no fucking way I could speak to Emery. Not coherently.

“I told her you wouldn’t remember her, and you didn’t, did you?” Conner asks him cockily.

Conner and I both know the only reason he recalls me is an event so staining neither one of us should reference it. He flicks his gaze at mine, as he no doubt thinks the same. He leans over Emery's desk, grabbing up the paperwork Suzanne left for me, and walks back toward me.

Emery's eyes bore into mine as his jaw still ticks with annoyance.

"Come on, Carina. I'll show you to your office," Conner says, walking past me. I turn on my heels, hastily exiting the room and taking the first full breath in the last five minutes.

Stay away from him. You know he's trouble. They both are.

CHAPTER FOUR

Anonymous

Dickhead detective is repping it out on some fancy chest machine as he grunts and ruts like a fucking pig. He keeps looking over at her house, as if he hopes she's watching him. Or maybe it's something he's noticed my girl doing, I wonder. I watched them the other night, standing on her porch, touching and staring at one another like teenagers. I'd damn near lost myself and rushed them both. He's the reason I have to be careful. He's the reason I'm close to killing. I heard her agree to a date with him. I know that if I'm not ready to show myself, I can't say shit, but it doesn't sting any less to watch her with someone else.

In between every set he does on machines or free weights, he looks over toward her house to see if he can catch her watching him. When I look back up from where I stand, perched behind an electric pole, there she is, peeking through the blinds. He smirks as he looks down, playing it off as if her being there didn't stroke his ego like he's one of her fucking cats.

I growl low in my throat and decide to go home. Before I do something stupid.



WALKING THROUGH MY DOOR, I DROP MY KEYS IN THE GLASS bowl I'd inherited when my mother died, letting the clink tell

my brain that we can settle down some. We're home. I head straight for my office, powering up my Mac. It greets me with that solitary, one note Apple tune. After grabbing a beer and a hot pocket, I plop down in front of it.

Through a day of research, I found C is most likely Conner Whitfield. Best friends and C.O.O. of Stanner Enterprises, where I followed Carina to yesterday. She'd left with a massive, spellbinding smile on her face, so I assume she now is editing for them in some fashion.

The slightest amount of research had told me Conner and Emery of Stanner Enterprises were a lot more to her than a job. They went to her high school in Rochester, only a couple hours down I-5 south of here. Rochester High School was a smaller school compared to most in the country, the town only having around three-thousand residents in total back then. Inwardly, I wonder if those two lust after my Carina as I do.

Of course, they do. Look at her. I run my finger over the small square photograph of her in the newspaper.

"Local Rochester Grad to Work in Major Publishing House." The title gives the impression the town was proud, that she was happy. The photo they'd chosen, however, shows another narrative entirely. Her eyes, even in black and white, express years of unhappiness, and a tale of woe of epic proportions.

"What happened to you, little one?" I murmur as I stare at the screen until my eyes burn, begging me to blink to clear them.

Sitting back, I continue to click through town newspaper articles via the library server. So much information is available to all via the slightest touch of a button these days. It thrills men like me.

Computers have always been my thing. It's the reason people come to me for many jobs. I find it surprising that Mr. Whitfield and Mr. Stanner haven't ever reached out for my services. Especially in the field they're in with the money they have. Being a fixer means I usually deal with their type.

Looking at the smugness on Emery's face—even in high school photos—pegs him as my kind of clientele on sight. The type to fuck up and have to bury the secrets via Father's money. If I dig deep enough, I know I'll find all his hidden skeletons. And that's what I intend to do. Anyone who gets close to her is someone that gets close to me.

And getting close to me is dangerous.

CHAPTER FIVE

Emery

I have no business being on this floor. I need nothing from here. My office isn't on this floor, nor do I need to meet with anyone here. But here I am, wandering through the corridors, looking for *her*.

It's been a week since she started. I've heard ravings from many people. One being Suzanne. But I haven't seen her. She was missing from a meeting this morning, and that had led me here. At the very least, I could ask her where she'd been. She's haunted my thoughts and dreams.

I spend my time trying to recall her from school, trying to conjure any memory of her. Even if it's bumping into her at the lockers, or her walking by the sidelines of the football field.

Why would she be near the football field?

I sigh, looking in the last room as I resign myself to the fact that I need to get back to my office. I have a meeting in thirty minutes.

"Mr. Stanner?" a small voice asks, and I whip to attention, my eyes falling on the empty desk in the office I'm peering into. I turn, finding the elusive Ms. Eder standing behind me, holding an armload of blank copy paper.

I rush to take it from her, but she pulls back, moving around me and into her office. She drops the paper on the desk and a loud thud reverberates through the room as she sighs.

One hand slinks up her hip and perches on the delicate curve. She's in a thin, flowy, blue dress that stops at her knees

and black flats.

It would be so easy to slide that fabric up and...

I snap back to attention, meeting her eyes as her brows rise on her forehead.

“Did you need something, Mr. Stanner?” she asks.

“I was —” I start, voice raspy. I clear my throat and try again. “I was coming to see why you weren’t in this morning’s meeting,” I finally get out, feeling like an absolute asshat. It seems to be the norm when I’m around her.

Confusion and panic seem to war behind her eyes for which is the correct feeling as she thinks of what to say. “I didn’t know I was supposed to be there. Suzanne said that as the editor, I wasn’t needed.”

Fuck Suzanne.

I keep that tidbit to myself as I look her up and down, praying she doesn’t look down toward my tightening slacks. I rock on my heels. “Well, she’s probably right. I wanted to make sure you were settling in okay.”

She rounds in front of the desk, leaning up against it with her supple backside, crossing her arms in front of her. The action makes her look powerful, commanding. Her breasts push up in such a way that I swallow hard against their siren call, fighting the urge to go to them.

“Do you make a habit of checking on all new Stanner employees, sir?” she asks.

My eyes find their way back to hers, reluctantly. “No, I mean...Of course, I want every employee to fit in and love their job.”

“That’s not what I asked,” she counters. “I asked if you make a habit of checking on all your new employees. Or is it something you reserve for the pretty ones?” She smirks, and I swallow, feeling like a drooling mutt. I produce an overabundance of saliva around her.

It’s those curves...

I open my mouth, at a loss for words, as I move closer to her. I see her fidget ever so slightly.

It's all an act.

The fact that she knows how fucking beautiful she is turns me on even more, but I know now it's all a front. I've heard about girls like her. Introverts who've learned to mask themselves to be like the rest of us. She knows what is societally expected of her, so she gives it.

I can't help but wonder what's underneath. If I were to peel back the layers surrounding Carina Eder, what would I find?

Before I realize it, I'm directly in front of her, looming from above, and her hands have dropped to grip the edge of the desk. It's a tell. One that says, *'back the fuck off, I'm uncomfortable'*.

I know what I should do. There's always a right and a wrong in a situation. It's not what I do, however. Instead of using my common sense and giving her space, I lean in, breath fanning across her face as she tips her head backward to maintain eye contact.

"No, Ms. Eder, I don't check on all new employees." I admit, like a sinner caught red-handed.

She swallows, and my eyes track the movement of her throat. "Then... then why are you here, checking on me?" she asks.

"I don't know, Ms. Eder. I don't know."

This admission takes her aback. She only lets the slight surprise trek across her features for a millisecond, but I catch it because I'm tracking every movement of her face like a fucking hunter with prey in his sights.

"Maybe—" she starts, breaths coming in shallow waves. "Maybe you should go, Mr. Stanner. This doesn't feel..."

I cut her off, leaning closer. My heart is running away, thumping so I can barely think. "Doesn't feel what?" I whisper.

“It doesn’t feel appropriate,” she finishes, drenching me in the icy feel of her words.

I pull away, stepping back abruptly and taking her in. Her body is flushed. Blotches litter her exposed chest. Her lips are parted, expelling the light pants of a woman aroused. Her hands are white knuckling the edge of her desk as she presses her luscious thighs together, causing me to lick my lips in wonder of what succulent treasure she hides between them.

“It doesn’t feel appropriate at all, Ms. Eder. You’re right. Nothing feels appropriate when I’m near you. But it feels...” I don’t let the thought finish. I scrub my hand over my face, turning toward the door.

I can’t leave. My cock is standing at attention, rigid as a fucking board. If someone sees me coming out of her office in such a manner, it’ll raise many fucking red flags. Though, I am a walking red flag myself.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

I turn swiftly, mouth dropping open. “What are you sorry for?”

“Coming here. I shouldn’t have come. But I needed the job...” She looks down, picking the sides of her thumb as I’ve seen my mother do when she’s anxious. I move before my brain can think, covering her jittery hands.

“This will not be an issue. I can get myself under control,” I tell her, doing my best to look as serious as possible to get my point across. I want her to be reassured. I can’t leave here knowing she’s sitting here on the edge of panic.

Her hand rises, running over the expanse of the scar on my face that everyone usually pretends isn’t there. “Is this from that night?” she asks.

My brows furrow as my veins fill with ice.

She knows.

How does she know?

I back up, panic rising in my body. My brain screams at me to run. I don’t talk about it, I can’t. None of us do.

She opens her mouth to speak, and I turn and rush out of the room, not stopping to even catch my breath until I'm on the elevator with the doors closed.

Grabbing for the handrails inside the elevator, I bend, panting and edging off the panic that's raging through me.

No one knows the full extent of the night I gained this scar. We kept it that way. But it seems the enigma that is Ms. Eder knows something. Something she shouldn't.

Something that could get her hurt.



CONNER FINDS ME SITTING IN MY CAR, TAKING A MINUTE TO calm down before getting back inside for more meetings. He knows when it's not okay to push me to talk, and right now is one of those times.

He turns to me, sensing the mood shift as I come down from what happened in Carina's office.

“What's wrong? It's been years since I had to come sit in this car with you. Hell, it's been years since I've found you in the car like this,” he says, his voice overflowing with concern.

“She knew about my scar. She asked me if it was from that night.” I turn toward him as I let the seriousness of my words settle between us.

“How? I mean, she obviously lived in Rochester and went to school with us, but...”

“She's from Rochester. But that night was... it was buried, Conner. Wasn't it? I mean, Father handled it. I thought he buried it.” I scrub my hands over my face, worry beginning to crowd my chest, warring to be the only emotion I feel.

“Yes, it's buried. Unless she was there, she doesn't know anything.”

Unless she was there.

“The girl’s name from that night?” I ask him, not having to elaborate because he knows who I’m talking about. He knows the disgusting things that happened in that house.

“Amanda something,” he replies.

I nod, chest finally releasing at a name that isn’t hers. I couldn’t stand it if it was hers. I don’t know why, but I couldn’t.

“She might know about the fire or the rumors, but I don’t think she knows more than that. She can’t,” he tells me, fully pulling down the curtain of calm over me.

“Thanks man, it’s ...”

“Thinking about it, I know,” he finishes for me. Because he’d been right beside me, as he always is.

I let my head fall back and hit the headrest.

“You know, you have two more meetings before you can call it a day. Afterward, I think we should get a drink,” he says, opening the door and stepping one foot onto the asphalt of the parking garage.

“Yeah, give me a few more minutes,” I say.

When the door shuts, I let myself take a few more breaths, but when my eyes close, flames dance behind them and I pry them back open.

Maybe Carina Eder is a lot more trouble than I gave her credit for.

Hours later, I’m sitting at the bar next to Conner, at our favorite Pho joint downtown, sipping strong Saki as we wait for our food.

The bartender hangs up the phone, shaking his head with a massive smile tugging his lips upward.

“What’re you smiling about?” Conner asks, sake taking full effect as he slips into his usual nosy self.

“The girl down the street, Carina. She always orders the same thing every week.”

Conner perks up at the name, and I, too, feel my ears hone in.

“So?” I ask. “Why does that make you smile?”

The bartender shakes his head. “Oh, no reason. Just brightens my night to see her. She’s always kind and she over tips. She’s not bad on the eyes if you look hard enough, either.”

I scoff. He must not be talking about the same Carina because the one that haunts me is drop dead gorgeous.

“Must not be the one we know,” Conner says, voicing my thoughts.

“Too bad I don’t have a fucking delivery guy tonight. He called in sick.”

“I’ll take it,” I say without thinking, and the bartender eyes me warily.

“Why would you do that?” he asks.

Conner turns toward me, grinning like a fool. “Yeah, why would you do that, boss?”

“I was trying to be helpful, fuck. Forget it.” I wave my hands at them both, downing another shot of Saki, wincing as it burns down my throat.

“I mean...she’s usually the only order I get this late, so it would be helpful. If you didn’t mind, that is.”

I nod too eagerly, and he eyes me.

“I’m not going,” Conner says.

“No one asked you to go,” I reply without even looking over at him.

“I was saying.” He shrugs. A blonde, leggy woman walks up, laying her hand on his arm and talking too low for me to hear. I roll my eyes. Conner has a face that could melt the panties off a fucking nun. It’s nothing new for him to get

approached while we're out. I'm no slack, but the scar, mixed with my broody features, usually keeps women from approaching me.

The bartender arrives with two bags, dropping them down onto the counter next to me. "I bagged your food too, since I didn't know if you were coming back to eat," he tells me.

"Thanks," I grab my wallet and pay for our dinner as I slide off the stool.

"Will you be needing a car sent for you?" I ask Conner, breaking up low whispers between him and legs-for-days.

He looks at her, as if assessing. She meets my eyes and shakes her head. "I can get him to where he needs to go."

I bet you can.

I move outside, sliding into my car and rattling the address to Carina's house on the slip the bartender gave me off to my driver. The wafting scent of the food has my stomach grumbling. Excitement wells in my gut at the thought of seeing her outside the office. It'll give me an opportunity to apologize for my behavior earlier. Each passing moment has my body doing anxious summersaults.

"This is it, sir," Tim says from the driver's seat. I peer out the window at the old, Victorian style house that looms to my right.

"Okay, I won't be long. I don't think," I say.

"Take your time. I'm on until the morning," he says.

He has a lot of faith in me. A lot more than I do.

I set the bags down on the porch, ringing the doorbell with my gloved hand. It's fall, but winter is quickly coming for us and the cold wind bites through my thin, tweed jacket. I blow into my gloved hands, smelling the sake that still lurks on my breath.

The door swings open and what stands in its fissure is the version of Carina I haven't met yet. It was, in fact, the same Carina who works for me. But this version, the clocked-out version, is in a robe, sweatpants, fuzzy socks, and thick, dark-

rimmed glasses. Her face is bare of her make-up and her hair is in the sexiest tousled messy bun. My mouth waters, forcing me to swallow.

The smile she'd had on her face meant for the bartender fades as she takes me in, eyes falling to the bags of food I'd forgotten at my feet.

I snatch them up, fumbling for the receipt. I told the bartender I'd return the money she paid me after I delivered her order, promising not to abscond with it altogether. I should've paid for it, but things between Carina and I are weird enough and she seems like a woman that would find my paying for her a bit strange and inappropriate.

Like you showing up with her food instead of the delivery boy inappropriate?

"That'll be \$47.25," I tell her.

She smirks, trying to steel her face. "You hard up for work lately? I thought Stanner Enterprises kept you booked to the brim, but I guess you found some downtime, hmm?"

She hands over sixty dollars and says, "Keep the change."

"Well, I'm moonlighting as a delivery boy tonight. A little roleplay if you will. But I will give this money and the tip to the real delivery guy." I smirk, and she looks down and the remaining bag at my feet.

"My food," I explain awkwardly.

She moves back, motioning with her head for me to come in, and I hesitate. I don't know why, but I look around outside, as if anyone I know in this neighborhood can see me at ten at night.

"Come on, I won't murder you," she says.

"Well, that's all the reassurance I required," I joke, moving inside and thanking God inwardly when she seals the breeze outside by closing the front door.

"I usually eat on the couch, but seeing that I'm not eating alone tonight..."

“We can still eat on the couch. Whatever your routine is, is fine with me. I’m interrupting your night, after all,” I say, moving toward the couch and plopping my food bag on the coffee table so that I can remove my gloves, scarf, and jacket.

Carina takes them from me, placing them on the table by the door. “Trust me, they’ll be safer away from all the cat hair.”

I look around, eyeing three cats huddled on the top of a cat tree that sits inside the kitchen archway.

“A cat person, hmm?” I ask, sitting and tearing into my bag.

“Yeah. I mean, I’m not at crazy-cat-lady status or anything, but I love them.”

“Well, there’s still time,” I tell her, ripping into my fork’s protective covering with my teeth and spitting the plastic from my mouth into my bag like the barbarian I am.

“Time?” she asks, watching my every move like a lynx on the hunt.

“To become a crazy cat lady? Like full-blown.”

She nods lightly, moving to the far end of the couch—as far away from me as she can get—plopping down and opening her food.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” I start.

Shit. I hadn’t meant to offend her or infer that collecting cats is the only thing she has to look forward to in her future. I’d wanted to make playful banter with her.

“I didn’t take it that way.” She smiles, opening her chopsticks. She’s obviously more experienced than I am.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt. “About earlier today. I forget you come from...home. I’m not used to people knowing about that night.”

I look down.

“I know nothing. I know what everyone else does,” she says.

Which isn't much. Father made sure of it. Can't have your favored son stained in such a way, can you?

"It's not something I like to talk about. Shit, I don't even like to think about it," I admit.

"I can imagine. I mean, I don't know what happened, of course. But I can see how it would be hard to talk about."

Her eyes have drifted off, far away from where we sit in her living room. For someone who doesn't know much about the fire, she looks awfully haunted.

Stop trying to make something out of nothing.

My brain's right. I'm blowing this situation out of proportion. It's because I'm not used to having people who know, other than Conner. No, all the people who know are dead, buried along with all the secrets my father paid to be six feet under with them.

"Want to watch a movie?" she asks, snapping back to reality.

"Sure, why not. What do you want to watch?" I ask.

"There's a new Stephen King on Netflix," she says.

I nod. "Sounds good."

The awkwardness is still there, it's palpable. There's so much unspoken between us, you can almost see it if you look hard enough. But because of our situation—our work one—I keep my mouth clamped shut, other than to shovel noodles inside it.

She fires up the television, Netflix making its telltale noise as it loads, and something out the window captures my attention. A dark figure is outlined beyond the glass, close enough to make out a head and shoulders, but too dark to see any features.

"Who the fuck is that?" I ask, jumping up and placing my food down.

The figure sees me notice them and moves back into the shadow of the small pine near Carina's window.

“Who’s who?” Carina asks, alarm filling her tone.

I fly around the couch, flinging open the door and rushing toward the railings of the porch.

“Hey!” I shout into the chilly night, my breath causing puffs of smoke in the frigid air.

A man in a dark hoodie and jeans is walking down the sidewalk, but he doesn’t look back. That’s the most alarming thing about him. If you’re walking in the night, especially this late at night, and you hear someone yell, you’d turn.

Suspiciously, he doesn’t. He keeps moving.

“Stay the fuck away from here!” I yell for good measure.

He remains steadfast, walking at the same speed and turning the corner onto the next street.

“Who was that?” Carina asks, teeth chattering as she shoves her hands into her robe’s fuzzy pockets.

“I don’t know. I saw him standing right there.” I point down toward the front window that looks right into her living room where we’d been.

She looks across the street toward a white house with lights on and a cop car in the drive, eyes darting back toward me as she moves inside.

When I shut the door, I watch her grab her phone and hit someone’s contact before placing it to her ear.

“Hey, I think you were right. Someone was outside my window, a friend chased him off, but I think we need to install those cameras you talked about,” she tells whoever is on the other line, presumably the cop living across the street.

The good Samaritan would be thankful for the cop’s presence and the proximity to her. But that’s not me. No, I’m wondering if this cop is a man or a woman, and what their relationship to Carina is.

She ends the call and moves to close the blinds, shutting the outside world out swiftly.

She sits, and I remain standing, looking down as she seems to spiral in her head.

Friend?

CHAPTER SIX

Carina

It's been a weird night. First, my sexy, confusing, broody boss showed up with my massive order of food. Then, I didn't even get to eat it because my stalker showed up. I'd sworn a few weeks ago that I'd seen someone, but I'd brushed it off because every time I think someone's in the house, it turns out to be nothing.

Ryker mentioned cameras, and now I'm thankful he's said he will be over tomorrow to install them. I can't imagine why someone would watch me, or who would be.

Emery left not long after, sighting he had to go back and pay the Pho restaurant for my order before they closed. He also wanted to check on Conner, who he'd left with a woman at the bar, but I think the night bothered him too.

I've always felt like someone's watching me in this house, but it's old and massive. It makes the most insane noises when the wind blows just right. In the winter, when the house is stretching, it seems to groan. So, it's no wonder I don't feel alone.

Add to that fact that my cats are insane at night and like to knock everything I fucking own to the ground, and I'm a regular basket case.

I'd moved my date with Ryker to tomorrow night, telling him I was too tired from the week to go out, which was true. Getting back into the swing of working took its toll on me, but not physically.

Mentally and emotionally, I need time to myself to recharge. Being around people a lot does that to me. I have to have time to charge the social batteries. Inviting Emery inside had been good old hospitality begging me to be kind to my boss, even though internally I wanted to run away from the door screaming. I mean, I was in my fucking robe!

As I lie in bed, surrounded by my cats, who will wake soon to wreak havoc on my house, I can't get the vision of the man walking away from my house out of my brain. Any sane person would turn if they heard someone shouting. It's a knee-jerk reaction. He'd remained steady in his steps and had kept his gaze forward. It was chilling. He didn't want his face seen.

I haven't had enough run-ins with people to have angered anyone, so I can't think of who the hell could be standing outside my house, watching my every move from the darkness.

I'm about to doze off when I hear the sink turn on downstairs. This has happened before, and I chalk it up to the house being old, and the pipes likewise. After tonight, I wonder if I shouldn't check it out, but I'm not fucking going down there. What would I wield as a weapon? I look around. The only thing remotely scary that I have near me are the cats with their claws.

I could throw Tigger. He's particularly afraid of water, his claws will come out instantly and maul whoever is standing at my sink with a ferocity that would allow me to get out unscathed. But, if I want to remain fully unscathed, staying up here is probably my best bet.

I grab my phone off the charger, thinking about calling Ryker until I see the time. I shouldn't bother the neighbor over noisy and malfunctioning pipework at three in the morning.

Man, I never thought I'd have so many issues with an older home. I'd gotten the all-clear on my inspection before I moved in.

I think about anyone else I can call besides 9-1-1 and the sexy neighbor and no one else comes to mind.

Damn introverted ass has no friends to call.

I shake my head at the thought, growling inwardly because it's right. Being as isolated as I am, I have no one else to call.

A creak on the stairs sends my heart into overdrive. I slip my phone under the covers, closing my eyes all but a fraction as I try to control my breathing. I don't want to alert the intruder that I'm awake.

If there's even anyone in your house.

A shadow looms in the open doorway of my room and I almost whimper with fear. I keep my cool only out of sheer will to survive the night. The figure moves in, slipping into my bathroom and rummaging through my hamper.

What the fuck?

The form is obviously that of a man. When he trudges back toward my bed, I notice he's almost silent. There's no way I'd have heard him any night as soundly as I sleep, and I wonder if he's come in here before. How long has he been doing this? How the fuck is he getting in here?

The goddamned key. I realize my dumb fucking ass has a key under my mat because the first week I'd moved in, I'd locked my keys inside. It had been a huge—and pricey—fiasco to get inside. I'd used a hide-a-key since that day, but I apparently suck at hiding said key.

His hand raises as he sniffs whatever is in his hand from my hamper. He watches me. I close my eyes, praying to anyone who'll listen to let him leave me alive.

It's not long before I hear the stairs creak, and my eyes fly open. The room is empty. The door downstairs squeaks closed, and the lock clicks with the key he'd used to get inside. Tears rage through me, falling rapidly as I slip to the window. The same hooded figure slowly slinks back into the night.

Anger pools, and I rush back to the bed, hitting Ryker's number without a second thought.

“Carina? Are you okay?” he asks as he picks up. His sinfully raspy, sleep-filled tone almost derails my mission.

“He was in my house,” I tell him.

I move to the hamper where he’d dropped whatever he’d had in his hand back in before moving back out of the house. My panties. He’d been sniffing my panties.

Unease shifts through me.

“What?” Ryker shouts. I move back to the window, and I see lights flick on throughout his house before his form shows up on the porch.

He’s in a full-on run toward my house, and I’m so thankful tears sting my eyes as I rush downstairs to let him in. He envelops me in his arms, pushing us both inside before flipping on my living room light and looking me over.

“I’m okay. Well, no, I’m not okay, but he didn’t touch me,” I tell him as tears stream down my cheeks.

“How did he get in?” He turns, opening the door and inspecting the handle and the jamb.

“He used the fucking hide-a-key,” I admit, embarrassingly.

I move behind him, lifting the mat and picking the key up and pocketing it.

“Hey,” he says, standing and pulling me into him. “This isn’t your fault. Plenty of people have a key under their mats and don’t get fucking weirdos in their house.

“He stood over my bed as he sniffed my panties,” I tell him, cheeks heating as I admit intimate details of the intrusive moment.

“What the fuck?” he whispers, looking around the room. “Did he do anything else?”

I recall the sink being on. “He was in the kitchen. That’s what I heard first. I heard the sink come on.”

I hasten into the kitchen, throwing the light on and looking around.

What in the hell?

“Is anything different or missing?” Ryker asks me, looking around the room as he moves in front of me.

“He did my dishes,” I breathe.

“What?” He looks at me pointedly.

I nod. “He did my dishes. And come to think of it, there are nights I don’t remember doing them and yet when I come down in the morning, they’re done...”

His brows furrow in confusion. “I’ve dealt with some fucking weirdos, but this is...”

“Yeah.”

“I know you’re supposed to come to dinner with me tomorrow night, and it’ll be our first date and all, so I don’t want to push your boundaries, but do you and the cats want to come and stay with me tonight? I’ll sleep on the couch, of course. But it would make me feel better to know you’re safe.”

He looks down from where he towers over me. It warms me that he included my cats, but I know getting them over there would be an absolute pain in the ass. Still, I nod.

“I really don’t want to stay here tonight, but can you stay here? If I get out the cat carrier, Piglet will lose his shit. He will think he’s going to the vet, and it’ll become a huge thing.”

He smiles, eyes full of understanding. “Of course. Let me go lock my house up.”

I move in step with him, and he looks at me, quirking a brow. “Where you go, I go. At least for tonight.”

He laughs. “Come on then, tag-a-long.”

After arguing over sleeping arrangements, locking his house up, and fighting Tigger over his side of the bed, Ryker is next to me in my bed. We’re both lying on our backs, staring at the ceiling as awkward, ringing silence permeates the room and every cavern of my ears.

This is the most comfortable place to sleep, and having him downstairs wouldn’t make me feel any better. I’d still feel

alone.

“Thank you for this,” I whisper.

“Of course.” He rolls toward me, and instinctively, I do the same.

I can’t deny there’s something between us, but it’s not the same. It’s not enough. I consider myself a virgin, although I’m not. My virginity had been stolen from me, along with my dignity and sense of security. It had taken years for me to be comfortable enough to be on my own. And now, it seems another seeks to rip away what I’ve built.

I won’t allow it.

I won’t fucking stand for it.

My solitude is mine.

I’ve waited to ‘lose my virginity’ to the next man I choose to allow in my body. I’d resigned to making it mean something. I thought for the longest time I’d want that person to be Ryker. But even though I feel safer with him next to me, it’s not the same as when I stood in my office with Emery far too close only hours ago.

It’s not the same.

I keep telling myself to throw that notion out of the fucking door because he’s my boss—amongst other things—but my brain and body are locked in a battle and I’m on the sidelines waiting to see who wins.

“Not tired?” Ryker asks.

I shake my head. “My body feels too alive to sleep,” I admit.

“It’s the adrenaline, happens to me a lot in the field. Shit, sometimes, if too much happened on shift, I can’t get to bed for hours after getting home.” His gaze seems to darken even in the moon-illuminated room. “I could help with that, though.”

“Help with what?” I whisper.

Even though he's not Emery, the vibe between us is still electric, tangible.

"Help you come down," he says, moving closer to me under the covers as Tigger decides he's had enough and jumps down to the floor, meowing his annoyances.

Neither one of us smiles or even laughs. We're too caught up in whatever the fuck is happening. How I'd gone from my boss dropping off my dinner, to a stalker over my bed, to my detective neighbor in my bed, slinking closer to me with a sultry look in his eyes, is beyond me.

I'm probably dreaming and at any moment I'm going to wake up, filled with shame.

His hand rises from the bed, lifting my chin, tugging my gaze toward his. "Would you like that, tag-a-long?" he asks.

I lick my lips, swallowing.

"I..." I grapple with how to form my question without sounding like the inexperienced woman I am. "How would you do that?"

"Well, I'd use this hand," he starts, letting his hand slip under the covers and over my belly, caressing me through my night shirt. "To make you feel good. Once you come down, your body will relax. I promise."

"I don't know if we should..."

"Let me make you feel good. God, I've wanted to touch you since the day I watched you move into this place."

The news settles and startles me. "You have?"

He nods. "I watched you carry your boxes in until I was late for a shift. I would've helped, and I even argued with myself over the matter as I watched you, but I didn't know how to approach you."

"What? That's silly! Why?" I snort.

"Carina, come on." He scoffs.

"Come on, what?"

“Look at you. You’re fucking gorgeous, but your face tells people to keep their distance. Every now and again, though, when you’re unguarded, when you don’t know you’re being observed, a softness shines through. A calm beauty.” He reaches up and moves a strand of hair behind my ear that had escaped my messy bun.

Shivers race through my body, nipples perking up from the slightest touch that isn’t mine.

“Ryker,” I whimper.

“Mmm?” He moves in slowly, tentatively, knowing I’d shot him down only days ago.

“Make me feel good,” I whisper, his lips close, but far enough away to make me crazy.

When he lets them drop to mine, I push everything into the back of my mind, locking it away in a thorough examination another time. For now, I want to feel, and I know with Ryker, I’m in control, so I can let the moment happen comfortably.

“You tell me to stop, and I’ll stop, Carina,” he tells me.

“I…” I’d never told him about my past.

“In this field of work, reading people is what I have to be good at.”

The idea of him knowing something so intimate should stop me in my tracks, make me feel awkward, nervous. But it doesn’t. That he’d read me as a victim, still liked me, and moved with hesitation, and, at a pace best for me, warms me.

I let my lips find his. “Make me feel,” I tell him. Leaving the ‘good’ off, needing to feel anything other than fear tonight.

“Gladly.”

As his tongue slips into my mouth, teasing me slowly, his fingers trace the outer confines of my silk panties under my sleep shirt. I’d opted for a long jersey I’d found at Goodwill, for a sports team I don’t even know the name of.

His touch, even over fabric, causes me to moan. As the moments pass, he increases the pressure, never slipping under

my panties once. Not even coming close.

“Ryker,” I whimper, letting my mouth and legs fall open as I bloom under his expert touch. His heated eyes look down at me from where he lies on his side, up on one elbow.

“I like my name from your pretty lips, tag-a-long,” he says.

Wetness seeps from me, soaking the panties that are slipping inside my folds with every stroke of his hand. The fabric only adds to the increasing friction.

My eyes fight to remain open to watch him as he watches me. It’s the hottest moment I’ve ever had. Possibly because it’s the only moment with a male, I’ve ever had where I’m in control.

I can feel an orgasm building from my belly as every muscle readies for the coming storm, twitching and tightening in a symphony of slight movements.

“That’s it, tag-a-long, let me make you feel good,” Ryker moans, helping me along by pressing into my pussy.

“Fuck, fuck!” I moan, grinding into his movements without shame, needing him more and more as the quake builds.

I shout his name as I pulse with waves of pleasure that rack my body.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he whispers, nipping at my lips. I’d kiss him back if I could coherently do so.

“Oh my God!” I breathe, coming back to myself slowly.

He smiles. “Exactly the reaction I was hoping for,” he says, pulling the covers off me and slipping my panties off, moving across the room to drop them in the hamper with the ones my stalker had been sniffing only hours ago.

“Do you want fresh panties? Or are you good like that?” he asks, keeping his eyes trained on my face, never once looking at my exposed core.

“I’m good,” I say, slipping my jersey down and flipping onto my side, facing the bathroom. Ryker gets back in bed and

spoons up behind me, pulling the covers over us both, all while keeping his massive erection away from my ass.

“I’ll never touch you without permission. You’re safe. Sleep, Carina,” he says, and my eyes grow heavy as I yawn.

“Thank you, Ryker.”

It’s the only thing I could think of saying, even though it doesn’t seem to cover the gratitude I feel for him.

It seems silly. He’d made me come, all while not even touching me under my clothes, and now we’re cuddling as we drift off to sleep together, but he’s given me something more intimate, more meaningful. He’s given me back the slightest bit of control in an out-of-control situation.

I let my eyes close, and Ryker’s warmth lulls me into the dream realm where stalkers aren’t a thing, and the good men get the girl.



SUN STREAMS THROUGH THE OPEN BLINDS, AND I STRAIN TO open my eyes. I look over toward Ryker’s side of the bed, and he’s gone, replaced by cats. They’re huddled together in a massive mound of fur. I roll back over, checking my phone for the time and see that Ryker has texted.

Had to get to work, but I think you’re okay home alone in the daytime. I’ll install those cameras before we go to dinner tonight.

I realize I’m smiling like an idiot, and close the text, only to see there’s another from an unknown number.

If you let him back into your bed, he’ll be the first one I kill. His blood will be on your hands.

I sit up, staring at it as if it’ll change. I read it over and over, trying to figure out how the fuck this psycho had gotten

my phone number. Though, I guess it's easy to get your hands on anything.

I screenshot the message and shoot it over to Ryker without thinking. I've watched enough crazy cop shows with hackers to know that my phone could be watched. Who knows if he's got my phone mirrored and watching my every move, but I'd already sent it.

A ping alerts me to a return message from Ryker.

Sending a unit to watch the house while I'm on shift. You're going to need to come down to the station and file an official report on this nut job.

Okay, I'll go down today and get it done.

Are you okay?

Yeah, a maniac is trying to kill the only man I've ever let willingly touch my body, I'm peachy.

I'm fine. Don't worry too much about me. I'm a tough cookie.

I never said you weren't, tag-a-long. But everyone needs someone to worry about them.

Do they?

I don't recall me ever having someone like that in my life. Ever. Still, I don't want him distracted at work and getting hurt.

Still, don't worry. Have a good shift. And thanks again for last night.

I await his funny retort or sexual innuendo like I'd expect from any other man, but it doesn't come. Instead, he tells me I'm welcome and moves on with his day. I have to respect it, but I'm almost disappointed.

Ryker is an amazing man. He'd be a perfect partner, that I know. He's sweet, giving, and devoted. He'd treat me right in

all aspects. But there's something that keeps me from fully connecting with him.

He's not...

I don't know.

Maybe it's that old notion that women love assholes and he's not one. Maybe I should force myself to use my fucking head for once and go after the good guy, instead of the scintillating mega-millionaire boss I'm not even allowed to touch in my dreams.

I sigh as the doorbell rings. Looking out the peephole, I see an officer rocking on his heels. I open the door and let him in.

"Ryker sent me to get a statement from you about your stalker. I have my partner casing the perimeter for anything he could've left behind," the officer says.

How has this become my life? I have a new job, boss that's a blast from the past I should've left buried, a stalker, and a neighbor I want to like—that also made me come—but has something off about him.

"Let me make us some coffee," I tell the officer, moving into the kitchen and seeing the clean dishes I didn't wash.

Fuck. I need something stronger than coffee.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Anonymous

“Gage!” the slight, gothic-looking barista calls from across the coffee shop. I look up from my laptop and meet her eyes. Something akin to fear and anxiety passes over her features. She drops my gaze and sets my hot, black coffee down, sliding it across the counter toward the edge, the furthest she can get it from where she stands.

When I stalk toward the counter to grab it, she backs away. I have that effect on people. I’m an intense man, and I’ll demand nothing less than submission from those around me. If you don’t bow, I’ll break the knees that kept you standing.

“Thank you,” I tell her, and she shivers.

When I turn, I smirk wickedly.

“I don’t know why you have to toy with them, G,” Trevor says, sipping his sissy latte with foam.

“It brings me joy,” I joke, sitting down on the plush chair and re-opening my laptop.

“Listen, I tell you about one fucking book...” he starts, shaking his head at my teasing banter.

I cut him off, raising my hand. “You not only read it, but then you recounted all the ways to declutter my life and tried to remove things from my apartment.”

He smirks. “Well, there’s not much to remove, honestly.”

About a month ago, Trevor’s wife had begged him to buddy-read Marie Kondo’s *The Art of Tidying Up*. Then he took it too far—as he’s known to do—and tried to tidy up my

place after he ran out of shit to throw away at his own home. He's about the only person I won't murder. He's lucky.

I sigh. "I don't need much. No person does. I'm a minimalist. Nothing wrong with it."

"You live like a serial killer," he murmurs. I don't look up, but smirk into my coffee mug.

"Did you get that video feed I airdropped you? Mark wants us to see if we can remove a chunk of time from it and loop the video."

I nod, swallowing as I pull it to the forefront of my screen, ahead of what I'd been doing.

"I already looped and deleted," I tell him.

"Great, that'll be the last thing for the Alvarez case," he says, biting into a muffin like an animal and getting crumbs all over the place.

"That book doesn't teach you to tidy your eating?" I ask, smirking as his annoyed gaze flicks up to my face.

I pull the feeds that Carina's neighbor had installed back up. He doesn't know it, but he's helped me a shit ton since placing them. Now, I can watch her all I want. Twenty-four-seven Carina coverage.

She's gotten up. Her head is lounged on the counter as she watches the slow drip of the Nespresso machine's brewing cycle. She knows about me now. I mean, she doesn't know *me*, but she knows of my existence. That I've been watching her.

Emery Stanner chased me off her property only nights ago, and I watched as Ryker—the annoying twat of a neighbor—installed a camera feed inside and out. Since then, I've been so distracted by watching her more than normal. Work has been the least of my daily objectives.

"Hello? Earth to G." Trevor waves his hand in front of my face, luring my eyes away from Carina, who's now sipping her first mouthful of coffee, leaning up against the counter.

"What?" I ask, furrowing my brows. I hadn't heard him speak a word. I'd been too transfixed.

“I said I’ll catch you later. We don’t really have anything more to get done today. The wire should come through with your half of the Alvarez money. I’m going to go take my girl to breakfast,” he says, moving away from the table.

I wave.

He stops near the door and mouths, “You good?”

I nod once, letting my gaze drop as I sip the remains of my coffee.

Almost getting caught was exhilarating. It was the most alive I’ve felt in a while, and it hadn’t stopped me from coming back later that night when she was in bed. Or last night. I loop the feeds and slip right in, unperturbed.

All I think about is letting her know I’m there. But if she asks why I’m watching her, what then? I can’t give her my true motivation. The game would be up, then.

Once the points are tallied, the fun is over.

Carina looks up toward the camera in her kitchen, and I reach down toward my screen, running my fingers over the plains of her face.

She knows she’s in my sights, but she doesn’t understand the gravity of being locked in them.

Carina Eder toes a thin line between prey and trophy. Because once I get my hands on her, I have to decide which she will become to me.

Too bad she has no choice in the matter.



SHE’S SNORING LIGHTLY, CATS PERCHED ALL AROUND HER. I didn’t have to tidy up a thing in the house. Seems Carina has caught onto my routine and has been doing it herself.

I have to say, it annoyed me to have nothing to do for her, but such is the way with being found out.

Tigger rolls over, and arches his back, begging me to pet him as he paws the air. I sigh, reaching down and ruffling his stomach fur lightly. Neighbor Boy had equipped the camera feeds with sound, allowing me much more insight into Carina's life. I now know all the little furballs' names.

Carina moves, and I slip back into the shadows, watching as she pulls from the bed and toward the bathroom. I've never seen her wake up before, but I've been coming a lot later the past few days, wanting to ensure she's not sitting somewhere, waiting to catch me.

When she comes out of the bathroom, my eyes are trained across the room. I'd been gazing out the window at the branch, shadow playing on the floor below. It was a mistake that cost me everything.

Carina heads for the closet, bumping right into my chest. The shadows had kept me hidden. If only she'd gotten back into bed.

If only.

"Don't scream, little one," I tell her, covering her mouth with my hand. The gravel of my voice deeper because I haven't spoken since earlier in the day with Trevor at the coffee shop. Her lips against my palm are unnerving. My blood heats and rages through my veins with rapid intensity.

Her breath hitches and her lemon verbena scent wafts up my nose, dosing me with her presence.

"How?" she breathes as I slowly drop my hand, hating to break the physical contact.

"How did I get in? Little one, you'll never be safe from me." I reach up, wrapping my hand around her throat and tilting her face back, walking her out of the shadows and into the moonlight that dances through the room.

Her eyes are dilated. It's the only fucking thing I can focus on.

“What has you so excited, little one?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not...”

“No lies!” I shout. I feel her flinch under my hold. “I can’t stand liars,” I whisper.

“I don’t know why I’m excited,” she admits, meeting my gaze with hers.

I smirk. “I do. You’re teetering the edge.”

“The edge?” she whispers.

“The boundary line between life and death. You don’t know me. You have no idea what I’m capable of.” I flex my hand over her throat, and she swallows, the motion exhilarating me.

The backs of her legs hit the edge of the bed, where she can’t go any farther. Where she’s fully mine to play with.

“Why are you angry with me?” she asks, a tear leaving her eye and rolling down her face. I lean forward, capturing it with my tongue and licking up the trail left behind, savoring the salty tang of what I’m doing to her.

“I’m not angry with you. If anything, I’m fucking obsessed with you. I live for you, Carina,” I whisper in her ear, nipping its outer shell, making her yelp.

“Why? I’m nothing to be...”

I tighten my grasp on her throat and silence her mouth. “I said no fucking lies!” Anger punctuates every word as I glare at her. She nods in my hand.

She keeps quiet, gazing at me, waiting for me to decide what to do with her.

Smart girl.

But what do I want to do with her? On one hand, her skin against mine is driving me fucking wild, but the look in her eye tells me she’s been brutalized before. And that makes me halt, refraining from pushing her too far.

Why do you care?

'I don't fucking know!'

I hate that I'm arguing with myself, but the way my prey is looking at me tells me if I start externally arguing with myself, she'll definitely be disturbed.

"Why are you obsessed with me?" she asks, working to keep her tone even keeled as she maintains unwavering eye contact with me. I assume she's doing it to let me know she's not afraid, but she forgets I still grip her pulse point.

"Who wouldn't be?" I reach up and cup her face with my other hand, brushing across her delicate skin as I've thought about doing a thousand times before. Shit, I don't know how many streaks are across my Mac's screen where I've tried to touch her. Longed to be closer to her.

Her breathing hitches. She leans inward.

"Does that entice you, little one?"

She appears as if she's going to give me her lies again, but she nods, admitting her truth in the darkness as I hold her hostage with my touch.

I smirk.

"Well, what should we do with that information, hmm?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Emery

The days are longer now. I live for the breaks when I see Carina. Today is going to fucking blow because I won't get to sneak to her floor and pretend some mundane task needs doing. Nope, today I'm driving to Rochester.

Conner tried to talk me out of it, especially because everyone seems to hate it when I leave without a driver, but I'm determined to find out what the hell Carina knows. Also, I want to know more about her. Which side of town is she from? How far away did we live from one another?

It helps that I have a meeting with the principal from Rochester High. Being the benefactor they're after for the school's football program will gain you an audience.

When I pull into the parking lot, I see the big blue R plastered on the front of the school. I drive through the massive loop in the front, parking on the curve close to the doors, before letting out an enormous sigh of annoyance mixed with eagerness. It's a strange combination. The annoyance is because I'm back here when I vowed never to step foot in this town again. More so to myself because I didn't know what the memories would do to me. What would happen to my psyche from being this close to ground zero?

This town leaves a stain on all who spend too much time here, and it had tainted my soul. Tinged it with darkness that had only stopped spreading when I left out past the city limit sign.

I slam the car door, looking up at the school a moment longer, letting memories flood and feelings return. That's the thing about a place, isn't it? When you're in a moment, a span of time within a certain location, there's a tangible feeling that you won't get anywhere else. Here, I get the rush I used to feel stepping on campus as I headed to see whatever girl I was dating at the time, or the excitement of it being Friday and game day. I can almost feel the same nervous energy I felt as a teenager walking through the front doors again. This school was filled with mostly farmhand's children, rednecks, if you will, and the occasional odd man out. That was me and my friends. I was the football star. The star quarterback of the fighting Warriors.

I shake my head, looking into the case and seeing my State Championship Trophy shimmering back at me. The only one the school's gotten was when I took our team to victory.

I sigh.

This place was the grandest thing I'd ever done in my life. There never seemed to be too much waiting for me on the other side. Except Stanner Enterprises. I don't think Conner, or I understood the gravity of how massive the company was or how much our lives would change by going to Stanner.

Seattle is a whole different ball game than Rochester.

"Mr. Stanner! How wonderful to see you, and all grown up, too. Would you look at that?" Principal Glenmont says as he approaches me. I'm still looking into the glass case that houses a shrine to me and the team I'd been a part of.

I turn toward him, removing a hand from my pocket to shake his. "Mr. Glenmont."

He turns his gaze toward the case. "That was the last year of the greatest Warriors to ever go through this place. The program's gone to shit, I'm afraid."

I sigh. Ever the salesman. I get it. He wants to provide for his students and staff, and I have the funds to get the school back on track.

It's not his fault. He does not know the hand this place had in making me who I am or how damaged I am.

"Well, let's get down to terms, shall we?" I ask, smiling as big, bright, and fake, as I do with most clientele.

After sussing out all the details of me handing over millions to the school to get them back in the green, we meander out of Glenmont's office.

"You should grab lunch on your way out! It's pizza day. Mrs. Bloom still cooks up a mean lunch," he says, shaking my hand. Seems like that's all he's done all morning.

"Actually, I had some questions for you if you don't mind. Before I go." I don't know how he'll react to my requests, but it's always worth a shot.

In my experience, not asking is where you fuck up.

He nods, face showing slight hesitation. "Anything, of course."

Of course, because I've revived your dying school.

And that was the entire plan.

"So, I was wondering about a girl who went to school here my year. I know it's hard to remember all the students. You probably see so many, but I thought it was worth a shot."

He smirks, probably remembering how much of a ladies' man I was in high school. What football jock isn't?

"A girl, hm?" He opens the door, spilling out into the hall and motions for me to go ahead of him as we head toward the cafeteria.

"Her name is Carina Eder? Know anything about her? I'm not really looking for anything too specific, anything you recall."

He nods, thinking as he taps his chin. It's the way older men do when they're trying to remember something, anything. I'd seen my father do it a million times.

“Yes, sad situation with that one. Had it been anyone else, I probably wouldn’t have remembered.”

I quirk my brows as he opens the doors into the lunchroom. We filter through the line, getting our pizza and waters and heading off to a table near the big blue exit doors.

“We had a lot of complaints about her in school. Clothes ill fitting, body smelled like she hadn’t washed. She was always in my office. CPS came calling on her a few times. The last time, they wondered if I knew how she was even still at school when her father was locked up and her mom was in the wind.”

He bites his pizza, and reluctantly, so do I, not wanting to look like a schmuck. I want to keep him talking, so I eat slowly as I listen to him tell me about the beautiful secretary.

“And? Did you ever figure out how she was making it?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Nope. They could never really find her. Somehow, she’d disappear from class when CPS showed up here. They tried multiple times to get their hands on her, and then before we knew it, she was eighteen and it wasn’t their issue any longer.”

“What was her father locked up for?” I ask, taking a bigger bite out of my pizza. It looked awful but it was delicious.

“Arson. Caught him fleeing the scene of the gas station down on Elm that was ablaze.”

I nod in understanding, even though my heart is racing with intrigue and trepidation. Fire isn’t something I like to think about. Fire had derailed my senior year. Fire had also washed away sins my father thought I had.

“You alright?” Mr. Glenmont asks.

I nod, sipping from my bottle of water.

“Anyhow, her father was always in and out of jail. So, I know little about her. She was a ghost around here. She tried to be, at least. She didn’t have any friends or do any sports or participate in any clubs. All I can recall is an overview in comparison to who she is, I’m sure.”

You have no idea.

“When did her father get out?” I ask.

“He isn’t. They pegged him for that fire at the Westpoint House. Remember that? It would’ve been your senior year. Those poor kids who died in that.” He shakes his head. “It was tragic.”

I shake my head in unison. “Yeah, tragic.” I try to keep my tone steady, but I see him eye me as some of my annoyance leaks into my tone.

I can’t help it. As one of the remaining survivors of that night, I feel some type of way. And now that I know someone innocent is doing time for it, it makes it even harder to sit here looking unperturbed. And it’s *her* father. No matter that he was a criminal before. He’s doing time for murder now. He’ll never see the light of day. For something he didn’t do.

My father set that fire, not hers.



DRIVING PAST THE WESTPOINT HOUSE HAD BEEN SOMETHING I wouldn’t do. Not since the incident. But as I creep past now, I see that nothing’s changed. Sure, the flames are gone, and the char left behind has turned to rot and decay, but the house still stands.

I wonder why they didn’t tear it down. Why leave it standing? It’s the biggest stain this town has, and there it is like a big, flame-covered red flag waving in the sky.

The porch is leaning to one side as it tries to fall off but is held in by the side that isn’t rotted. The shutters all hang askew, and the broken windows seem eerie. Darkness from within the house is all that’s visible from the curb because that’s all that remains. I guarantee the interior is nothing but pitch blackness.

I step on the brake, shoving the gearshift into park before letting my head fall back and my eyes shut. Allowing that night to seep into my brain for the first time in a long time.

“Should she be so out of it?” Wes asks, slapping the face of the girl that lies unconscious on the table of the abandoned Westpoint House. The night had started fun enough. We stole some liquor from my father’s cabinet because he never notices. And we trolled the local shake shack for girls to hang out with before landing here. Wes gave us all some pills, one each, that he’d gotten from Bart—the local drug head. He swore they were safe, but I pocketed mine when no one was looking, not wanting to mix it with alcohol.

I’ve seen first-hand what drugs do to a person, and I don’t want to end up like my brother. The most I’ll ever take is Tylenol because of that fact.

Wes slaps the girl across the face again, and I wince.

“Hey, don’t do that, man. That’s fucked up. She’s obviously had too much to drink,” I say.

Conner nods in agreement with me, but in comes Declan, with his massive presence and overbearing attitude.

“I say we slap her a little harder. Wouldn’t want her staying passed out, you know? Can’t be good for her. It’s all in the name of helping,” he says, sipping from a longneck beer, his massive neck stretching and tugging as he downs more drink he doesn’t need.

Conner eyes me, and I shake my head. Fucking with them when they’re like this isn’t a good idea. Conner motions with his head toward the porch, and I nod, following him outside.

“Hey! Where are you two going?” Declan shouts.

“Piss,” Conner replies, not breaking his stride.

The night air washes over us, and we don’t speak for a long time. I may be the quarterback football star, but Declan is the star of the high school. He’s the mayor’s son, and because of that, he thinks he can do whatever he wants to. Because he can.

“What the fuck is wrong with them?” I ask.

Conner shrugs. “I don’t know, but there’s no use in getting into shit with them when they’re this far gone.”

“I know.”

“Stanner, Whitfield, get your asses in here! We’re going to have some fun!”

When our eyes meet, it’s as if we both understand what needs to be done. We both know that they can’t be allowed to tarnish some girl and ruin her life. I think of my mom and what she’d say if she knew I stood by and watched, that I was an accessory.

As we turn and head back inside, it’s decided. They will harm no one tonight. And if it came to violence, it wouldn’t be the girl on the table who was enduring it.

I open my eyes, looking over toward the red-stained screen door that hangs from one hinge at its top corner. I remember the race of my heart as I pushed back into the house, ready to go toe to toe with Declan. He was the mayor’s son, and the biggest lineman we had on the team. If only it hadn’t gone so fucking wrong.

I sigh, pushing my car into drive. I pull away from the curb. Glenmont had given me the address of where Carina was supposed to be staying while in school, but I decide after peeling open the wounds of my past, I’ll leave hers alone.

Instead, I pull onto I-5 and head back home, head full of memories and chest seizing with emotion.

Conner was right. I should’ve stayed away.



SHE’S NOT AT HER DESK.

Odd. Since she's been here, she hasn't missed a day, and today is definitely a day when she should be here.

"She's out today," Suzanne says from behind me.

I swing around. "Where is she?"

She shrugs. "Don't know. No-call, no-show."

I think about the man I chased off only a little over a week ago, and my heart pumps faster.

"Has anyone called her?" I ask.

She shrugs and moves down the hall, her heels clicking as she goes. I roll my eyes.

Way to take initiative, Suzanne.

When I burst into Conner's office, he abruptly sits up. He pulls his feet off his desk where they'd been perched and places his sub down on the table. He's got his napkin covering his shirt, and I damn near smirk. Almost.

"Why's no one checked on Carina? She's a no-call, no-show today, and no one thought to see if she's okay?" I shout, slamming his door behind me.

His mouth is hung wide open like a gaping fish. "Uh, well, normally we fire people who don't show up to work. Unless you've changed our protocols, so..."

"So? She's different, Conner. Don't pretend you don't know that. She could be in fucking danger!" I slam my hands on his desk, leaning over it as I pin him with a stare that says *tread lightly*.

"Danger?" he asks, standing and pulling his ridiculous bib-like napkin off his shirt.

I growl in frustration, standing back up and scrubbing my face as I plop into the chair in front of his desk.

"She has a stalker," I admit.

I don't know if it's really my business to tell him anything, but I have to tell someone about the shit that's been going on in my fucking life. She's turned it upside down unknowingly.

“A what? How do you know that?” He sits back down, tentatively sitting on the edge of the chair, ready if he needs to move again.

“The other night...well, the night I dropped her food off, I saw a man standing outside her window and I scared him off.”

Conner’s eyes go big as he takes this information in. “He won’t be back,” he says, waving me off.

“How do you know? What if he has her?” I sit forward, dropping my face into my hands.

Conner laughs. “Em, what kind of world do you think we live in?”

He realizes what kind of fucked up world *we* live in and says no more. He stands up and wraps up his sandwich, grabbing his keys and moving for the door.

“Where are you going?” I ask incredulously.

“Well, she’s different. Right? So, let’s go check on her.”

I rush from my seat; grateful he’s taking me seriously instead of giving me shit like he normally does.

The drive over is quiet, and the air is filled with nervous energy that threatens to swallow me whole.

“That’s the house?” he asks.

I nod. Looking up toward her house, I can see it’s dark inside. The light’s fading in the sky, so any sane person would have the lights on.

Any alive, sane person.

I shake out of the thought’s hold, looking toward her driveway. Her car is there, yet the house seems sullen and empty.

A knock on the car window makes us both jump.

“Jesus on a cracker,” Conner says, grasping his chest.

I laugh at the term he’s heard my mom say so much that he’s now adopted it as his own.

A man stands at the window with dirty blond hair and no shirt on. The house behind him has the garage open, and I can see it's filled with gym equipment. Which makes sense with all the sweat dripping off him.

Conner rolls down the window.

"You all looking for Carina?" he asks.

I nod. "Yeah, she didn't come to work today," I say. "I'm her boss."

He nods. "Oh, that makes sense. Yeah, she's home. I saw her earlier taking out the trash, but I don't know why she would've skipped work."

I look back toward her house, and a light flicks on.

"Go talk to her," Conner urges, and I look back toward the two men as buff Ken doll leans against Conner's massively expensive Bentley.

I sigh, pushing out of the car and moving toward her steps. When I ring the doorbell, I hear her call out that she's on her way to the door.

She opens it and startles at the sight of me. "Emery?"

She's in a bathrobe and slippers. Her tousled hair tells me she's fresh from bed.

"What the hell, Carina? You didn't come to work today. Shit, you didn't even bother to call in!" I shout. "I was worried half to fucking death!"

Her face pulls tight with confusion marring its features. "Why?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why were you worried? I did call in. I spoke with HR. I told them I wasn't feeling well, and they said they'd relay the message that I was out."

Well, now I feel like an ass.

"Who's at the door?" a man calls, and she seems to startle, alarm filling her face swiftly.

“I have to go. I’ll be back on Monday, sir.” The door slams in my face, and I’m left trying to regain my composure before turning around and heading back toward the car.

“Well?” Conner asks. He now has the window closed and Ken doll has moved back to his own house, watching us like a hawk from where he curls dumbbells.

“She said she called HR and that she’s sick,” I recount, looking back toward the house.

On the second floor, a curtain moves as a dark figure pulls out of the fissure.

Odd.

Everything about her seems vexing as fuck, and I wonder if that fuels my fascination with her. She’s like a magical creature, known for her illusive nature and mystique.

“Well, you made an ass out of yourself, hm?” Conner says, waving to the muscle-bound man across the street as we pull off from her curb. “Twat,” he mumbles.

I smirk.

The entire ride home my mind is full of thoughts of what to do about her. The only thing there is to do is to leave her alone, obviously she has a man in her life. She doesn’t need me barging in and fucking shit up for her.

She’d seemed so available when I was in her home, though. Everything told me she was a single female, living alone. It makes no sense. But, acting in this manner and getting this entangled over the woman makes no sense, either.

I decide to focus on what matters in my life. What’s at the forefront. And leave the past where it needs to be.

Including Carina Eder.

CHAPTER NINE

Carina

Night of First Contact

“Well, what should we do about that information, hm?” my stalker asks, looking down at me, his radiant, blue eyes glimmering in the moonlight. Something about him is dark and dangerous, and his touch has me vibrating with need. I don’t understand it at all.

Dark and dangerous? He’s a stalker!

My brain sobers me, reminding me of the serious nature of my situation.

“What do you mean?” I ask, realizing his eyes are darkening by the second the longer I don’t give him an answer.

“What are we going to do about your excitement toward me?” he asks, patience growing thinner and thinner.

I swallow, and I feel his hand flinch over my throat.

“I don’t know,” I whisper.

He’s been watching me, stalking my every move in the night, and here I am buzzing with anticipation of what he’ll do next.

“Well, you’re mine to command, it looks like. Doesn’t it seem that way, little one?”

My eyes flick toward the window, to where Ryker’s house is only yards away. To where help lies in his bed. The man’s hand slowly inches up and snaps my face back toward his, his

eyes darkening. Even though the moon is all that illuminates the space between us, I can almost see the danger dripping from him, as if it's his very aura. As if he's death himself. Come for my soul.

“Detective Dickhead isn't coming to help you tonight, little one.” His voice is filled with malice. It feels like magic tingling against every nerve ending I have.

Another rush of heat licks my insides as his penetrating gaze bores into mine.

“Please, don't hurt me,” I whisper, swallowing past his tight grasp on my throat. He tightens it, leaning in and fanning his whiskey-scented breath across my lips.

“But that's all I can think about. You're all I can fucking think about. Maiming your body in such a way that you're branded as mine forever. I want to stand back when I'm done with you and watch your blood drip for me. Little one, I want to take you so fucking high that you beg for my blade. You take up every cavern in my brain. Every nook and fucking cranny is filled with images of you; filthy, depraved images that make my cock ache. You think I want this? You think I want to be here? You've done this to me! You've done this to yourself!”

His words have gotten louder as he's gone on, but he lets go of my throat, forgetting me altogether. He's pacing my room. But that's when I see it. There's a blade, and it's haphazardly shoved down the back of his dark pants. Its steel gleams in the moonlight, promising pain. Promising an end.

“I'm sorry,” I say, voice cracking.

He stops and turns, eyes taking me in, as if he's sobered. As if someone's doused him in cold water.

“Are you?” he asks. It's almost so low I can't hear it.

I nod rapidly.

“Or,” he says, “are you afraid of this?” He pulls the massive blade from his pants. When he moves toward me, he moves with purpose. There is a dominating presence about him, and I await his orders. To spare my throat, I'll do just

about anything. I still, as much as possible. When the cold, sharp tip pinches my neck, I stiffen, body shaking with fear as a whimper escapes.

“So, which is it? Are you sorry? Or are you afraid?”

He leans in, awaiting my answer, and my body heats again, betraying me and confusing me in one swift chess move.

“I’m afraid,” I finally admit.

He smirks. “That and aroused. I can almost smell it on the air, little one.”

His pet name for me coils thrill through me like those first few moments at the top of a roller coaster before the drop; before the descent that’ll pin your stomach in your throat.

I elongate my neck, pressing into his blade and faking nerves of steel. I’m getting fed up with being anxious. He snarls as I bare more flesh to him.

“Do it. If you’re going to kill me, fucking get it over with,” I tell him, venom oozing from my tone.

“And risk not getting to play with you first? What kind of man would I be if I did that, hmm?”

He skims the tip of the blade down my pulse point that’s battering the inside of my throat. My body wars with itself. It can’t decide if we want him to touch us, or if we want him to go away so that we can call the cops.

Ryker had me do a report on the stalker, but after they checked the perimeter, they’d acted like they didn’t believe me. And who would? Ryker’s police detail stayed a day, and then he’d sighted that the cameras would do their job. But somehow, he’s here, flesh and bone, and in front of me, and my system hasn’t alerted Ryker, despite the fact that he has the same app on his phone I do.

“Your heart is racing,” he whispers, leaning down and pressing his ear against my throat and dropping the blade down next to his side. I find a point on the ceiling and fixate on it, blocking out my body’s obvious response to his proximity.

But when his hand rises and rubs over my breast, his ear that's pressed firmly to my throat surely doesn't miss the moan that escapes. Or the way I arch toward him. The scene changes and he pinches my nipple between his fingers, causing me to yelp. He lifts his head, lips grazing mine.

"Do you feel that? That line you're straddling between pain and pleasure. That's what you make me feel." He pinches again, and it leaves behind a sting. The pain swiftly melds into a primal desire deep in my belly, and I groan. My voice carries through the room, and it doesn't even sound like mine anymore.

"Please," I beg. I don't even know what I'm asking for. Any sane person would ask for their life. They'd ask to be left in one piece.

"Hide from me," he says, backing away. His eyes are alight with something ominous and dark, but there's also excitement in them. I think I can see arousal, too.

"What?" I ask, quirking a brow.

"Run. Hide from me, little one. Don't let me find you!" he orders. "Because if I find you, you'll regret it."

Before I can even fathom the words or their meaning, my feet launch me into motion. My brain works to catch up, feeding me places in the house I might be able to hide.

The basement? No, I won't have anywhere to get away if I need to. The attic is scary as fuck.

He's scary as fuck!

My brain has a point. But it seems equally stupid to climb the squeaky ass stairs to the attic and box myself in that high up. My heart is racing as I look for somewhere to hide, and I'm getting frustrated. Too overwhelmed. Tears sting as I rush downstairs and shove myself into the closet by the front door and sift through thick blankets on hangers and jackets to get behind them. Tears are streaming down my cheeks as I flatten myself against the wall, trying to be as flush as I can.

If only I could turn invisible.

I can't deny that part of me wants him to find me. The other part scolds that part for being a fucking moron. And around and around the two parts argue as I grow increasingly anxious.

"Here I come, little one. Let's hope you're not hidden somewhere obvious. Because you don't want to anger me."

My hands shake more as I fidget. He sounds close. Too close. My palm brushes up against something, and I stiffen, sliding my hands behind me with a renewed sense of hope to suss out what it is.

A door?

It's a door!

A round latch is dangling from a small, hidden door behind me. I slowly work it open, trying to make no noise as I slip inside and close it.

It's dark inside, and I realize that I'm not in a hidden room. It seems that I'm in some kind of hidden hallway system behind my walls. There's too much airflow for it to be a room.

I can still hear the man bellowing, but his words are muffled. I keep moving inward, running my hands across the walls as I trudge through the darkness. Anxiety pulses as I think of all the things that could be in here. None seem as menacing as the man that had me by the throat. I reach the end of the tunnel and cross over, touching the other wall to see if there's another door anywhere.

As I run the expanse, I finally find another small door. This one is smaller and perched more toward the floor. When I push it open, it spills out into the night. I stick my head out, looking around and listening for signs he's outside.

He's not.

I can still hear him shouting things from inside the house. Banging is getting more frantic as he can't find me. I slip out, the cold, dew-covered grass stinging my feet as I rush across it. The asphalt reminds me that my feet are sensitive when I cross the street toward Ryker's house in only a few paces.

I bang on the door, causing a monstrous amount of noise, but I'm dying to be let in. I'm near crazed to be taken in. Away from the psycho that's in my house.

Finally, the door flies open. "Carina? What's wrong?" His eyes dart up and down my body as he assesses my well-being, as he's trained to do.

I push past him. "Close the door!" I squeal.

Reluctantly, he does. "What the hell is going on?"

My mouth opens, and then it shuts.

Logically, I should blurt out that there's an insane man with a fucking knife in my house that made me hide from him, and that I'd escaped. But I know Ryker will grab his service weapon and charge into my house, bullets blazing. And that stops me. God, fucking help me, it stops me dead in my tracks.

Do I want him to be found out? I can't deny how I felt when he was close. But I can't deny how I felt when Emery was close. Fuck, I'm a confused, horny girl who needs someone to fuck me, so I'll stop lusting after my stalker!

Well, that's no way to think. We're strong and independent, we can get ourselves off.

Inwardly, I roll my eyes.

"Carina!" Ryker shouts, firmly grasping my shoulders and shaking me. "What's wrong?"

"A man...there's a man in my house," I stammer. "He has a knife."

There. Logic wins out. Barely.

Just as I thought, Ryker runs for his closest gun, rushing out the front door and into the night. I close his door and watch from the window as I chew my nails and pace back and forth. All my lights flick on one by one as he moves through the house, but I don't hear a gunshot.

That's good, right?

My brain can't be trusted, I decide.

When Ryker comes back in, he's annoyed. I can tell. My little middle of the night calls of alarm are getting old. Soon, I won't be able to rely on him. Soon, I'll be on my own.

"House is clear, Carina." He replaces his weapon and then leans against the wall. His abs flex as I realize he's only in his boxers. I bite my lip.

"He was there. He held a blade to my throat."

For the first time, I see doubt cross his features.

He doesn't believe me.

"How about I come and lie with you until you fall asleep?" he asks.

I nod without even considering any other alternative. Even though my heart has fallen that my savior doesn't believe me, I don't want to be alone. And I can't sleep away from home. Curse of the introvert; only home feels safe. Well, it did.

He huffs. "Let me go get some shorts."

It's the first time I feel like a burden to my poor neighbor. The first time he made me feel like an annoyance. But what did I expect? I hadn't spoken to him after our cuddle session turned into an orgasm for me and nothing for him. It was awkward for me, though. Because there is something missing with Ryker. He doesn't spike my adrenaline like others do.

Two others?

I roll my eyes at the inward admission of my depraved side, because there's no denying that two men have caused a disturbing reaction within me, and I don't know which is worse. The football star who's a part of the darkest bits of my past? Or the stalker who is determined to darken my future?



BANGING ON THE DOOR DRAGS ME UNWILLINGLY FROM slumber. I sit up and instinctively cover myself, as if whoever it is has magical powers, gifting them the sight to see through my house and into my bedroom.

The banging grows louder and more incessant. I grumble as I look over the side of the bed that previously had Ryker sleeping on it. It had been a hellacious night that boasted no sleep for either of us. I'd called in first thing when my alarm went off, citing illness. My body had felt devoid of energy, fully drained from the lack of adrenaline pumping through me and the overstimulation from the events of last night. Human Resources had told me to feel better, and that had been that.

As the banging continues, I swing my legs out of bed and grab a robe. Tugging it closed, I cast a glance at the clock, then trudge forward toward the door. It's already evening again. I must have been more exhausted than I realized since it seems like I've slept the day away. When I swing my door open, Emery stands behind it. His face is flushed, and his eyes are darker than I've ever seen them. Not that I've seen his eyes enough to compare them in a lineup.

Not the point.

I stow the random, useless train of thought for later; when I'm alone.

“What the hell, Carina? You didn't come to work today. Shit, you didn't even bother to call in! I was worried half to fucking death!” he shouts, exasperated with me. Over what? I do not know.

I feel the blood drain from my face as it rushes to my thumping pulse, adrenaline flooding me.

Ugh. How did I go from no man issues to too many?

“Why?” I blurt.

“Excuse me?” He's not amused. His face reddens as he continues to boil over me not coming to work.

“Why were you worried? I did call in. I spoke with HR. I told them I wasn't feeling well, and they said they'd relay the message that I was out.”

His face changes as his anger morphs into embarrassment. He'd assumed I was a no-call, no-show. He thought he was going to come here and bully me or fire me. One or the other.

"Who's at the door?" a loud booming voice calls from inside my house, and I stiffen. Ryker was gone early, likely trying to escape my psychotic ass after what he saw as a mental episode last night. Unless my stalker is back, I don't know who is in my house, but I don't want to deal with Emery and whoever is inside at the same time. I don't want him in my business any more than he already is. I can't handle it. One crazed man at a time.

Emery's face shifts back to anger. Seething rage, more like.

Swiftly, I blurt, "I have to go! I'll see you Monday, sir."

With the door slammed, I turn my attention to the interior of my home. The interior I'd thought was empty until moments ago.

I should've bought an apartment.

Jeffery Dahmer had an apartment; I remind the inner voice.

True.

Great. Now I'm conversing with my madness.

A movement in the living room grabs my attention. Next to the television stands a man. The same man from last night, judging by the build. He's still in a dark hoodie, his head tilted down, and his eyes trained on the floor.

"Little one, it took me too long to find you. And when I did, you had that fucker in my spot. What did I tell you?" he grumbles.

I gasp, covering my mouth when he pulls his hands from inside his pockets. They're covered in blood. He lifts his head, his light eyes and dark features aimed directly at me.

"What did I tell you?" he repeats.

"That his blood would be on my hands." I swallow audibly as he moves toward me. My pulse intensifies and moves lower

in my belly, with one heading in its sights.

“Well, looks like it’s on my hands. Now doesn’t it, pretty one?” he whispers, wiping his metallic-scented hands over my lips. My stomach roils, but I manage to keep the contents inside. If only for a moment.

Ryker. He hurt Ryker. And it was my fault.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him.

“Here you go again with your lies. You’re going to have to be tamed, little one. Don’t you think?”

I nod frantically in his hold as he tips my head back, admiring his artwork on my face.

He smiles, and my stomach tightens. Beautiful teeth gleam at me from behind his rugged, full lips. “You look good in red, little one.”

He leans down and brushes his lips across mine, and I can’t help myself, I lean into him, sinking into the twilight zone with the man Ryker thought was a figment of my imagination. His tongue sweeps into my mouth, brushing mine with the ferocity of an F-5 tornado.

When his fists clench my hair, tugging to the point of severe pain, I break the kiss and squeal.

“Do not disobey me. You’ve awakened something in me. Something that’s been asleep a long time. Something I don’t know that I can control.”

“I’m sorry, and I’m afraid,” I say before he can ask me questions, as he did last night.

“With good right, little one. With good right.”

CHAPTER TEN

Gage

Fire cascades within as her kiss sears my soul. It's as if her name is slowly being tattooed into its flesh. I reach up and touch her face, the blood from my sullied hands stretching across her skin, painting her with my misdeeds.

“You hurt him?” she asks. Her tone is only above a whisper.

I shake my head. I'd wanted to. Fuck I'd wanted to. He stormed in here like the fucking muscle-bound fucktwat he is, and I'd escaped onto the back porch. He's not like me. He announced himself, blistering through the house like a fucking bull in a china shop. He'd given me plenty of time to get out the backdoor.

The blood was from the deep gash I'd received sneaking over the back fence only moments ago. But does she need to know that? No. Fear is an amazing motivator, when used properly.

Still, I shake my head. “No. Not yet.”

She tugs my hand off her face, looking at the wound that's still pulsing along with my heart.

“This is bad,” she assesses. “And I assume you don't go do the whole mainstream medicine thing?”

She's read the situation perfectly. Since I watched my mom die in the discomfort of a hospital bed, littered with buttons and tubes sticking out of everywhere, I'd never returned to any medical institution. Too many astringent scents and dark reveries.

I shake my head.

She nods and then sighs, tugging me toward the kitchen and pushing me down into a chair at the table.

“I’ll get the first aid kit.” Her face pulls tight, filling with emotion that’s written right at the surface. She shakes it off and moves out of the room. She’s wondering why she’s going to help her stalker, no doubt. Shit, I’m wondering the same thing. But her touch, her presence, it’s enough to blind me to anything resembling reason.

I hadn’t meant to call out when I got inside this evening. No, I wanted to figure out how the fuck she’d gotten away from me. I needed to find her escape route and seal it off. But when I heard a man’s voice at the front door, and the sharp uncomfortable tone she had with him, I’d known she needed an out. Another escape. But this one I knew about; this one I handed her.

She brings out something wild in me. Something innate that begs to be loose; freed.

She hisses when she turns my hand over, assessing where to start her bandaging process. She’s really going to do it. She’s really going to help a man she fears. I know she shows signs of arousal that ebbs and flows when we’re close, but that’s adrenaline confusing her. My little one hasn’t been touched much. I can tell. It’s in the way she kisses lazily, unfamiliar with the process itself.

“This needs stitches but I think if we clean it really well, and use some of these butterfly strips, it might heal on its own,” she says absently as she tweezes chunks of debris out of the wound. I don’t even twitch, and she notices the lack of humanity.

“Why are you helping me?” I ask.

She startles. “Wouldn’t you help me? If you saw me bleeding?”

“What if I’m the cause of the bleeding?” I counter.

Her cheeks heat. It’s not fear. No, fear makes the cheeks pale. The idea of me making her bleed excites her. Her gaze

darts back to her work, training on closing my hand so that she doesn't have to make eye contact with me.

I've seen what I needed to see, little one.

“Yes,” I say abruptly, and her eyes meet mine. “I'd help you if you were bleeding.”

She nods, slowly getting her wherewithal to go back to her task, dropping her head.

Silence. An absence of sound. Sound makes life vibrant and worth living. The silence in her home now, as she closes my wound, is mind-numbingly loud. My ears ring and beg for someone to speak. They beg me to speak, but I'm speechless. The girl I'd hunted inside her home last night is painstakingly taking care of me right now, mending the hand I maimed sneaking into her home to do the same thing all over again.

I wonder if it's her lack of carnal knowledge that makes her so susceptible to being prey. Or is it that I'm a sick fuck, and she's kind?

“There,” she says, patting the finished, clean hand, as if giving herself a pat on the back for her job well done. And well done it is. My hand is clean, and the wound is closed. I turn it over and examine it.

“Thank you,” I mumble, looking up at her. She's leaning against the island where the dishwasher sits. The one I used to load for her every night. Her hand rises and lands on her hip, and her face hardens. She's readying for whatever words she's about to give me.

“Why have you been following me? Why have you been stalking me?” she asks.

I look down to hide my smirk.

She thinks that I owe her something. Now that she's fixed me up.

“Little one, I told you. You're mine.”

She scoffs. “No, I'm not. I'm no one's property!” she shouts, turning to walk away from me. The one thing in the world I can't stand, the one thing I never want to see, is her

back turned toward me. Unless it's arched, baring her supple ass in the air for filling.

I move, sliding my hand through her hair, wrapping my hand around the back of her neck, and turning her around, pulling her into me. I tighten my hold as she struggles and grunts, trying to escape.

"Is that so?" I drop my face toward hers, unnerving her as adrenaline overtakes her, confusing her.

"Yes. I'm no ones," she says, but her voice is sad. Emotion has filled every crevice at her admission, and I long for nothing more than to change the tone. Make her shout with pleasure and forget her fear. Or maybe let fear and pleasure tango together. My little one seems to like the junction where desire meets fear.

"Funny," I say.

She quirks a brow. "Why is that funny?"

"It's funny because you damn sure feel like mine."

I crash my lips to hers, and she doesn't struggle. No, she gives me back far more than she did the first time I kissed her. My girl is a fast learner. I realize she's shaking, so I pull back. Looking down, I can see that her right hand is white knuckling the countertop.

Someone hurt her. Someone has hurt her in such a way that even the idea of the passion between us frightens her.

"Who hurt you?" I growl.

She shakes her head, letting a tear escape and closing her eyes as memories flood them.

"Eyes on me, little one."

Her eyes open, finding mine and holding them.

"Who fucking did this to you?" I snarl.

"I don't know what you mean," she lies.

"You know exactly what I mean, Carina."

A breath escapes her at the mention of her name, and she bites her bottom lip. I swallow a moan, not letting her see how much control she has over me. One of these days, I'll let her see me. I will let the veil I keep in place fall. I'll let her know how much control she has over me. But today is not that day.

"It was a long time ago," she whispers, looking down at her feet. "And I'm dealing with it. They're going to get what's coming to them."

Oh, are they?

It seems my timid little one has some spice inside, after all.

I smirk. "Oh, and what are you going to do to them, pray tell?" I ask.

Her hand is back on her hip. "I have my skills."

"I don't doubt it, little one." I lean down, hovering over her lips and being in the moment with her; present and unwavering.

"Who are you?" she asks.

"It's not time for you to know that, I'm afraid."



FINDING RECORDS ON HER WAS EASY. SIFTING THROUGH THE only hospital server in Rochester was a breeze. There wasn't even much of a fucking firewall. HIPPA my ass.

Carina Eder, born on September 21st, 1988. She was taken in on November 6th, 2006, for injuries. The injuries sustained were extensive. Lacerations to the face and hands, two missing fingernails, a broken rib and cheek bone. Also, a sexual assault kit was used to determine if she was taken advantage of. My hand grips the mouse so hard that it creaks under the pressure, plastic threatening to give way and break if I continue. It states the patient was non-verbal, rocking back and forth, and had some serious burns on her arms and legs. Police were called,

and a report was made, but it looks like Carina never followed up.

I throw the mouse across the room, and it shatters. I've been so careless with her, so fucking careless and blind. She's the way she is for a reason. But she should've been handled with fucking care, and here I come stalking her like a lunatic, manhandling her every fucking chance I got with a stiff cock to boot.

The only thing that's driving me insane about this situation is that there were no reported fires in town around the time she popped up in the emergency department. It says she was a walk-in, and that she checked herself out of her own volition when they asked her to stay.

My Carina is a walking conundrum.

What town has a massive event and doesn't have any evidence of it left behind?

Unless...

My fingers work the keys, caressing them as if I hadn't thrown a fit only moments ago. The only influential family in town with resources to bury things is our very own Stanner family. Stanner Enterprises is based in Seattle, but it seems that the family itself wasn't. I'd known that Emery Stanner went to high school with Carina when I looked up her new job, what I didn't know is something happened to her in the past that left no trace.

If I were a betting man, my money would be laid on the Stanner head of household himself for there being no evidence of the fire, and I'd place a second bet that Ms. Carina Eder was part of the news he buried when he got his son out of trouble.

Too bad he's already dead.

Or he'd be dangling off the end of my blade by nightfall.

"Mmm, but you're not dead, are you, Emery Stanner. And I guarantee you won't live long enough to beg for forgiveness."

Or will I make him beg for her forgiveness, on bended knee, in front of her, with blood dripping from his wounds? Either way, he'll pay for whatever it is he's a part of. Because he's the reason she shakes in fear when she's touched. She's afraid of something deeper that he was a part of. I can feel it in my bones he was involved.

Let the planning begin.



“THE WESTPOINT HOUSE? YEAH, IT BURNED DOWN ABOUT... Oh, what was it, Marge, 06’?” the man at the counter of the local IGA recalls.

His wife looks up from her crossword puzzle, her thick, pink glasses are on the end of her nose, barely giving her any aid in seeing, unless she's looking down.

“Yeah, it was 2006. I heard there was a girl in there with them boys, too! Heard their father covered it all up. I waited to see in the papers what happened, but the story never came, and that's sayin' a lot, ain't it?” she asks me, but it's rhetorical, it always is with gossipy types.

I'd known that the local rumor mill would gain me more insight into where the fire was, and what the town thought happened. And I was right. This is my first stop, and the Smiths have been a wealth of local knowledge.

“Yeah, so why does the town think there was a girl in the house before the fire?” I ask Marge, who clearly is the one I need to talk to. Jerry has turned away, shaking his head at his wife and her need to talk. I'm sure he thinks I'm encouraging her, but the tank full of gas and many snacks I'd bought had secured his mouth shut. I'm a paying customer, and he won't make a scene while I am. Fuck, for Carina, I'd buy this entire gas station if I have to.

“Oh, because after the fireman came, Sissy Louise over there across the street from them, well, she saw a girl stumbling out of the house! I don’t know how the firemen would’ve missed her after they got the fire out. You’d have thought they would’ve cleared the building.”

“You’d have thought,” I murmur.

Marge says nothing else, shakes her head, the way older women do when they’re appalled by something.

“Anyone have theories on who the girl was?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Didn’t see anyone with burns in town, either. I looked for weeks.”

“Why’d you say you wanted to know?” Jerry asks, and I can tell I’ve about overstayed my welcome.

I smile politely. “Just passing through and seen the house, is all.”

“Mhm. Well, maybe you ought to be moving along now, hmm?” Jerry asks, as if he could make me. As if my Colt revolver in the back of my jeans wouldn’t ensure I get all the answers I want out of old Marge.

But I decide that this being the town my Carina grew up in, I don’t want to make waves. Even though none of these fucks see her like I do. None of them paid her any attention. None of them fucking cared. Marge had probably passed Carina covered in bandages and was none the wiser. But one chance meeting in the market with her, and I could see nothing else. Blinded by her like she’s my own personal sun to revolve around.

The fact that she laid in a burning building for hours, hurt and afraid makes me want to find Emery Stanner and slice his fucking flesh until he tells me what he did to her, until he admits it. But I know that this needs to be strategic. You don’t fuck with a grizzly bear without a plan first. You don’t fuck with any monster without disabling it first, and that’s what I need to do. I need to cripple the monster that is Stanner Enterprises. I need to pull Emery Stanner down a peg, to my level, humbling him at my feet to kick.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Emery

“Come on, Stanner, take a bump. It won’t kill you to stop being the pretty boy your father wants you to be,” Wes taunts once we’re back inside.

I’ve convinced him to leave the girl alone, and she’s now lying on the couch, covered up and sleeping off whatever the dumb fucks had slipped into her drink.

I look at Conner as he wipes lingering cocaine from his nose, and my heart races. I know it’s stupid to try and conform to these types, but no matter how popular I am, I never feel like I fit in anywhere. I still feel like an outlier. I drop to my knees where Wes and Declan have lined up perfect lines of cocaine with their IGA cards. Covering one nostril, I lean down and sniff it deeply into my nose. Burning, stinging pain sears through my sinuses, causing my eyes to water. I wipe my nose as I lift myself onto the couch near Conner.

Declan laughs, slapping his leg. “Fuck, I didn’t think he’d do it. Wait until Sean hears that Stanner took a bump!”

Sean is Conner’s older brother. He’s the worst sort of person. A drug dealer, alpha asshole that can’t stay off the streets. It didn’t stop Conner and I from looking up to him as we grew up, though. Conner would do anything to make himself cool in Sean’s eyes. It’s likely what these fucks think they’re cool for. Because Sean Whitfield pays them any attention. And it’s not because they’re on his radar. It’s because they’re funding him by continuing to buy his product.

My heart's pounding and sweat beads on my brow. I feel like I'm going to have a panic attack and pass out, but there's something else in the high that's barreling through me. Arousal. My cock stiffens, and my heart lurches.

"Fuck, was that mixed with something?" I ask, standing to hide the obvious erection.

"Just a little X, no big deal, bro. Calm down," Wes says, grabbing for my arm as I race past him and up the stairs looking for a bathroom. There isn't a door that opens, so I make my way back down, turning left at the stairs. A shove into a room, finally finding a bathroom and sighing thankfully, slamming the door behind me.

Splashing cold water on my face, I try to breathe through the whirring need in my body to be touched, and to touch someone. The laced cocaine amplifies the feeling.

'What the fuck have I done?'

The shower curtain rustles behind me, and I turn, shaking my head as the movement causes my world to shift.

"Who the fuck is in there?" I call out, instantly angry for some reason. It's like the drugs have amped up everything I feel, even if it's only the smallest amount of an emotion.

No one answers, so I swing the curtain back, metal hooks raking across the metal rod, causing a God-awful sound.

In the tub is a girl. She's a little dirty, a little banged up, but her eyes are the most alluring thing I've ever seen. Blue eyes have always been my favorites, but these? These are a contrast to her blonde, matted hair because of the oils that haven't been washed from it. They almost glow up at me.

She's blinking sleep out of her eyes as alarm floods her. Pushing back a sleeping bag she was inside of, she stands, covering herself as the chill of the abandoned house hits her skin.

"Why are you here?" she squeaks.

I realize she hasn't asked who I am.

“You know me?” I ask, shaking some of the lusty feeling from my head. I almost can’t think past the drug’s heated fingers in my brain as they scrape through the gray matter.

She nods. “We go to school together. Not that you’d notice me. Football players don’t really look away from the mirror, do they?” Her tone is laced with venom.

How had I made this girl hate me when I don’t know who she is?

“Well, I’m at a disadvantage then, hmm?” I ask.

She looks down, eyes grazing my rock-hard dick, and I don’t shift away from her gaze. Under the haze of the drugs, I can almost feel her eyes’ touch.

She shakes. I don’t know if it’s from the cold air in the room, or that I’m standing on what seems to be her bed, cock hard, and a deviant look in my eyes.

“Don’t be afraid,” I tell her.

“Why?” she asks, voice small and meek, and I fight the urge to pull her from the tub for only a moment before I do so, gripping the back of her head into my hold.

“Because it will only hurt for a moment,” I snarl.



I SHOOT AWAKE, PANTING, AS I RACE TO THE TOILET. THE LID barely hits the back of the porcelain throne before I violently lose my dinner. That night in November has always been a haze for me. Alcohol, mixed with the drugs the cops had found in my system—that I don’t recall taking—has kept me in the dark about most of what happened that night. Father buried all of it, and I never looked back.

Until *her*.

It’s her eyes.

They unlocked something in me I thought was long gone. Memories I wish now would've stayed buried. I move to the sink and splash my face and rinse my mouth, flushing the toilet on my way out. When I open the decanter from the drinks cart in the living room, I forego a glass and chug right from the bottle. I don't know what the rest of that nightmare held within it because I'd awoken, but thank God, I did. I was high. I was drunk. She wasn't. Her blue orbs were as clear as the sky on a beautiful summer's day.

She remembers.

How can I face her, knowing? How can I face her now that my memories are surfacing? I've seen Conner look at her in a manner I didn't understand and shrugged it off as Conner being Conner. But now it makes me wonder what the fuck he knows that my mind is protecting me from.

I rush to the bedroom before thinking, grabbing my cell. Pounding in his contact information, I place the phone to my ear. Biting my nail as the phone continues to ring, my mind spirals with thoughts of what I'd dreamt. It's as if it's on replay, over, and over, and over again. It's going to haunt me the rest of my life now that it's fresh.

"Hello," Conner answers, voice filled with sleepy confusion.

"Tell me what I'm missing from that night," I blurt, fear residing in my voice as it shakes.

"What? What do you mean?" he asks. Swishing of bedsheets indicates his movement as he sits up.

"Tell me what I'm missing. What did I do to Carina?" I ask him, tears wracking my body like a fucking hailstorm.

"I don't want to do this over the phone, Em." His tone is instantly closed off and curt.

He does know.

"Well, get your ass over here. Because I can't..." I trail off as despair settles into my chest.

"I'm on my way," he says, cutting the call.

I throw on sweatpants and make myself a proper glass of whiskey before clicking the fake fireplace on for some warmth. The way she'd looked at me with my hand tangled in her hair would've stopped me now, but it didn't then.

But would it have?

I recall instantly the other day in her office when I saw her look of fear and still pressed in toward her face. I noticed how she white knuckled the desk, and I still pushed myself into her space.

I'm a fucking monster.

Tears spring free again, and I drown them with more alcohol. Why was she there? In the dream, it seemed as though she'd been asleep in there, as if that was her home. I remember how Principal Glenmont told me her father was in and out of prison, and I wonder if that night was one of those times.

She'd been trying to sleep in the frigid cold, and then here we'd come, a massacre of drunk assholes into her life.

Conner uses his key, and the sound alerts me he's here.

"Hey," he says, dropping down on the ottoman in front of me. His eyes look as if he's annoyed with me. "I really wished this wouldn't happen," he says, tousling his hair before dropping his keys next to him.

I quirk a brow.

"You haven't remembered all this time, so I did worry with her close to you that you might start to recall that night. I hoped not though. She needed a job, and I needed to do something for her that..." he trails off, looking into the fake flames dancing on the heater.

"You needed to make up for what happened," I realize.

He nods, not looking at me as he does.

"What did I do?" I ask him, voice crackling under the weight of the world as I try to wrap my mind around being the cause of the scared, guarded look in Carina's eyes. I didn't deserve to have the moments I've had with her. But it makes

me wonder why the fuck she'd want to even be near me if she remembers.

It makes no sense.

“I don't know what all you did, to be honest. I went looking for you when you didn't come back to the living room. I found you in that bathroom. She was on the floor unconscious, and you were covered in her blood. Her pants were down, and you were in the corner, frantic.”

His words stab through me, causing me to wince at the pressure of them.

“I brutalized her,” I choke out, a heaviness making me dizzy as I admit to something I hadn't thought I'd done this entire time. I knew there was a girl there that night, but I thought that she'd gotten out safely. Conner and I had talked Wes and Declan out of touching her, only for me to turn around and let some foul inner beast out to turn on Carina.

He closes his eyes. “It looked to me like you did, yes. I panicked. I tugged you out of there and took you home. The fire happened, and I didn't know if she got out alive until I saw her in school two weeks later. I lived two fucking weeks not knowing if my actions had killed her. But I've lived my entire life with the knowledge that my actions helped bury what you did.”

I swallow past the density of what he's telling me, standing, and placing my hands on my head, so I can breathe. “I should've helped her. But instead, I hurt her.”

Conner stands, placing his hands on my chest and grounding me. “Look at me,” he says. “You were fucked up. You were high and drunk, and it doesn't excuse it, but you're not that man.”

“Aren't I?” I ask, shoving him back. “Just last week I saw fear in her eyes when I got too close to her in her office, and it turned me the fuck on. I pushed her. I unnerved her more instead of backing off and taking a beat. I'm a fucking monster, and just because it's buried deep within doesn't mean

it still isn't there!" I shout, fever settling in my bones as whiskey takes hold of my insides.

"I need to go to the cops. I need to turn myself in. I shouldn't be rolling in fucking money and protections. I should be locked away. I'm fucking insane!" I tell him, heading for my room for shoes and a shirt.

"Hey," Conner shouts, grabbing me by the arm and stopping me. "You're not going anywhere. The statute of limitations is up even if you turn yourself in. But what good would it do? You have the chance now to make it up to her. To make her life better. Do that. Repent for what you've done with how you act going forward."

My chest seizes under the burden of my actions. I don't think he understands how I feel. I don't know myself. And that's a big deal for a person on a mental level. Knowing yourself is half of how you move through life with confidence and ease. I now have to work to figure out who I truly am, and from what I saw in my dream, I don't know if I want to look inward. I might not like what I find.



"THE PAPERS YOU ASKED TO BE EDITED, SIR," A VOICE SAYS, plopping down a file onto my desk as I hold my head in my hands. Last night's dream mixed with the whiskey I'd used to forget it, is pounding through my head this morning.

I look up and see Carina standing in front of me, eyeing me warily. I stand, chair going flying as I scramble for what to say. Conner was explicit in his orders not to make her relive it. Not to say shit to anyone. I don't know how I can, though. But looking at her, I wonder how I could say anything, either. I don't want to bring it back to the surface for her. Or does she live with it every single day? Am I the asshole who thinks she's somehow forgotten whatever it is I did to her?

“Sir? Are you okay?” she asks me, cocking her head. She moves to walk around the desk to check on me, and I back away, throwing my arms up in the air.

“I’m fine. Don’t come any closer,” I almost shout.

She stops abruptly, eyes narrowing. “Listen, I’m sorry I slammed the door the other day, I had company, and I didn’t want it to get weird.”

Lies. She’s lying. Carina has a very expressive face, and you can tell every time she lies, but I can’t call her on it because I’m a fucking liar too.

“It’s forgotten. I don’t feel good, and I don’t want to share if I’m contagious.”

She nods, smiling broadly. “Well, that’s kind of you, sir.”

When she turns to walk out, I avert my eyes. I can feel the shift between us, and I’m sure she can too. No longer is there thrumming attraction burning through me. Only thoughts and feelings of remorse and anger at myself.

One memory had changed the course of us in an instant. Which, logically, that night had changed the course of her life. So, I got the easier end of it. I always do.

I plop down in my chair near the wall, not bothering to slide it back up to my desk before I let my head drop and panicked breaths to move through me.

“What the fuck have I done? Who the fuck am I?” I ask only myself.

I don’t want to fire her, I know she needs the job, but I can’t have her here. And it’s for selfish, fucked up reasons.

I shoot a text to Conner, telling him he needs to make a new arrangement. Have her work from home. Anything other than her being anywhere near me in this building. Not only for my sake, but for her own. Her even wanting to work here blows my mind completely.

Is she toying with me?

Is she here to fuck with me, and that's why she seems happy about her new job because she's going to tear me to bits and pieces?

Conner immediately texts back and says he'll handle it, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I don't care if it makes me a fucking coward. I can't have her here. She's not only an unwanted memory, but she's a liability to me and the company my father built. If anyone gets wind of what happened that night in Westpoint House, I'll be ruined completely.

Conner is right. No one can ever know.

I need to follow my father's tracks and make sure this shit is good and buried because it would be catastrophic to me and all who rely on me for their jobs if this leaked. And I don't know altogether that it's not Carina's intention to have it leak into the media. She's here for a reason, and I can't believe it's for a job.

No, she has an agenda.

I silently scold myself for turning on the female I felt sorry for attacking, but I have to think of myself first and this company first. She can't be allowed to ruin my father's legacy. Not over me making one mistake that I'll never make again.

She has to be contained. I'll keep her under my thumb. She can work here from home, and she can reap the benefits from her employment, but she has to be kept in check. She won't be the reason the company falls.

I nod at my internal thoughts as a plan comes together. I've been feeling so out of control, so out of touch with my reality. Having a plan puts things in perspective and helps to calm me some. If she talks, she'll be ruined right along with this company. So, let's hope Ms. Carina Eder has enough sense to keep her pretty mouth closed.

My phone buzzes and it's Conner.

It's done.

Tension leaves my shoulders as I open my computer, letting my mind focus on work instead of what's going on

inside me.

One step at a time, Em. One step at a time.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Carina

When I pull out of Stanner Enterprises, I look back only once with a scowl on my face. I'd wanted this job, yes. I needed the money. But also, the chance to get close to Emery Stanner, the reason my nightmares exist, was my sole motivation for applying. Conner explained why I'm being moved to work from home, but I can only hope Emery didn't realize who I was. If so, my plans have gone to shit.

As soon as I'd seen him in the papers as the new C.E.O. of his father's company, my mind raced to plan how I could get close to him to exact revenge. For years after what happened, I was so fucked up. I'd had to deal with it completely on my own. I almost died that night, and I have the scars to prove it. Now, I'll be home, which means I'll be prey for another insane man's attention.

I still don't know who the fuck my stalker is, nor why he thinks I'm his. All I know is that whatever Emery did to me left behind a seedy darkness. Every time the crazed maniac who breaks into my home touches me, I sing to life, like a revived songbird that's taken a spill and lost its breath momentarily.

When I pull into my drive, I see Ryker working out in his garage. My chest constricts, and my stomach does flips. I thought the man said he'd hurt him, but he looks fine. I slam my car door, rushing across the street without care and blasting into his arms like a madwoman.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asks, pulling me off him and looking into my eyes.

“I thought he would hurt you,” I sob. This life I’m leading has become far too much for me to handle. I feel overstimulated to the maximum degree, and I want to hide in my room and decompress for a week. Which, I guess now that I don’t have to go into the office, I have the time to do.

“Who? Who did you think hurt me?” Ryker asks me, pushing some of my loose hair behind my ears. I’d driven here with the radio blasting and the wind rustling through the windows to drown out the loudness of my head.

“The man who broke in with the knife. He came in when we were asleep. He saw us. The next day, he came back. He was covered in blood, and he said it was my fault. He said your blood was on my hands,” I blurt, not taking a breath and sounding like a lunatic, I’m sure. The stalker had said he hadn’t hurt Ryker ‘yet,’ but I had been so certain that he was lying.

That’s when I see it. His chest deflates, his eyes flick around as he grapples with what to say, and he backs away, crossing his arms in a defensive motion. The way my brain processes things, I notice every intricacy and his slight movements tell me one thing: he doesn’t believe me.

“Carina,” he coaxes, sitting down on his weight bench.

“You don’t believe me.” I shake my head and bite my tongue, so I don’t say anything hurtful. He’s still a great man, even if he’s a stupid asshole.

Regret weighs me down as I move back down his drive, headed for my house. I let him touch me. I never let men touch me. Not since November 6th, 2006, had a man gotten close, and I’d allowed this asshole the first unbridled touch.

I’d given him something I’ve been denying others for years. I’m so fucking mad I can’t even think straight.

“Carina, wait,” Ryker calls, running after me. He grabs my arm and twirls me around.

“Don’t touch me!” I shout, backing away from him.

He looks at me in bewilderment. I know what he sees. He sees my scars floating on the surface before I drag them back

down, tying them off with an anchor so they'll stay put.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean any harm. I wanted to apologize. It's not that I don't believe you, it's just that none of the footage has a man in your home, Carina. I've seen you talking to yourself multiple times on camera, though."

My mouth drops open, gaping like a fish out of water. "What?" I mouth, wrapping my mind around his words slowly.

You'll never be able to hide from me, little one.

His words flip through my mind on repeat as I grapple with the gravity behind them. He's deleted himself from the footage somehow.

"I know some people who could help. If you want me to put you in touch with them, that is. When you're ready, of course."

Ryker moves to touch my arm, and I back away from him, hurt plastered over my features.

"You think I'm crazy? You're a detective, you've seen the worst in humanity. You've seen what these criminals can do to hide, and yet you think I'm the crazy one?"

He winces, as if *I* wounded him. "I don't like to use that term. I think you're coping with something deep and it's coming across in hallucinations. The human mind is vast and a highly misunderstood thing. It heals in all different ways. But I want to help. I care about you," he says.

His words are like ice as they slither down my spine, leaving an icky, sick feeling in their wake. My stomach rolls, and vomit threatens at the back of my throat. I fight it down.

Throwing my hand out, I say, "Give me your phone."

He raises an eyebrow as his eyes move to the stool next to me where it's lying. I snatch it, opening it and deleting my camera feed from his phone. When I get home, I'll change the password to my system, and he won't be able to spy on me again.

"I wasn't looking to spy on you," he admits, taking the phone back.

“I won’t be bothering you again with anything. Thank you for all you’ve done for me, you’ve been an amazing neighbor,” I tell him coldly.

“Carina, don’t be like that.” He moves for me, but I turn and walk toward my house to unpack my office belongings and settle in for work tomorrow. One can only hope it goes better than being in the office.

I’m still pissed off I won’t be where I can stir up Emery and Conner, but I’ll have to adjust my plan to fit with their narrative if this is how they want to play. I’ve been paid off once, I won’t fucking do it again.



After getting settled into my home office, I showered and ate a microwave dinner. Now, I’m on the couch, surrounded by cats with my glass of wine, ready for a night of de-stressing with Netflix. I click on Supernatural to continue where I left off when Emery was here. I growl at the fact I let him into my house and at the fact I’d been unnerved by an attraction to him. Inwardly, I’d wondered if he changed. If he’d only fucked up the night I’d had my run-in with him. That’s making light of what happened to call it that, though.

I guzzle down my glass and grab the bottle of wine from the coffee table, deciding I don’t need a glass and setting it down instead.

I’d stupidly almost been caught in a web of Emery Stanner’s making. Again!

Aren’t you supposed to be de-stressing?

My head is right. I need to fucking drop it for right now. Dealing with my past, present, and neighbor all in one day has amped me up. I’m not one for confrontation, so handling Ryker earlier had been a lot for me mentally. I plan to drown

the constant replay in my head of the event with the entire bottle of cheap Pino.

When the bottle's done, I let my head lounge back on the couch, Tigger purring as he paws at my hair absently. It helps to settle me, until I finally answer the call of slumber and drift off.

"Don't be afraid," Emery says, but his eyes are glassed over, and rage is the only thing living in them as he holds me by my hair.

It hurts, and I want to scream, but I don't want to embolden him. He's taller than me, and more massive in every way. Not only that, but I haven't had enough food today to fight. Father's back in jail, and the landlord had all our stuff out on the curb when I came home. I'd hoped Father had at least paid the rent before he'd gone in, but he hadn't.

The Westpoint House has always been my safe haven when shit like this happens, or when Father was too drunk to deal with. He's a mean drunk, and he doesn't care who he hits, he wants to beat someone. So, when I run, I run here. It seems now that my safe haven is going to turn into a new kind of hell. One I haven't experienced yet.

"Why?" I ask him meekly, and his eyes light with something I don't think I've ever seen in anyone's eyes as they look at me, and I can't quite place what it is, but there's a layer of glee in them.

"Because it will only hurt for a moment," he snarls.

Those words rage through me, spiking unease in my chest as I struggle against his hold.

"Hold still," he says, fighting to keep me in his grasp.

"Please, don't hurt me," I beg, whimpering as he rips a chunk of hair from my head as I slip on the ground, but he doesn't let go.

"Fuck," he says, throwing my hair down in disgust. "Just behave!" he shouts, grabbing for me again.

The sting at my scalp isn't bad, but I'm sure it's going to hurt later. The bathroom here isn't small, the claw-foot tub is in the corner, and the expanse between it and the sink has to be twenty feet, at least. Whomever had lived here had money. It makes me feel like I'm somebody when I sleep in here. It's why I'd chosen it. Plus, it's the smallest room in the house, making it warmer than outside or any other room.

When he lets me go to unbuckle his pants, I turn and run toward the tub. Logically, there's nowhere to go, but I have to get away from him. If I can unnerve him long enough, I can shoot around him.

"You little bitch, get back here!" he snarls, and I hear his belt buckle rustling as he runs.

But it's not on his pants, I realize far too late.

He wraps it around my throat and shoves the rest of the belt through the metal clasp, using it like a leash as he pulls me to him. My air is gone, the life force stolen from me by a boy I've looked at more than once and wished that he'd look back.

Now, I'm in his crosshairs, and I want to beg him to get out of them.

"Please," I mouth, but he's behind me, loosening and tightening the belt repeatedly as I fight to stay conscious.

"I thought I was going to have to fuck the drugs out of my system tonight with my hand. Good thing I found you here. Now, I won't have to," he whispers in my ear, and my stomach turns.

He has the belt too tight. I fight on tiptoe to stay up against it, so that it doesn't break my neck if I fall. But my toes slip, and down I topple, taking him with me.

Even with his weight on my back, I use my fingernails to claw into the wood floors and drag away from him, two nails giving in and pulling off their nail beds. Agony sears my insides like a vise. There's no way out; he's going to kill me.

He shouts, turning me over and biting my lip. "Be still!"

I don't know when I resigned to behave, but I think it was this moment. The look in his eyes as he straddles my body on his knees is intense and spine tingling. Fear has never felt like such a tangible element until Emery Stanner made it corporeal. He's the living embodiment of nightmares.

"Please," I beg in one last ditch effort to appeal to his humanity. If there's any left in there.

He rears back and punches me in the face. Bones crack under the pressure. Blood spurts from my nose as my head turns, coating the side of the beautiful tub that's kept me safe for so long from the outside world. But tonight, it had done me no favors.

"Don't speak again," he warns as he moves down my body and slides my pants and panties to my ankles.

It's the first time a boy has seen me, and this isn't how I'd envisioned one seeing me, either. I thought it would be clumsy, yes. But this? This is hell. I almost wish he'd knock me out, hit me again so I didn't have to bear witness to whatever atrocities his drunken mind has planned for me.

"Fuck you," I spew at him. "Fuck you for thinking your worthy of what my body has to offer. You're no better than your father, taking all the time. You're a piece of shit!" I growl, lifting off the floor with all my might and spitting in his face.

Anger fills his features as he pulls his arm back, landing a blow that sends me into the arms of oblivion, like I wanted.

I surge to life on the couch, crying instantly as the nightmare I haven't had in years resurfaces. I let all the anguish out, screaming violently as I remember every fucking thing he did until the lights went out. And thank God they had. Just knowing the state I'd woken up in was enough to assess what happened to me. I'm not proud of my past, or my life before now, but I'm proud I had the gall to give him the truth.

He's a piece of shit. And I hope he remembers every fucking word I'd given him.

The fact he hadn't remembered me on sight had caused an electrical storm so powerful in my body I almost couldn't speak to him during my interview. How does one brutalize another in such a fashion and then go on with their life like nothing happened? How can he sleep at night? Fuck, how can he look in the mirror?

I pad up to my room when the worst of the tremors have left me, slipping into the shower to wash the dream and his touch away. Let it be part of the sewer system because that's where people like him belong.

When I finally run out of hot water, I move into my room with a towel wrapped around me. I rifle through the closet for some pajamas when I hear the floorboard near my bed creak. It freezes me, heart lumping in my throat as it seems to stop beating.

I steel myself. If I could deal with Emery, I can deal with *him*.

Because I know it's him.

I know he's out there.

When I exit the closet, he's sitting on my bed, twirling his blade on his knee, tip pressed into his flesh, as if it doesn't hurt one bit. It attracts me to him; I watch it closely. His eyes flick between me and his blade. I take a moment to memorize his sharp features. His hair is brown and waves back on his head delicately. Too subtly for a killer. His eyes are a deep cerulean. But they have a dark edge to them, hardened by life and the things they've seen. His jaw is chiseled, clenched tightly as he glares down at me. There's a deep scar over his throat, as if someone had tried and failed to take his life. My eyes keep scanning over the healed wound in awe.

My eyes flick back down to where his blade is still twirling, the tip pressing sharply through his jeans.

"What?" he asks, as if he's not the one who'd broken into my home again.

“That doesn’t hurt?” I ask.

He scoffs. “No, not anymore.”

It’s alluring, to say the least. To know that he’s trained his mind to not feel the physical pain of things that it should. It makes me want to beg him on bended knee to train me to be the same way. To help me forget and not feel.

My face falls at the thought. People aren’t supposed to be this way. People aren’t supposed to be this damaged. A tear slips past my defenses again, and it crawls down my cheek.

The man stands, lifting my face and taking me in.

“What’s happened?” he asks.

“Why do you care? You’re one more fucking person in my life who wants to mark me. You’re going to exact your pain upon me, leave me with more wounds, and then be on your merry way. You’ll forget me as soon as you deem me no fun, as he did!” I sob, my chest is heaving with emotions I can’t control. The edges of hyperventilation race towards me.

“Hey, shh,” he soothes, tossing his blade onto the bed. “I’ll do no such things to you. And whoever the fuck has touched you will pay.”

His words are given even toned and steady, but they make my heart strum behind my ribcage.

“Why? Why would you do that?”

“Because, like I told you already, little one. You’re mine. And no one touches what’s mine.”

I’m fucked up.

Because that one statement makes me want to sink into him. I want to hide behind him as he fights the world to protect me, and I don’t even know his name.

“Give me his fucking name,” he growls, and my insides heat, and it’s not anger that wafts through me.

Before I can think of the repercussions, I blurt, “Emery Stanner.”

He kisses my forehead. “Vengeance will be yours, little one,” he whispers against my flesh before he turns and swipes his blade off my bed, storming out of the room like his boots are on fire.

“What have I done?” I breathe, hugging myself.

I’d given a madman my attacker’s name, and I don’t know the extent of what’s going to happen. But I know one thing: whatever does happen, the blood will be on my hands.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Gage

I don't know the extent of what happened between Emery and Carina. All I know: is that the look on her face when I'd told her I'd protect her from the world was one no one has ever given me. Adoration? No, more like a calm that only assurance can bring. She looked as if she wanted to jump into my arms and let me shield her for the rest of her days. She's haunted and she's tired. I'd begun this venture on a whim after a slight brush of her skin when she tried to wipe latte from my chest. I'd thought myself insane, but tonight had confirmed my suspicions. She needs me.

And I don't care what I have to do; I'll be there for her.

What are you talking about?

I shake my head as I reach into my pocket for my phone, dialing Trevor and waiting for him to answer.

"Yeah, boss?" he answers.

I sigh. "Did you find anything on Emery Stanner? I know it's soon..."

"Yeah, what I could find, I have. I'll shoot it to your e-mail?" he asks.

"Yeah, thanks. This is between you and I, Trevor," I remind him. Not that he's ever broken my confidence. I think his gut tells him that's a bad idea. Most people have an innate inner alarm system that warns them when they get on a predator's radar.

“Of course, half the shit we do isn’t legal, boss. You know you don’t have to keep reminding me.”

This goes far beyond that, Trev.

I leave the words unspoken. Trevor doesn’t need to know what I’m planning. Fuck, I don’t even think I know what I’m planning. I know that Emery Stanner will be covered in blood in the end, though.

What’s unclear is how long I’ll toy with my meal before I devour it.

When I get back to my apartment and open my Mac, I flick through the e-mail Trevor had sent me. There’s not much here. Even a deep dive had turned up little. Money changing hands between his father and multiple departments. No news story on the incident on November 6th, 2006, yet money was donated by the Stanners to rebuild two city parks only a week later.

I shake my head. The things a mayor is willing to bury are ridiculous. It seems when Father Dearest died; he left his son and his best friend a shit ton of money and property. His address is listed in the e-mail, and I smile.

Thank you, Trevor.

I close my Mac and grab my keys off the table and my trusty wooden baseball bat from the corner by the front door. Just in case.

I smirk as I swing it absently while I head down the elevators to the ground level parking garage. My drive over is uneventful. The surrounding city is buzzing while simultaneously in the process of shutting down for the night. There’s something about a city at night. All the lights twinkle through the brisk air, giving an almost effervescent feeling that melts through you. It’s the same feeling one gets when they look at a Christmas tree.

His building screams ‘*I didn’t work for this*’, and I roll my eyes at the grandness of it. I park on the side of the street, waiting outside of the parking garage. Stalking isn’t something that’s new to me, so I settle in as I watch the exit for his car to

emerge. When he does, I'll have to find the opportunity to approach him.

I've always been someone who hyper-fixates on things. I don't know why, it's my personality. Whether it be a food, television show, or a female.

Tonight, it's retribution. Revenge for what she'd endured. She hadn't told me what happened, no, but I've seen the fear that she houses in those beautiful eyes. The damage that's visible if one only looks long enough. I bet he didn't. I guarantee he couldn't see past the throbbing of his dick long enough to truly witness all Carina offered the world.

And soon, she'd be the last thing his eyes behold before his big send off to hell. With him gone, maybe Carina will sleep easier. I'd been in the shadows when she'd awakened from her nightmare. Everything in me begged to go to her and wrap around her. To teach her how I relieve the pressure. But it was clear in the way she shook I needed to stay hidden right where I was. If I would've touched her in the state she was in, it would've ruined my touch for her for good. She'd associate my touch with the torments of her mind. I know well when you wake from a dream like that, it's difficult to shake off. It takes a moment to ground yourself back to reality. Nightmares have a way of gripping on and riding you.

I'm about to say *fuck this* and enter his building when the prick exits. He waves to the doorman, swinging his keys around his index finger as the valet tosses them to him.

Fucking cunt.

When he gets in his car and cranks the engine, I am ready to follow at a safe distance. Taking him in front of any building he owns won't do. He'll have this place secured like Fort Knox, and I don't have the fucking time or patience to deal with tech tonight.

I want to get back to Carina and make sure she's okay. No doubt she's spiraling, worried about what I might do to Mr. Perfection.

I follow him to the outskirts of town, and I can't deny the unease blossoming in my stomach as he pulls into a haunt of mine. The Bluefish is a small hole-in-the-wall bar on the edge of town near the water, too seedy for most to enter. Emery Stanner locks his Audi and saunters in like he fucking owns the place.

Cunt. Cunt. Cunt.

I almost decide to wait in the car, ready to tail him when he leaves again. Too many know me here. Well, they think they do, anyway.

"Fuck," I grumble, hitting the steering wheel a few times for good measure before turning the key and sliding it out of the ignition. As I walk up to the building that's seen better days, I pocket my keys and make sure my blade is hidden beneath my shirt in the back of my pants. Gravel crunches under my boots and it's almost cathartic, rousing me like a smelling salt would wake a patient.

Hand on the door, I roll my neck as I enter The Bluefish. The smell of stale beer, cheap cigarettes, and men straight from work cascade up my nostrils, causing the hairs within to curl. All around me, men laugh boisterously, women move from table to table to see who's going to take them home, and people too drunk to do so throw darts at a wall.

I find a booth in the corner under a Coors Light sign that's blinking on and off every few seconds, sliding in and throwing a booted foot into the seat next to me. Don't want anyone to get any ideas about coming and conversing with me.

I let my eyes drift around the room unsuspectingly, never looking at anyone for too long before darting them away.

"Hey, Gage! Haven't seen you in a while, sugar," Allie says as she plops into the seat across from me.

I smile. It won't hurt to have company in the booth. It'll draw attention away from me, so I let the smile grow larger as I meet her glazed eyes. She's in her fifties, and those years have been rough. Her massive tits are barely held inside her muscle shirt not meant for a broad her size.

She shoves her hand down into her bra, pulling out a lighter as she flicks it and sings the end of her cigarette. Breathing deeply, she eyes me assertively.

“Where you been?” she asks.

Now, normally, I’d be telling this woman to fuck off. But Allie is an informant of mine. She’s the day shift bartender here at The Bluefish, and I need her eyes and ears when I’m working a case.

“Working. You know how it is.” I wave my hand around absently at the packed bar surrounding us.

She nods almost immediately. “Yeah, I damn sure do. What brings you in tonight?”

That’s when I spot him. He’s two booths down from us, leaning across the booth and talking to someone. The light above his head is swinging, as if he’d hit it with his hands while talking.

Allie follows my gaze, turning to see what’s caught my attention. “Ahh, the Stanner boy, hmm? What you want with him?”

My ears perk up like a cat that’s heard the jingle of its favorite toy.

“What you know about him?” I ask, leaning forward as I hope something she can tell me will give me a solid idea of how to get my hands on the fucker.

She sighs, eyes vacantly looking behind me at a spot on the wall. She takes a long drag of her cigarette, eyes darting back to mine. “Real piece of work, that one. He’s been in more than a few scuffles in here, and when he comes to, he always says he didn’t remember what happened. Real Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde type shit if you ask me,” she finishes, stanching her cigarette in the glass tray in between us on the table.

I look up to where Emery has sat back enough for me to see he’s sitting with someone I know. Mr. Smith from Rochester sits across from him in the booth. The IGA owner had been all too forthcoming with information when I’d been

in his presence. But it seems Mr. Stanner has a solid network of snitches in place in his hometown.

“What did he get into fights over?” I ask, finally realizing how silent I’d become.

She shrugs. “No one knew. Not even the people he put in the hospital. One of them said he smiled at Stanner as he walked past, and then the next thing he knew, me and Big Ed were loading him onto a stretcher out front.”

Big Ed was the owner here at The Bluefish, known for his kind demeanor but also for his size.

“What do you want with him?” Allie asks again, eyeing me warily. She’s worried about me; and probably thinks I’ll get my ass handed to me if I square up with Stanner in her bar. But she’s never seen me in action.

“I think he hurt my friend,” I tell her.

She sighs again, grabbing her lighter from inside her bra. “Well, dug his own grave then, didn’t he?”

“No, but he will.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Emery

The haggard old man slides into a booth, and I look around, assessing who's watching us in this shithole bar. No one seems wise to my presence. He clinks his glass down on the table, sighing as he rests his big body back on the booth's cushion.

"So, what's this about?" I ask, eyeing him warily. I'd received an odd phone call earlier after I'd gotten Conner's text, one telling me to meet a man here for our "check-in."

The man sighs. "I knew dealing with his son would be different. I hope you will not make any trouble."

My brows furrow in confusion. The man looks familiar. Somehow, I know him, but my brain can't place how I do.

"Trouble? You called me here!" I grumble, looking around and finding a female staring at me from across the room. She's in a booth with a man who has his head bent down in the shadows. None of his features are clear because of the broken lights above him, almost as if he designed the moment that way.

She inclines her head, popping her cigarette out of her mouth and between two fingers daintily. Turning back, I shake a sinking feeling out of my spine as I try to focus on the problem at hand.

"Listen, either tell me what this is about, or I'm out of here," I tell the man.

He rolls his eyes in exasperation with me. "I'm supposed to check in and give your father information every six months.

Usually there's nothing to report, but this time there is."

"Check in?" I ask absently. Not really meaning to speak aloud.

"Mmm, about a week ago a man came into my store asking about the fire," he carries on.

My heart races in my chest, battering my ribs so fiercely I know there'll be internal bruising later. My mind is a flurry of thoughts.

The fire.

My life seems to have gone along smoothly up until now, only for Father to die and the finely placed walls he'd built around me to crumble.

"What did this man ask you exactly?" I ask, voice kinder than it's been the entire time I've been here.

The man smirks. "I wondered when self-preservation would kick in. He wanted to know about any girls who escaped the fire. Marge, of course, gave him the rumor mill's account, nothing I can do about that. She's my wife, after all, and the town does still talk about that night. But he didn't seem to believe her. So, there's that."

My ears fill with a fog almost too dense to hear him through as panic strikes fear through me. My insides boil and roll, sickness churning in my stomach. Someone's onto me? Someone knows. Someone at least suspects enough to come calling.

"I'm paid for my eyes and ears, is all. So, I called you on my scheduled day. Other than that, all has been silent. The house is still vacant, of course, since you own it."

My head flies up, ears clearing. "Excuse me?"

His pupils constrict as fear floods into them. "Mmm, you did know you own that home, right? I mean, your father did before his passing, so I only assume it passed to you."

Why?

"Why would he buy it?" I whisper.

Clearly my thoughts were too loud, because the man scoffs as he picks up his beer to take a deep drag of it. “To keep enemies close. You’ll understand. I mean, enemies aren’t always in the shape of flesh and blood, are they? I reckon that house and the memories and left behind evidence it holds were a threat to your father.”

My blood has turned to molten lava in my veins. Soon, I’m almost sure it’ll bubble through my skin like acid and cause a show for all the souls who came to drink and revel at The Bluefish tonight.

“Excuse me,” I mutter as I slide out of the booth, eyes darting around the bar for the restroom sign.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’ll be leaving,” I hear him say before I pad as fast I can to the bathroom, pounding through a stall and hitting my knees as my stomach empties violently into the toilet bowl.

What my father had done for me to keep his legacy alive and intact is bad enough, but this? This is too much. He’d bought the fucking house where I defiled an innocent girl, where he’d burned evidence of that incident to ash. There was no evidence he’d condemned an innocent man to life in prison. Not only that, but he’d also been keeping snitches in the town, making sure nothing of what I’d done—what he’d done—came to light. No matter how many years have passed, it feels like it happened last week with all the visions and memories plaguing me lately. A lot is fuzzy, but I’m too much of a coward to want to face anything else. I don’t want to see it all.

I wipe my mouth, sitting back on the cold tile floor and breathing past the emotions rolling through me like a freight train out of control. My world is coming to a head, and it’s all my own making. My father nurtured the things I’ve done in my past by hiding them, by protecting me. Now, he’s gone, and I have to deal with the fallout.

Flushing the toilet as I stand, I turn and move to a sink, washing my hands and face before taking a long look in the mirror. Recent weeks are showing plainly on my face. Purple circles are under eyes that harbor disgust and fear within them.

I know when I close my eyes tonight, memories will come and there's nothing I can do to stop them. There isn't whiskey strong enough to drown the disgusting past. My mind's trying to remember while my sensibilities try to fight it.

I'm clammy when I head back to the booth. I'd absently heard the man say he was leaving, so finding the booth empty should be less alarming than it is. How could he drop all this news on me and then leave?

Because he doesn't know what I've done. He doesn't realize the extent of his news.

Sliding back into the booth, I let my head rest on the faux leather that's patched with duct tape in a few places, the scents of the bar lulling me back steadily.

"Can I get you something, sugar?" a woman asks, voice raspy from years of smoking.

My eyes open and meet the eyes of the woman who I'd locked gazes with earlier. Instinctively, I look for the man in the shadows she'd been with. Her gaze tracks mine, not reacting.

"Do you want a drink? Pardon me for saying so, but you look like you could use one." Her beaming, unaffected smile meets my eyes as they lazily find her face after realizing the booth in the shadows empty.

"Whiskey, neat. Please, make it a double," I croak through my scratchy throat.

She nods. "Coming right up."

She moves behind the bar, smiling to patrons as she ambles through her tasks fluidly, filling two beer orders while she readies my drink. She's at home here, somewhere I wouldn't be caught dead working. I find her fascinating, if only to take my mind off everything in my life that's crumbling.

She drops my glass on the table. "Made it a triple, and it's on the house. You look like you need a friend, so let Jack soothe you."

She saunters off.

Of course, she'd given me Jack Daniels.

I stow my disgust and down the liquid fire. It sears through me like a steak hitting hot coals, my eyes shuttering against the rush of foreign drink in my body. A few more, and I'm ready to leave, sauntering out into the cold night and fumbling with my keys. Knowing I shouldn't drive, but not wanting to sit inside the stale Bluefish any longer, I plop into the backseat of my Audi and snicker to myself. Libations have a thick grasp on me, and for the first time in weeks, I don't care what happens when I shut my eyes because there's no choice in shutting them. My body is too weak against the hold of Jack Daniels.

"Come on, Em," Conner says, lugging me off the floor of the bathroom as my mind works to discern what's happening. Rolling my vision around the room, my eyes find a girl, bloody and nude on the cold floor next to me.

Conner's trying to rouse me, tugging me to stand. "Come on, we got to get out of here!" Conner grunts.

Letting him pull me up, I turn and look down at the girl I can foggily remember trying to kiss before drugs took over. Covering my mouth, I gag before rushing to the toilet and throwing up enough alcohol to embolden anyone. And yet, I'd been full of drugs on top of it. I'm turning into my fucking brother. I swore I wouldn't but look how fucking easy it had been.

Tears from the violent act of purging roll down my face, sliding to my chin and blurring my vision.

Conner scoffs. "Come on! We need to get out of here."

I flush the toilet, surprised when it flushes. This house has been abandoned for as long as I've been alive.

Yeah, that's what we should focus on.

Conner's back to tugging on me, but my mind is buzzing with what to do. "We need to call 9-1-1, she's really hurt," I

tell him, patting my pockets for my phone, surprised to find my pants on at all.

Why are my pants on?

How did I pass out?

What the fuck happened?

Drugs still hold onto me loosely as I work to find my phone. Conner spots it on the basin near the sink. Our eyes lock, but he's quicker. He grabs my phone, pocketing it and keeping it away from me.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I ask.

"Keeping your stupid ass from fucking both our lives up. You'll survive, you're a Stanner. I'm not. Without you, I'm nothing, Em. Do you want me thrown into the system? Do you want me on the fucking streets?" he asks, face coiling with rage. He's still high, as if he'd taken even more than I had. His pupils are fully dilated, and rage has him in its grips.

Do I? Do I want my only friend in this world, my only person, to be taken from me? No. But what I clearly did to this girl...it's not okay.

"We need to call someone. We can't leave her here," I whisper.

He looks down at her, something crossing his face that makes him look like someone I've never met before. Only momentarily, there's a monster that slithers under Conner's skin, making him appear as another. It passes, and he nods.

"We'll call your father when we get in the car."

Conner tugs me toward the door, and I look back at the girl lying on the cold floor. Her body is brutalized, beaten, and used, and I'm in an identity crisis. I couldn't have done that, could I?

Who am I?

Screaming from the other room makes Conner and I look at one another before moving out of the door and through the house.

Wes is on his knees, doing CPR on Declan, who's staring at the ceiling above. He's already gone, his dead eyes tell us that. But none of us move to stop Wes from trying to save him, trying to breathe life back into a corpse.

What the fuck?

Bile rises as I wake covered in sweat. I move to make it to the bathroom, but find I can't move.

What the hell?

My eyes open, forgetting my need to vomit altogether when they open fully. I'm chained to a chair; the room is dimly lit and dank. A warehouse. I'm in some kind of warehouse. It's cold, and the air is musty.

"What the fuck?" I whisper, looking around and seeing no one. I vividly recall falling asleep in the backseat of my car in the parking lot of The Bluefish, but I don't remember making it home. My stomach reminds me how much I drank last night, and I fight to keep its contents where they are. Light peers in through a covered window. A tear in the paper that shows years of decay tells me it's daytime. I should be at work. Someone's going to notice I'm missing.

Someone will come.

Won't they?

Who would come for a rapist? Who's truly going to save me?

"Welcome back to the land of the living," a man's deep, gravel voice says from somewhere in the shadows.

"Who the fuck are you? Do you know who I am? You're fucked!" I shout, veins rising to the surface of my neck as rage flies from me without thinking. I don't know who *he* is, either. For all I know, a gun is trained on me. The thought sobers me as I try to maintain what decorum I can.

A chuckle meets my ears, stroking them and striking me with an off-putting chill.

“Of course. I know who you are, Emery Stanner. Why else would you be chained down? Monsters need cages. Although I haven’t built yours yet, I will. The chains will do until then,” he says, voice bouncing off the concrete walls of the warehouse in such a way I can’t pinpoint where he is.

He knows.

It’s the only thought radiating through me. He knows what I’ve done. What I truly am. My time walking this earth as a free man—a monster among men—has ended, as it should.

I hang my head.

“Ahh, so you know why you’re here, then. Good. It spares me the begging; the whining,” he says. The telltale scrape of a blade being sharpened tickles my ears.

Words choke in my throat. He doesn’t truly know me, then. Because as I hear him sharpen his weapon of choice, words of pleading are begging me to shout them. Begging me to throw myself at this man’s merciful side to spare us.

How can he know?

No one knows.

“Now,” he says, stepping out of the shadows, “tell me, how did you get that scar, hmm?”

He’s tall, built, and something about him makes me stop breathing momentarily. Me not knowing him is the first racing thought through my brain. I’ve never met this man in my life, nor have I seen him before. How could someone I don’t know, know so much about me?

“My scar?” I ask, stalling as I rack my brain for an answer. Because even though I know it’s from that night at Westpoint House, I don’t remember how I’d gotten it. That memory hadn’t come yet.

“Mmm, you’re not deaf or dumb. So don’t give me that act. How did you get the scar Emery?”

Twirling a blade with his right hand, the tip digs into his left forearm. It's all I can do not to shudder at the sight. No pain shows on his features, and it unnerves me. I deal with men like him to fix my issues, but never had I thought I'd find myself on the other side. A victim of my own making.

"I don't know. I don't remember," I admit, and he pauses twirling and looks me over. His head cocks as he assesses something, thoughts pass his eyes as clear as day before he resumes twirling the blade.

"What did you do to my Carina, hmm?" he asks, and my stomach cinches as my breathing halts.

"Carina?" I breathe.

How does he know?

"Yes, Carina. Why is it that she's given me your name for vengeance, hmm? You must've done something simply awful," he says, sheathing his blade and leaning over me. Coffee-scented breath wafts pasts my nose, but it's his demeanor that teeters me toward the edge.

He's killed, and I know he has. I can feel it in the vibrations rippling around his body. It's as palpable as heat waves floating above asphalt in the dead of summer, almost visible. He's killed, and I'm going to be his next notch on his blade handle.

"I don't know. I don't remember. I hurt her I think."

There's no need to lie to him. I'm chained to a fucking metal chair God only knows where. I need to keep him engaged so that Conner has time to find me.

"I think you know, even if that filthy mind of yours has hidden it from you. But don't you worry, we're going to find out what you did."

"Why?" I ask stupidly. "Why not kill me?"

He stands up, dropping his hands into his pockets. "Because men like you aren't who they are on their own, are you? You've an army at your disposal. Even as a teenager you would have. Killing you doesn't solve the problem. Everyone

who helped you get away with what you did will die along with you. But first, we'll unlock those memories, won't we?"

He moves through the shadows, coming back with a cart. The wheel squeaks every other turn as he moves it toward me. Electric paddles tell me it's a machine I've only seen on television, used to bring people back from the dead when they've coded in a hospital.

Tugging against my chains, I fight to loosen them to get away.

He's fucking insane!

The machine whirrs to life, as he comes toward me with the paddles. Our eyes lock as he decides something. Indecision flicks across his gaze, making me take a solid breath of relief. He stands back up, still holding the paddles.

"My little one should be here. She should get her revenge."

He shuts the machine off and kicks it over into the shadows.

"Don't go anywhere. I'll be back."

Footfalls grow distant as he leaves me in the middle of the room, chained, and afraid for when he comes back. Carina will surely see me and let me loose, I'm sure of that. She'll save me. She's not a monster.

She's not me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Carina

Working from home has been strange. Zoom calls mean I have to dress business casual—from the waist up, anyway. My bottoms are fuzzy pajama pants with cats on them, and furry slippers keep my feet warm. Winter has come in full force; the first snow of the year flurries beyond the panes of the windows in my office.

“So, the documents for the new tire campaign are going to be sent by the end of the day if you could make sure I edited everything to your liking. Check the tone on that as well, if you can,” Suzanne says, pulling me out of my thoughts and bringing me back to reality as my gaze swings back to my computer screen.

“Okay, sounds good. Give me a few days with it.”

She nods. “We need to hone it in before next week, though. I know Mr. Stanner will want it wrapped before next Thursday.”

That’s fast.

Usually, we have a good amount of time on a campaign, so that it doesn’t release half-finished, or less than top tier.

“Why the rush?” I ask, leaning in and sipping from my iced coffee off the screen.

When I pull back, she’s eyeing me as if she’s trying to assess if I’m making a joke.

“Carina, next week is Thanksgiving...” she trails off as pity enters her features.

Obviously, she's assessed that I don't have family because I don't pay attention to holidays as accurately as the rest of the world does. Sure, I'll make a turkey dinner for me and the cats—which consists of a trip to Boston Market for all the fixings—but I don't have family to go see on the day.

I clear my throat. “Right, I've been so busy lately it completely slipped my mind.”

A light chuckle leaves her, and she deflates. My answer has appeased her enough that she doesn't do the unthinkable and invite me to her family dinner.

“I get that. Well, let's touch base sometime tomorrow, okay?” she says.

I nod. “Talk tomorrow.”

I let my head fall and hit my desk, a groan slipping out of me so loudly that I'm sure one of the cats will be in here soon to check on me. Not Piglet, though. He's been lying on my desk all morning, stretched out without a care in the world as I worked.

Now, it's afternoon and the winter light is fading as the snow falls harder.

Hands come down on my shoulders, and I stiffen.

“Long day, hmm?” It's the voice of my stalker. Gravel coats it and makes my insides warm. For some ungodly reason, I melt into his touch, not lifting my head off my desk to eye him. He deepens his contact, kneading my shoulders, and a groan escapes me.

Is it right to call him my stalker when I allow him to do shit like this? And the very fact that I know about him disqualifies him as stalking me, right?

The thought disturbs me. This shouldn't be happening. But for some reason, I feel at ease around him. My gut is never wrong, and I've learned to go with it. Even when I was running from him, I knew if he found me, he wouldn't kill me. Even if only for the fact he was obsessed with me. Who would he toy with?

“Long day,” I finally agree, standing and tugging out of his expert touch. The smallest gesture had tension leaving my body.

“Well, I hate to pile onto it...” he trails off as I turn toward him.

His eyes scan up and down my body before he laughs. The sound makes my core clench. His perfect teeth flash as a side of him that’s rarely visible slips free.

“What on earth are you wearing?” he asks.

I fight a smirk. “Business on the top, casual on the bottom. It’s all the rage!”

Faking a pout, I head toward my room, knowing he’ll follow.

“What is it you need to tell me?” I ask, stepping into my closet and changing my top into a hoodie.

A light touch grazes my neck as I tug my hoodie down over my hips. A small breath escapes me.

“You’ll want to change these pants,” he grumbles, touch dropping to the fuzzy pajama pants I’m wearing, a finger slipping under the waist and toying back and forth.

“Wh—why?” I finally get out past the need to lean into him. Something about him is dangerous, and yet my body wants more. Wants everything he has to give me. I’ve been weak and afraid for too long, and now I want to dance with the devil and feel his evil upon my flesh.

“I need you to come with me. We’re going to get your revenge, my little phoenix.”

I turn, eyeing him as he looks down at me with admiration peppering his stare.

“Phoenix?”

He nods, reaching up and curling my hair behind one ear. The lightest brush of his fingers causes my insides to boil like lava. The air in my closet grows thick with anticipation.

“They rise from the ashes, becoming even stronger from what burned them. That’s you.” He leans down, and I pull toward him, into his orbit.

“You don’t know me,” I whisper.

“I will, little one. I will. I see more than you realize.”

His lips tease mine, the outer confines skimming over mine as his breath plays on my flesh.

“What do you know?” I ask, voice cracking. His closeness, his aura, is intoxicating. It’s as if I’m drunk off his very presence.

“I know that you’re stronger than you give yourself credit for. You’ve dealt with all the darkness life offers and kept ongoing despite it. I know you sleep harder than you have a right to with your past. I know that someone hurt you, and that you’re going to rise like the empress you are and return the favor. I also know that you keep the Apothic wine company in business single-handedly.”

My lips quirk upward at his last statement. But the rest of his words have my heart galloping in my chest like a stampede of wild horses.

“Maybe I’m not all those things. Maybe I’m a broken girl, smiling through the pain,” I tell him, eyes drifting up slowly to meet his.

“Maybe, little phoenix, maybe. But if so, I’ll teach you how to rise. I’ll be by your side as you do, too.”

My breathing wavers as a tear leaves my eyes. He captures it.

“You’ve done this life alone, but you’re not alone anymore. You haven’t been for a while.”

My chest cinches. “How long have you been watching me?”

He smirks. “In truth? Over a year, now.”

His admission shocks me to my core, but I try to remain steadfast with my reaction. How had he been stealthy enough

to elude me this entire time? I've only been here a little over a year.

“Where are we going?” I ask as he backs away. Air floods my lungs as I heave it into them. His presence is so intense that I feel like I don't have the room to breathe, as if it's pressing down on me. Imposing on me.

“Like I said, to get your revenge. We're going to get vengeance,” he replies, turning around and finding a pair of jeans and handing them to me. Bending, he grabs my black boots and takes them out of the closet into the bedroom. Drawers open as I slip into my jeans and by the time I get into the room, he's got socks laid out for me.

“You have Emery?”

He nods.

My mind whirls. You'd think it would be fear and guilt at the fact I'd gotten someone taken by this madman. But it's something else. Something I don't want to name because if I inspect it too closely, it might scare me. Trepidation thrums through me as I slip into my boots, throwing my hair into a messy bun and stepping behind my stalker as we descend the stairs.

I stop on the first landing. “I can't do this. You expect me to ride off into the night with you to some unknown location? I don't even know your fucking name,” I tell him, clutching my chest where panic is taking hold.

He bounds back up toward me, grasping my shoulders. “Breathe.”

The idiocy of the moment isn't lost on me.

The strangeness between him and I is astounding.

Despite that, I let him coax me back down from the anxiety swirling through me, like the blustery weather outside the house.

His eyes bore into mine while we breathe in tandem.

“My name is Gage,” he says, my heart racing, but now for another reason.

Gage.

“Gage,” I whisper, and he moves closer, eyes closing as he leans his forehead against mine for a moment.

“Do you know how long I’ve longed for you to say my name with those pretty lips?” he asks, his gravelly voice rumbling through me.

Tilting my head back, I try to keep in mind he’s dangerous, but I forget as his lips travel down my nose and skim my lips.

“Carina,” he whispers, haunting my ears with my name.

Never has my name sounded like it filled someone with such happiness. Yet there was a sad tone buried within his voice when he’d said it, as if he knows we will never be more than voyeur and the watched.

“Gage,” I answer, leaning forward and coaxing his lips with mine.

In only a matter of a moment, the scene between us changed from panic and fear to longing and lust, and the insanity isn’t lost on me.

Gage pulls back, looking at me with concern and restraint painted on his features.

“We have to go. We need to get your answers.” Turning, he moves down the stairs, shaking his head at himself as he shoves his hands into his pockets.

Capturing my breath as I slowly step down the stairs, I try to regain my composure. Something about him throws me off axis. One minute I’m scared of him, running, and hiding in a closet with tears flowing down my cheeks. And the next, I’m leaning into the enigma of him, begging with every fiber of my being for him to kiss me.

With my past, a man like him is the worst idea for me. I need someone like Ryker, someone good. Someone who’ll keep my heart and body safe and the memories away. Gage is the kind to take my memories in his grasp and rip them to shreds. Murder is his vibe.

But I’m not all too sure that’s not what I need.

I follow Gage outside, locking the door behind me. My camera's lights blink red when I glimpse them on the side of the house. Not that they helped me keep Gage out.

Coming to a stop behind Gage, I eye a beautiful car as he holds the door open for me. It seems he's comfortable enough to drive right up to my house. My eyes drift toward Ryker's house, but it's dark.

"He's gone. Working, or watching someone else, I suppose," Gage says offhandedly, motioning toward the car.

I slide inside. The front seat is leather and smells recently polished. The door shuts, followed by ringing in my ears in the cold night air. I run my hands over the dash.

Gage drops into the seat next to me.

"What kind of car is this?" I ask, risking looking like an idiot. I don't know cars, but I know I like the look of this one. It's old, that's all I do know.

"1969 Chevrolet Corvette," he answers, caressing the steering wheel lightly once before turning the key and igniting the engine. The rumbling stirs through me like a smooth shot of whiskey, skimming my nerves like an old friend. My body jolts to life, momentarily forgetting I'm with a man who's been stalking me for over a year, headed to confront someone who brutalized me and lives in my nightmares.

"It's beautiful," I murmur as we pull away from my curb, rambling down the street in a loud cacophony of gears shifting and wheels screeching. I'm sure the last action was for my benefit only because Gage turns and smirks at me when the ass end fishtails.

Every so often, Gage turns his eyes toward me, watching every intricacy of how I move with his car, and something about it gives me a thrill that boils inside white-hot.

When we drive to the outskirts of Seattle, toward the industrial parks, my insides fall back into the cold rhythm of the anxiety I'd felt earlier in the day. An empty, long forgotten building is where Gage's beautiful car comes to a stop.

The warehouse looks as if it's been in disrepair for several years.

"Gage?" I mutter as I amble out of the car, shutting the door behind me. It's heft makes my arms burn, reminding me I'm awake and this *is* my life.

He grabs my hand, shivers snaking through my body, almost hypnotizing me instantly with one touch. Tugging me along beside him, he unlocks the door he'd had padlocked with chains from the outside, as if a magnificent beast resides behind it. And I guess, in reflection, one does.

Emery Stanner's behind it. A monster in his own right.

"Let me the fuck out of here!" Emery chides as Gage moves us through the shadows in the room, pulling me in step with him.

When I exit the shadows at the back of the room with Gage, Emery snaps his mouth shut. Sweat beads on his brow, even though the room is frigid. He's been fighting the chains he's bound in. The metal chair he's in is welded to the floor, as if this is where Gage brings people all the time. I'm sure Emery doesn't know his fight is all for naught.

"Carina, get away from him. He's a psychopath."

Something in me tightens as anger pools. I roll my neck. "He's a psychopath? And what's that make you, Emery? Hmm?" I ask, eyeing him sternly.

His jaw ticks, and his eyes dart away from me.

"I told you I don't remember what happened. I've only recently..." Emery trails off, dropping his eyes, looking at his lap that's likewise covered in chains, binding him to the chair.

I look over at Gage, who's leaned up against the wall, unaffected.

He inclines his head toward Emery. "Go ahead, little phoenix. Get your answers. You deserve them."

Can I? That night is a blur of fog for me, too. I spent most of it knocked out. All I know is what happened when I came to and got out of the smoldering house in one, shattered piece.

Images come and go from when I'd come around during the attack, but I've never trusted my concussed mind and the things it conjures in my sleep.

But that's when there was nothing that I could do about it. There is now. At least, Gage says there is.

Moving closer to Emery, I watch Gage for a reaction as I straddle over the chair and drop down onto Emery's lap. Gage's eyes darken and his teeth set on edge, and I turn back to Emery, my breath hitching with anger instead of lust as it does for Gage.

"Tell me what you did to me that night. I know the condition I woke up in, I know how long it took my body to heal. My mind is still fractured, and it's your fault, isn't it?"

Emotion wells in my chest, begging me to spill it, but I won't.

He doesn't get the satisfaction of my tears.

"I don't remember. I swear. I was so fucking high that night..." he drops my gaze, looking down in shame.

High? He'd been high? That's his excuse for what he'd done to me?

Rage coils like a fucking snake around my heart, blackening it by the second.

"You're a fucking liar. If you didn't remember, why use daddy's money to hide it all, hmm? Why the fire?" I ask through gritted teeth.

Emery's eyes flick back up toward mine, shifting uneasily from me and Gage.

A low chuckle sounds as I hear Gage push off the wall. Boots hit concrete as he comes up behind me, encasing my face in his hands.

Dropping, he skims my ear with his lip. "He was hiding more than what he'd done to you, weren't you, you piece of shit?"

Emery chokes on a sob as he nods, dropping his face.

I push off his lap, easing into Gage's chest, breathing intensifying. "What else? What else happened that night?"

Emery shakes his head. "Someone died. Declan..."

"Why do I know that name?" I ask myself out loud.

"He went to school with us. He overdosed. When I came to... I was next to you on the floor, you were... God, you were beaten so severely and naked..."

I move swiftly, without thinking, balling my fist, and punching him as hard as I can in the face. His head whips to the side from the force. He spits blood onto the concrete, and my eyes fixate on it momentarily before I cup my hands together, trying to keep them from shaking.

"When I came to, Conner was trying to get me to leave. He found us in the bathroom, we heard screaming and when we came out of the bathroom, Wes was doing CPR on Declan. But he was gone. I only just started remembering. It was you who triggered the memories, I'm sure of it. I've spent my entire life without them. I swear it!"

"Conner?" I ask, horrified. "That's how he found me?"

Emery's head whips up, looking at me squarely. "What do you mean, found you?"

"He found me. I was in the bathroom, still in and out of it, when he woke me. He said the house was on fire and helped me to safety. I've spent all these years thinking he was my savior, but he left me there and got you to safety first?" My voice is shaking, and I'm unable to quell its quake.

Anger has reached an entirely new level inside me, and I can't fight its hold.

Emery nods, taking the coward's way out of answering.

Wheels squeaking reminds me Gage is here, and I turn to see him wheeling over a machine.

"We can get your answers from him. A couple of shocks should spark something. It always does." His eyes are dark and scary. He's done this before, I realize.

My dumb ass has been longing for this psycho's touch, and he's no better than what I've already dealt with in my life.

I turn back toward Emery, tears of rage spilling from me. "All this time, I thought if I could get the missing chunks of time, the missing parts to the night, I could heal. I could have closure somehow. Now, you tell me, you don't even know what the fuck happened?"

I back away. "Do what you need to," I tell Gage.

He shakes his head. "No, you need to take your revenge. Take your power back, little one. Come here."

I eye him, mind, and heart pattering away as his words sink through my cortex.

I can't become a monster.

"I can't...I'll be like him." I incline my head toward Emery who gasps as he continues to carry on crying tears in the wake of his predicament.

Gage shakes his head. "No, you won't be. You'll be taking back what he took from you. He's the monster, you're the broken. Repair yourself, little one. Take your power back."

Before I can think, my feet are moving toward Gage. He holds paddles in his hands, a machine whirring as he swiftly hits buttons on it.

He hands me the two paddles, looking down at my vacant stare. "Don't touch your skin to his when you touch him with these."

I nod absently.

Can I do this?

What happens in this room, from this moment forward, will change me forever. On a molecular level.

Standing in front of Emery, my mind works to decide if I can take back my power. If I can become the powerful one, at the expense of hurting someone else.

"Do you want me to help you, little phoenix?" Gage whispers in my ear, startling me.

I turn my face towards his, noting his dilated pupils at the very idea of watching me torture my torturer.

“Will this even help him remember? Or is this for what he did to me?”

Gage shrugs. “A little of both. He could be lying; he might tell us all we need to know before the paddles even touch his flesh. That’s what usually happens. Or, he could be telling the truth, and at the very least, you get to feel powerful for a moment in your life. What’s the harm?”

My eyes turn back toward Emery. He’s got his eyes closed; his breathing is erratic.

“Please, I deserve it. The memories are too much!” he begs.

My chest aches, but anger roils inside me.

He says the memories are too much for *him*? He’s the one who lives in my nightmares rent free. His face is the one that’s haunted me for what seems like my entire life. The knowledge that the only reason I’m okay today is my silence angers me. I sold my soul and my silence to Emery’s father only days after being attacked by his filthy, entitled son. It’s the only reason I have any comfort and happiness today, and even it stemmed from that night, from the darkest parts of my past.

Fury ignites inside me, and I scream as I slam the paddles on either side of his head. His body convulses, eyes rolling back as electricity shoots through him. Shockwaves move through me as I pull them back, panting and letting tears of seething frenzy leave me.

“That’s my girl. Don’t you feel better?” Gage coaxes.

No words. I’ve no words for what I feel, but inside I feel a beast, dark and carnivorous, come to life, rolling around her neck as power tendrils through us both.

Moving forward as Emery comes back around, I hit him with another wave of power, screaming into the warehouse, echoing my torment through the three of us as I let it go. It’s as if I can see my anguish leaving me in the shouts of pain, flitting through the air as if they’re alive.

Gage grabs my hands, pulling them backward with the paddles coming along with them.

“We don’t want to kill him, little one,” he tells me, holding my wrists.

Realization dawns, and I drop the paddles, backing away as they hit the floor in a crash and covering my mouth as a cry of surprise leaves me.

“What have I done?” I sob, watching Emery’s unconscious body. Gage shuts the machine down, checking him for a pulse before coming toward me.

I back up, back hitting the cold wall.

“You’re not the fucked up one here. He is. He took what wasn’t his, you’re taking it back. When he comes to, we’ll see if your work gave him back more memories.”

Gage pulls me into him, and emotion overflows, sobs bursting from me like water from a broken dam. When I wrap around him, I realize the full excitement watching me lose it on Emery had coaxed within him. His hardness presses against my body, and my body warms. Pulling back, I look down at where his cock is hard as steel.

His eyes follow my line of sight. “You were magnificent, little one.”

My body sings to life under his praise, as if I was performing solely for him, wielding a symphony of electricity for his amusement.

I’d played right into the devil’s hand, and I’m not all too sure I hate it. Even as disappointment tries to rouse inside me at myself and what I’d done, heat burns it away under his unwavering stare.

Rising on tiptoes, I connect my lips with his, swallowing a deep, guttural moan. Tongues clashing, and hands grasping one another anywhere we can, the kiss is demanding and hot. Adrenaline fills me and coaxes me onward, into the depths of depravity.

I don't know who I am anymore, but in this moment I feel powerful. More powerful than I've ever felt before. And it's because of him. Even as fucked up as I am about what's happened, and what I'd done, I know it's because of him.

“Little one...” he breathes, pulling back.

I shake my head. “I'm taking back my power, remember?”

He eyes me heatedly.

“I'm partial to whatever it is you have planned, but I don't want to be with you this way. Not here. Not...” he trails off, looking over at Emery, who's unconscious.

I tug off my sweater, ripping my bra off next. “This is the best place. I want my power back, and you'll be the first I've let inside me since what he did. Let him wake. Let him fucking watch me enjoy making my own choices for once. He ruined me...” I look down as the words rattle through me.

Gage moves forward, lifting my chin, his eyes meet mine as a smirk tugs his lips upward. “No, he didn't. But I'm going to.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Gage

Carina's eyes go wide at my words. Watching her singeing Emery Stanner with electricity and rage has my cock as stiff as it can get without fucking hurting, but it's playing second fiddle to her bare breasts with pert nipples standing on end in front of me. I'd meant it, I'm going to ruin her. If not her body, her soul. Just look at what I'd already gotten her to do. My Carina wouldn't have done that without me in her ear. Or would she have?

I'm a firm believer in revenge, and she was working for the very man who'd hurt her for a reason. She had a plan up her sleeve, and I hadn't had time to figure it out before she gave me his name and set me on this path that led us both here tonight.

Before I can even blink, she tugs her jeans down kicking her boots and pile of clothes to the side. Stepping back, I take her in. Her full figure entrances me momentarily, and I see her start to second guess herself as she covers her breasts.

Fuck the reasoning, I'm not a good man, and I can't start pretending I am now. I'll take what she's offering. Something I've wanted for so long. But fuck if I don't want it to be perfect, and this seems strange. To take her while the monster of her nightmares sits chained, and unconscious isn't how I envisioned slipping inside her for the first time.

Moving toward her, I pin her with a glare that tells her how much her body turns me on. She drops her arms, her beautiful, full breasts bare to me. I revel in the sight of them.

“I’ve wanted you for so long. Do you know that? Do you know how many nights I smothered my face with your panties, drowning in your scent and wanting nothing more than to slip my tongue through these folds, and now you’re offering them to me in the most delicious way. After I’ve watched you maim your attacker, watched you emerge,” I tell her, slipping my fingers over her lips as she expels a shaky breath.

The knowledge of her words isn’t lost on me. I’ll be the first one she’s let into her body, willingly. Because Emery Stanner had taken what he’d wanted and left her broken in his wake. Now, she’ll know pleasure. I’ll be sure of it, if it’s the last thing I fucking do.

“Gage,” she whimpers as I toy with her more, caressing her nipples too lightly to give pleasure, but enough to tease. She deserves more than teasing, though, and we both know it.

“Watching you with those fucking paddles was so goddamned hot, little one. The power you had…” I pinch one of her nipples, and she arches off the wall behind her into me, moaning carnally and heating the air between us.

Having her under my touch is something I’m not even sure my mind believes in this moment. The very idea she’s giving herself to me is surreal. Part of me wants to toy with her long enough to make certain she’s sure. Make sure it’s not the rush of adrenaline moving through her that’s making her so pliable in my hands.

Dropping to one knee, I look up at my beautiful Carina as her breath hitches. I smile wickedly, leaning forward and slipping my tongue through her folds languidly, drawing out our first touch, pressing in with as much pressure as my tongue can muster to give her the force she needs to feel good.

“God, Gage,” she moans, knees bending as she slinks her hand through my hair. My eyes flick back up to watch another facet of her power slip back to her tonight. She’d been right. She needed this.

She watches as my tongue slips through her folds, swirling around her clit in rough, pressure-filled flicks.

She tries to pull back from my mouth. “Gage... too close,” she admits breathlessly.

I smirk, surely covered in her wetness and eyes filled with crazed amusement. “This first one is mine. The next one is yours,” I tell her, and she licks her lips sinfully, making my cock jerk in my pants.

When I lean back into her, I slip a finger inside her, breaking momentarily to check with her. “Is this okay?”

She nods, mouth wide open and words lost on her. “Please,” she whimpers.

It’s all I needed. I needed to know she was comfortable, needed to know that I didn’t move too quickly. Because no matter how slowly I’d like to revel in her flesh, I can’t. I need everything, and I need it now. But I need to do it on her terms, too.

Her body quivers as she grows closer to coming while I lick and stroke her, coaxing her higher and higher. She lifts a leg, throwing it over my shoulder, opening herself to me fully. I grin as I nip her clit with my teeth, causing her to scream as her body quakes and rolls through her climax.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck! Gage!” she shouts, gripping my hair to the point of pain.

When I stand, she attacks me with her lips, tongue slipping into my mouth and tasting how good she’d behaved for me. Then, something happens that I don’t think I’ve ever allowed in my life. She turns me, slamming my back onto the wall, taking control of me expertly.

“Strip,” she commands, and I instantly obey, not dropping her eyes as I remove my clothes piece by piece.

Movement alerts me that Emery is coming around, but I don’t say shit to her. He made his fucking bed, and he’s about to lie in it. He’s going to watch my girl take her power back.

Once I’m nude, she steps back and takes me in, making a mockery of what I’d done to her before I made her come.

“Now what, little one?” I ask gruffly.

“Sit down, back against the wall.” Her eyes keep flicking toward the defibrillator.

“You can use it, turn it down,” I tell her, giving her permission to do what I know she won’t ask me.

She bites her lip but nods, turning the knobs down some before dropping over my lap with her core dangerously close to my throbbing cock that wants nothing but her to take me out of my misery.

“Now, you’re going to tell me a few things,” she says.

My ears perk up, eyes flicking to hers in alarm. She hovers the paddles over my shoulders.

“You can’t touch me with those without affecting yourself, little one. What are you playing at?”

She smirks. “I want answers, stalker.”

I fight a smirk. “Go on then.”

“Tell me when I got into your crosshairs,” she says, moving one paddle into her other hand so it holds two, using her free hand to grab a hold of my cock. My breath leaves me all at once, unable to answer her question at all. No thoughts conjure past the feel of her hand on me. Standing my length up, she slips me inside her.

Pain pinches her face together as she slowly works me into her body, making me almost insane from the slow tightness of her muscles letting me in.

“Fuck, little one. This is cheating... how... how do you expect me to answer you?”

She shrugs, returning one paddle back into her other hand and placing them on my shoulders, letting the electricity coil through me and then her. Both of us cry out, and my eyes roll in my head, seeing Emery open his eyes and take us in from where he’s chained.

A pained look crashes through his features, but I turn my attention back to where it matters. Onto Carina.

“The market,” I rush out as she rides up and down so slowly and threatens to touch me with the paddles again. “You bumped into me last October. You dumped your pumpkin latte on me!” I get out through gritted teeth. It’s taking every fucking ounce of self-control I have to not flip her and drive into her. She feels like heaven.

She stops moving as she remembers me. But surely not in as much detail as I remembered her. How I still remember her when I touch myself to her image.

“Fuck, if you don’t move, I might die...” I beg.

She smiles, power filtering across her face.

She touches me with the paddles again, low electricity cascading through us both. We both shout in pleasure as I lift off the floor and slam deep inside her.

“Fuck, what was that for?” I ask as she throws the paddles back onto the cart.

“Because it feels good,” she admits, slamming her lips down onto mine.

Grabbing onto her supple hips, I squeeze them. Carina cries out, biting my lip past the point of pain.

My cock almost erupts, filling her.

Breaking our kiss, Carina reaches up and rubs her fingers through the blood of the wound she left behind, smearing it across my face.

“You look good in red, stalker.” Her words spur me on., my hands find her throat, testing as I wrap both around her, as they’ve done once before. Only this time, we’re not coated in the moonlight, we’re bathed in the yellow glow of lights in a warehouse long abandoned, and the eyes of the monster who hurt her.

Carina arches into my hold. “Tighter,” she says.

An inner war brews. I know someone has hurt her before, but it seems she blossoms in the darkness, forgetting her past as she controls those beneath her.

When I tighten my hold, she glides up to the tip of me, dropping back down in a slow movement that almost kills me in one fell swoop.

“Fuck, you feel so goddamn good,” I growl, trying to keep my cum firmly where it belongs until she comes for me.

She’s lost. Her eyes are rolled back in her head, body moving mechanically toward the finish line as I steal her air and give her power at the same time.

“I want you to come for me. Because I can’t hold out much longer, little one. I need to come for you, too,” I beg. She nods frantically, and I tighten my hands.

Her eyes meet mine, frenzy filling them for a moment.

“I’ve got you. I’ll never hurt you. You’ve got the power,” I tell her, and her mouth drops open as I feel her pussy tighten around me.

“Fuck, Carina, that’s it, come for me! Fuck, Carina!”

My cock follows her, filling her full as she rides the last of her orgasm out over me.

When she stops, I let my hands slide off her throat, slipping over her breasts languidly as she leans down and rests her head in the crook of my neck.

“I never knew it could be...” she trails off.

“That’s because you were stolen from, little one. Wasn’t she, Emery?”

Carina gasps, sitting up and turning around to meet the eyes of her attacker who’d watched her take a man inside her for the first time since what he’d done. Tears are streaking down his face.

She slips off me, and we both hiss. I’m ready to grab her clothes and talk her down, but she doesn’t head to get dressed. She saunters over toward Emery, leaning over him in all her nude glory.

“Do you see how good it can be when someone *willingly* gives into someone else? Do you see how good it could’ve

been? That's what happens when you don't take, Emery. When you're not a monster."

My lips clamp shut. I'm not a hero, but in her story, I guess I am.

If the walls in this warehouse could talk, she'd know I'm as dark a monster as Emery, though not in quite the same manner. She's got an affinity for attracting us it seems.



WE'VE BEEN SITTING IN FRONT OF CARINA'S HOUSE FOR MORE than twenty minutes. She hasn't spoken a word. I don't want to push her, either. She'd been through a lot in her life, but tonight will have been a lot for her, and I'm not proud of all I'd allowed to happen between us. Hope is all I can hold onto that she doesn't feel taken advantage of by me, too.

"When will you let him go? He's an affluent member of society, someone will notice he's missing," she finally says.

It's not the first thing I thought she was going to say, I'll admit. I'd been prepared for her to tell me she regrets what we'd done. Not that I'd let her for one second revel in any of that bullshit feeling.

"When you get your answers," I tell her, turning in my seat to look at her.

"Gage, why are you doing this? All because you saw me and wanted me? It doesn't make any sense." She's shaking her head, tears threatening to spill.

"Carina, you're worthy of everything I've done and everything I will do for you. I'd kill for you, and there needs to be no rhyme or reason to it. You are my driving force; I can't tell you why you are. Something about you calls me to you, and I'll do anything..."

"To be with me?" she asks, cutting me off.

Do I want to be with her? What's my end game?

I'd never thought deeply into my obsession with her. I'm a dark man, and I never think too hard on anything I do. If I do, I risk driving myself insane. More so, anyhow.

"If that's what you want. Carina, I want any part of you that you'll give me. I know that's weird coming from me, being how we met, but it's true. I'd never have taken from you as he did."

"I know that. But you also have to realize you shattered my idea of safety. I thought I was okay to be on my own, okay to move on from the past, and you broke that sense of security. Even when I got cameras, you still pushed through my boundaries."

Wait, what?

Her words unsettle me, make me feel like I fucked up more than I even realized beforehand. And I'm not going to deny how uneasy I feel as she gives me her truth. But I'd resigned to give her back her power, and in doing so, I'm now faced with her shutting me out.

And now that I've had the sliver of herself that she'd given me, I don't know if I can go back to stalking her. I don't know if I'll ever feel okay following her. Even as I think that, though, a seedier part of me tells me I'd follow her to the ends of the earth, in the shadows of hell if that's where she took me. She's mine, and I'll wait as long as it takes her to realize it.

"I'm sorry," I mutter, surprising us both.

"Are you? Or are you scared?" she asks, turning my words on me expertly as she turns toward me.

I try not to smirk because she's serious.

I open my mouth and she covers my lips with her finger. "No lies. I fucking hate lies," she whispers.

"Your too quick a learner, you know that?" I ask.

She smiles. "Answer the question."

"Both. I'm sorry and I'm afraid of losing you."

Her eyes soften as her hand moves to my cheek. “I don’t know you, Gage. I have a feeling not many truly do.”

“I’ll let you know me. But only you.”

Her thumb brushes across my cheek slowly.

“I need time. Tonight was a lot.”

My chest cinches at her words, not meaning to let them affect me so deeply, but I know she’s seen my reaction cross my face.

She slides across the bench seat, slipping into my lap sideways, letting her feet rest in her side of the seat.

Cupping my face, she says, “Don’t think I regret a second of what I did with you. I vowed a long time ago to never let a man inside me until it was my choice. Until it felt right. Everything about you and I was the highlight of tonight. If I could, I’d do it all over again.”

“I mean, that could be arranged,” I tell her, slinking my hand over her thigh and squeezing before letting go, letting endorphins rush her.

She whimpers, leaning her forehead against me and letting the wave of pain mixed with pleasure rush through her.

“You know what I meant,” she growls.

“Mhm, I do.” I smile.

“It defined my life, that night, and I don’t even remember it all. I want the facts, I want to know what his memories hold, and I can’t explain why I want them. I want the truth. And I want to know how he covered it up.”

“Do you want to ruin him?” I ask her, and something flits through her face, but only briefly.

“I don’t know yet,” she admits.

I scoff.

“I know that sounds crazy. I should want to ruin him, right? But he didn’t ruin me. It might be a fucked-up way to look at things, but the money I was paid with put me through

college and put food in my belly and a roof over my head. My life took a bad turn and a good turn from that point on.”

“Who paid you?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Some lawyer came for Mr. Stanner. At least, I assumed that’s who he was for. He told me some long-lost relative had died. I knew it was bullshit. I knew they were covering up what happened. But admitting they knew about me and what happened, was admitting to the incident altogether. I’m not stupid. I also wasn’t about to fight him in court when my only shelter had burnt to the ground. Even now, it’s charred beyond belief inside. No one’s ever repaired it.”

Her truth sends shockwaves through my center. Anger wells at what she’d gone through. The knowledge she’d been in that house that night because she had nowhere else to go, and Emery had done what he’d done all for some kind of sick, twisted fun, makes me want to sink my fucking blade into him. I’m not all too sure I won’t in the end. But she deserves her answers. If it’s what she needs, it’s what she’ll have.

I’m still not sure what called me to her like a moth to a flame, but I’m too fucked-up to look too far into it. I want her, and whatever I have to do to have her is what I’m going to fucking do. I only hope I don’t stain her as darkly as I’m stained.

Watching her tonight with the paddles in her hand, screaming as she let go of a piece of the pain she’s been carrying for years. Pain that I’m not all too sure the staining process hasn’t already begun.

“What do you remember from that night?” I ask, at risk of her shutting down.

She swallows, slipping a hand around my neck and squeezing lightly as if to ground herself to reality before diving into the memories.

“I remember hearing him come into the bathroom, and I shifted. It was stupid. If I’d have held still, he wouldn’t have known I was there. He ripped the curtain back, and I stood up.

When we first came face to face, for a fleeting moment, I thought he was going to be kind to me. There was something there between us. There was always this spark. I had a massive crush on him at school. Every girl did. But I was dirty, malnourished, and in tattered clothes. Of course, he wouldn't want me, right? But then, he wanted me. But the moment turned where I didn't want him anymore. I wanted to get out of the bathroom alive. The last thing I remember is him punching me. I taunted him, teased him to make him hit me."

"Why?" I ask, breaking her out of the memory before she got too deep.

"Because I wanted to not be a part of it. I didn't want to remember. Now, it's all I can fixate on. I knew there were people in the house, many of them. I could hear them drinking and shouting. But I didn't know he was there, and I thought if I kept quiet... Sometimes I wondered if I was hating the right man. If it was Emery. Yeah, he was there when he knocked me out, but when I came to..." she trails off, eyes vacant as she searches the files in her brain for the images from that wretched night.

"What? When you came to, what?" I coax.

"It was Conner who woke me. He was sweating and..."

"And what, Carina?"

She looks at me. "I didn't realize it until tonight, for obvious reasons. He smelled like sex."

The admission dashes through my brain, bouncing off every fucking synapse as it does.

"Do you think they both..." I can't even get the rest of the question out. The lengths these two used her makes me fucking sick to even think about it. I reach up and turn her face toward me, kissing her, mainly to shake us both out of the icy claws of the past's grasp.

She pulls back. "I don't know, and that's what bothers me. I need to know."

"And then they pay?" I ask.

“What would you do to them?” she asks.

“Me?” I ask.

She nods. “I have a feeling that you’d burn the fucking world for me. It’s scary, I’ll admit. But on the other hand, it’s what I think I’ve needed for a long time. Someone to be there for me. Someone to bring the men who fucked me up to their knees in front of me, covering me in their blood as he avenges me.”

Her words heat me, cock stiffening against her instantly as the images fly through my head like a fucking firework on New Year’s Eve.

“Baby, I’d slaughter thousands for you. I’d walk through fire, coated in the blood of every man you told me to kill, until you felt peace,” I admit, both of us knowing every word is nothing but raw truth.

“Then after we get the truth, they pay.”

“Mmm, that’s my girl. You take the time you need, I’ll be in the shadows, hmm?”

She nods, leaning in and kissing me lightly.

“My umbra guardian,” she mutters.

“Hmm?”

“My shadow guardian.”

My chest fills as I kiss her. No words. There aren’t words I can give to this shattered girl of mine. All I can do is hold the pieces as she builds herself back up bit by bit, and hope in the end, she’ll stand in the shadows with me.

Because fuck she looks good in the darkness.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Emery

“Wes, he’s gone, man,” Conner finally says, tugging Wes off his friend.

Tears are rolling down Wes’ face, heaving breaths emitting from him in droves. My mind can’t wrap around what’s happening. First the girl I’d woken up next to, and now this? Looking over, I spot another girl still lying on the couch, somehow sleeping through all the commotion.

“We have to get her out of here. She can’t wake up to this,” I say absently.

“Good idea,” Conner says, standing and tugging his hair meditatively before he stands and turns toward her. “Help me get her out of here. We’ll call your father once we’re outside.”

I nod, grateful to have something to do, and I move toward the girl. Conner tries to hoist her upper body, but she slumps into him, and he shrieks and jumps backward, dropping her back down onto the couch.

“What? What’s wrong?” I shout, even though I know what’s wrong. She’s gone, died in her sleep likely from the same drugs Declan had ingested.

“What the fuck, man? What the fuck?!” Conner shouts, pacing back and forth as he eyes his feet.

“The drugs...it must’ve been laced...or...” Wes says, rocking back and forth while tugging on his hair to the point of pain as if to ground himself.

Conner grabs his phone out of his pocket, shaking his head as if fully resigning himself to what must happen next.

“What are you doing?” I ask, approaching his left side as his thumb hovers over the last one on his phone’s touchpad to dial the paramedics. Instead of punching it, he backs out and taps on my father’s contact that’s saved in his recent call log.

“What the hell, man? Call the cops! They need help!” I try to snatch the phone from him, but he turns, shrugging out of my hold and heading out the front door.

“Mr. Stanner? We need help...” The door shuts the rest of his conversation out, and I crouch down beside Wes, who’s spiraling into a dark abyss of emotion.

“My life is over,” he sobs.

“No, it’s not. You didn’t do it.” I try to console him, but I can tell he’s long past the point of that. Fuck, we all are. I still don’t even know what the hell happened between me and the girl in the bathroom. I don’t know how I’d passed out, or why she was so beaten and battered.

My insides coil and constrict, stomach bile crawling up my throat like a nightmare refusing to die.

“I was supposed to go to Stanford. This is going to taint my entire life. You don’t understand. Of course, you don’t. You’re a Stanner. You’ll be fine. Daddy will pay your way out of this,” Wes says, standing and punching a wall, his fist going through the drywall and passing in between two studs.

For some reason, I can’t stop looking at the fresh hole in the wall, wondering if it’s a foreshadowing of what’s to come. No matter what I’d done, I won’t be letting my father or his fucking lawyers near me. If I did that to her, I’m turning myself in. I won’t be able to go on like it didn’t happen.

The night had gone from harmless fun to a fucking shitstorm of trouble. Two people are fucking dead, and the way Conner had rushed me out of the bathroom, I’m not all too sure that number won’t rise.

The thought breaks me out of my head. Looking through the window, I see Conner pacing on the porch, still on the

phone. Wes has moved into another room, unable to look at his friend on the floor with foam seeping from his lips.

Moving slowly, I make my way back to the bathroom, covering my mouth as I take in the full scene with a semi-clear mind.

She's as beautiful as the moments before the drugs took full hold of me, but now she's marked. Painted in bruises and cuts, blood emanating from multiple points on her body. I'm sure all of it had come from the struggle. The one I don't recall.

A flash of me punching her in the face flits across my mind, and a sob escapes me.

'What the fuck have I done?'

I know I'll never recover from this.

Tentatively, I drop to my knees, reaching down and moving hair off her face, uncovering more bloodshed, my chest weeping at the damage I'd done. I never knew that a dark demon lived within me capable of such a thing. Even still, faced with what I'd done, I can't wrap my mind around how I'd done this. Me.

'This can't be real. It can't be.'

"I'm so sorry. I don't—I'm so, so sorry," I whimper, letting my head drop in defeat as my tears fall from my chin and land on her. Her chest rises and falls, telling me she's alive. That's something, but it's not enough. It's not fucking enough!

No human deserves what I've done. I'm a fucking monster.

"What are you doing back in here? Come on, your father is on his way. He'll be here any minute." Conner tugs me off the floor, and I go willingly. Cowardly. That's what I am. Because I can't look at her for another moment. Can't face the dark inside me.

When the night air hits me as he drags me onto the porch, I heave it into my chest. My lungs burn from the intrusion, screaming at me at how cold it is. But the pain of it is what I deserve.

Two people won't leave here and get to breathe another breath.

"I should've stayed home," I mutter absently.

"You and me both," Conner mutters, leaning over the railing and breathing out in annoyance.

Rage builds in me and then erupts as I stomp forward and grab him by the front of his shirt. "Do you think this is a game? Two people are dead, and one..." I trail off, eyes darting downward, catching what looks like blood spatter on his shirt momentarily before he pushes me off him.

"Fuck you! Of course, I don't think this is funny."

"Boys! Get inside. We don't need to tell the entire neighborhood we're here, do we?" Father says as he bounds up the steps. He's in a full suit, like he came straight from work.

We both seethe, looking at one another with too much to say and no time to say it. Complying, we follow Father inside and shut the door behind us.

Moaning wakes me.

Flashes of Carina naked and straddling my attacker blur through the edges of oblivion. My head pounds, temples throbbing from what she'd done to me. It was well deserved. The memories cause emotion to choke me. But they're too strong, and before I know it, my eyes close.

"You're going to go home," Father tells me, and I know better than to protest. "Conner, you're with me."

Conner looks fearful. But not enough for what's happened here. Something about him is off. Too calm in the face of all the destruction. His hands at his sides are steady, his eyes fixed on my father, awaiting his orders like a good little soldier, and I can't help but fixate on his every move.

My mouth opens, but Father's stern glare has me shutting it promptly.

When he moves into the bathroom to look at the girl, he comes back out, nodding to himself as he plans to clean up a mess we've made.

"What do I do, Mr. Stanner?" Wes asks, voice shaking with fear.

"You stay with me. We will handle this, don't you worry, alright?" Father's hand comes down on Wes' shoulder, and it makes my insides wither with rot. Something about the action is disingenuous. Something isn't right, and my gut knows it.

But I want out of here so badly I can taste it. I can't look at the bodies any longer. I can't think about the girl and her bruises. When I close my eyes to fight tears, the images of me hitting her roll through my brain.

"Hey Edward, we're going to need you. No, we're going to need guidance and possible clean up. I'll need your best man on this," Father's voice carries over to me.

'Who the fuck is Edward?'

Before I can ask, Conner tugs on my arm. "Come on, let's get a move on. Go back home with your father's driver."

"Why are you staying? Why does he need you?" My eyes catch on the blood drops on his shirt, and he registers my stare.

Lifting my chin, he looks deep into my eyes. "Men like you don't need to ask too many questions."

My brows furrow. "Why not?"

'And what do men like you need to do, Conner?'

I feel like a child being sent to his room, but I can't get my lips to form accusations to sling at Conner because my brain is still reeling in confusion and shock.

"Because there will always be men like me who will clean up the messes you make."

I open my mouth to deny his statement, but no words form on my tongue. Because he's not wrong, is he? I'd made such a fucking mess of this night and my life. Because this is going to stick with me. Drugs and alcohol or not. This is going to be the defining moment in my life, I know it.

Father and Conner want me to bury it, sweep it under a rug and move on. But how can I? This is how powerful men turn to monsters. A dark cloud whirls in my chest, and I know I'll never be the same. The stain of tonight will forever change me.

My eyes open, tears spilling down my cheeks as I moan and thrash my head back and forth, eyes meeting those of my attacker as he mumbles something clearly meant for me to hear as Carina's gaze swings toward me.

She pulls off his lap, turning and confronting me with the body I've seen in my nightmarish memories. But now it's nourished and full. I know I shouldn't look. Not knowing what I know now. It's not right. It's not okay. But I can't tear my eyes off her. She's prowling toward me with confidence and power that I'm in awe of.

She bends over me, hands resting on my arms and squeezing. "Do you see how good it can be when someone *willingly* gives into someone else? Do you see how good it could've been? That's what happens when you don't take, Emery. When you're not a monster." Her words sear into my brain. They'll haunt me for the rest of my life. As that night will. As will the image of her perfect body, healed from my damage.

Turning, she tells the fucker who'd taken me in her honor to take her home.

She's done what I thought she wouldn't. She's leaving me here. She's leaving me with him. I'd thought, surely, she'd see me tied up here and immediately go and get help or try to set me free. Instead, she looks reborn. Unbound from the past and all its pain.

“Come, little one,” he tells her after she’s dressed.

My chest fills with dread with her being so near someone I can feel has the same inky depths I do. He’s a foe, and she needs to stay clear of him, but who’s going to tell her? Me? I can barely get a coherent sentence out of my mouth. Even now, drool is dribbling from the corners of my lips. The door to the warehouse shuts, and I let out a whimper.

“Help!” I manage, but it’s not loud enough for anyone to hear. My body is so tired, and yet electrified at the same time. And with good right. She’d done a number on my nervous system with that fucking machine. But she deserved her revenge and then some.

My body looks nothing like hers had.

She could’ve killed me, and it wouldn’t have been enough.

As my head bobs, consciousness waning. I hear the door rattling. The same chain-like noise sounds as when my attacker comes and goes, and I know it’s not been enough time for him to be back from taking her home. I wonder if they’ve come back. Come back for more.

A sob gets stuck in my throat. I won’t let it out because I know I deserve this. Leaving her battered on that floor had broken my mind, and now that the memory of its back, I need to be punished, and she deserves her revenge.

“Hello?” I manage, voice gravel-filled and slurred as it grates across my vocal cords.

“There you are. Fuck, they’ve done a number on you, hmm? Do you know who had you?” the man asks. My mind works to figure out who the fuck he is.

“Who are you?” I slur, head feeling heavy and bobbing again.

“That’s not important. I’m paid a lot of money to keep my eyes on you. That’s all you need to know.”

He looks familiar. But my brain is too fried to place his face.

“You’re my guardian angel?” I ask, not knowing where the question had come from.

“In essence. Let’s get you out of these. Hold still.”

I look down at the number of chains that hold me to the metal chair and snicker. “I can’t do anything other than hold still.”

The man opens a lid to a massive toolbox, and I take him in. He’s my size and muscular. A gold wedding band wraps around his ring finger and it catches my eye as he shuffles tools this way and that, finally landing on what looks like massive bolt cutters.

“Who did you say pays you?” I ask, recalling doing the accounting after Father passed and seeing nothing that I deemed ominous on the accounts.

He smirks, twirling the bolt cutter. “I didn’t say, and I won’t. So, don’t ask again.”

I shake my head. “What the fuck.”

“Men like you need people like me...” he trails off as my eyes snap up to his abruptly as his words echo what Conner said that night. I wonder if that night is going to haunt me constantly now that the memories are back.

As he sets on busting through the layers of chains holding me down, my mind spins, remnants of electricity and its heated touch left over and trying to tug me back under. There’s nothing I’ve ever wanted less in my life than to close my eyes again. Logic tells me I’ll have to sleep sometime. But I know if I drown my brain with enough whiskey, I’ll be able to starve off the flood gates that seem to have opened in my head.

“Fuck they used a lot of chain. Who had you? What did they want?”

The question takes me aback. He’d been speaking so plainly before as if he knew who had me. But now I know he hadn’t a clue.

“I thought you knew,” I say.

He shakes his head. “I have a tracker in your wallet, I’ve been watching the place for a few hours now, waiting for that car to leave before I came in to get you. I got the plates, though. I’ll run them when I get back to my office.”

“And what is it you do?” I ask.

He smirks again, dropping the last of the chains to the ground and wiping his brow. “Oh, you know, a little of this, a little of that.”

I rub my wrists absently, looking down at the state of my clothes and body. Everything aches now that I’m moving. It’s as if a freight train ran over me.

“Well, whatever it is you do, I’m thankful.”

“So?”

I raise my eyebrows in question.

“What did they want?”

“Answers,” I say, not giving away anything else. I don’t know who he is. What I do know, however, is the lengths people will go to get to where I am. My father left me a legacy, one that’s worth billions. Anyone would sell their souls to be where I am. I’ll give him no more than he’s given me.

He nods, chuckling as he packs up his tools. “Fair enough. Well, at least you know now in a time of need, say nothing, I’m on my way.”

“I’m thankful, I am. But I do wonder who the hell is paying you to bug my wallet, I’ll admit.”

He shrugs. “Not my problem. I’m paid handsomely to do a job, and I do it to the best of my ability. Although not my finest hour with the time it took me to get you extracted. My daughter had a little league game, and I didn’t grab my work phone. It would’ve pinged me the moment you’d been off your normal route too long. That’s on me.”

I watch him move through the motions of packing his tools up as if he’s repaired my hot water heater after a winter blizzard. He strikes me as an odd character. He’s unchained

me from a fucking chair in a warehouse, and he's acting like it's any other fucking Tuesday.

"I'll give you a ride back to your place, hmm?" he asks.

"I mean, I'm not going to take an uber looking like this," I admit.

He steps in between my legs and heaves me up. "Can you walk, or you need to lean on me?"

My knees instantly try to buckle under my weight. "I'll need some help apparently."

"They must've really wanted those answers, you're in rough shape," he acknowledges.

Yeah, she did.

When he helps me into an SUV, I note the toys in the back seat. What kind of man randomly breaks from his family-filled evening to come and save a man, only to go back home and tuck his kids in?

In the situation I'm in, though, I don't have any room to question it.

The ride back to my building is silent.

He helps me into the building, using the back elevator to get me into my penthouse, away from prying eyes.

"Don't worry, no one knows you were missing. Of course, those closest to you do. But that's an internal matter, I'm sure."

As I stand on my own finally in my living room, I look around at the sheer audacity I have as a fucking human to live as I do. All the while she's been living in fucking limbo, dealing with the shattered mess we'd left her in on the floor. Wondering what Conner knows is now going to be my new obsession until I can get him here.

Now that my memories are back, he's the first one I'm going to approach. But I don't know how much he'll tell me, being that he's always loved this life more than I have.

"You going to manage on your own, Mr. Stanner?"

“Yeah, I’ll be alright. Thank you.”

My door closes as he leaves, and I drop to my knees, letting the entire depth of emotions sting through me like a swarm of angry wasps, pecking my insides as I scream in agony from the pain of reliving that night and what I’d done.

Now, I know I’m a fucking monster.

But what I do from here is what matters.

At least I hope.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Carina

The sinking, guilty feeling still hasn't left me for what I'd done to Emery in the warehouse. What I'd let happen to him, what my hands had done. I can't deny I feel reborn, as Gage told me he'd help me feel.

"You did nothing wrong," Gage tells me, leaning over the side of the tub and brushing my wet hair off my shoulder. I'd told him I needed time. I'd all but condemned him back to the shadows. But as soon as I was out of the car, looking up at the daunting Victorian house looming in the darkness, I couldn't go in alone. He'd known in an instant and turned his car off, taking me inside and drawing me a bath and settling me into it. He's become someone who's slowly helping me rebuild, piece by piece. But I have to break the finely built barrier of lies and comfort I'd built around myself. And I think I'm now realizing it.

"Then why does it feel like this? It's like a vise has my chest. I can't breathe past it...I can't..."

He turns my face, fingers gripping my chin snugly. "You were owed tonight. Now, we go back and see what he remembers. Well, I will. I don't want you to have to hear it from him."

"I don't know if I can...Do I want to know? It's all I've wanted this entire time. To know. Now, I know someone died that night. I lived, Gage. It could've been me who died. It could've been me they buried."

He shakes his head, rage trickling across his face. “You were buried, Carina. Can’t you see that? They buried you the second they realized you couldn’t remember anything. They paid you off like they would any of their other problems.”

He’s right. I know he’s right. But my mind doesn’t want to admit it. They’d buried me so deeply; I never even questioned it. Not until small little flashes of his face started to come back after seeing him on a news conference. That’s when I was obsessed with revenge, answers, anything to give me closure. Anything to make me less afraid of the fucking world outside of my house.

But what I’d done tonight wasn’t me. Was it? It means I’m capable of the same violence as Emery was that night at Westpoint House. And I don’t like the sticky, heavy feeling it’s left behind.

“He’s going to tell us what he did. You’re going to find out, and then you can choose how to go forward,” Gage says, breaking me out of my spiraling panic.

“What do you mean? Choose to go forward, how?” My words don’t even sound like I’ve spoken to them, it’s as if I’m on autopilot, existing through the tough shit to get to something better. Something akin to my old life.

“Well,” he says, “when we figure out the extent of what he did, what he buried, you’ll have to decide what to do with him.”

Gage’s phone rings, causing me to jump and the water to splash at my movement.

“I’m sorry, I have to take this,” he says, moving out of the room.

“Deal with him?” I whisper to myself. Does he mean kill him? I could never end someone’s life. Yeah, what he did was horrible, but I’m not an executioner by any means. My stomach rolls, and all of the sudden, the bath feels too hot.

Pulling the plug, I step out and wrap myself in a towel, moving out of my ensuite and catching loud shouts from

Gage's phone call he'd taken into the hall. Moving across the floor, I press my ear to the door.

"What do you mean he's gone? I left him chained, of course!" Gage says, and my heart sinks, fear rushing through me. My body becomes like a brick of ice, seizing with terror as I recall all I've already done to my boss, done in front of my boss, and now he's freed from his bindings. The ethical and moral lines I'd crossed alone are enough to get me fired and arrested in one fell swoop.

I can't listen to anything else, moving back to my bed, I plop down and try to starve off the panic racing through me.

He's going to come for me.

And there's no reason he couldn't. He has resources no ordinary man does. He has the means to ruin me for what I'd done. And if I were him, that's what I'd do. Self-preservation gets the better of us. He's going to re-bury me, and this time I'm not certain there won't be actual dirt involved.

"Sorry," Gage says, moving back into the room. Seeing me on the edge of the bed heaving massive breaths, he drops to his knees and lifts my face. "Hey, it's okay. You're going to be fine!" he tells me.

"The things I did to him...I'm like him. I'm a monster, and now he's free! He's going to come for me, Gage." My hands are shaking, and I grasp them together to stop them before Gage drops his touch over them.

He shakes his head. "He's not coming for you. And what you did was warranted. Shit, more than what you did was warranted. He got off easy if you ask me, and I know he's going to feel the same fucking way, but it's going to be short-lived, you're right. I'm going to find out who helped him escape, and then he's going to be mine."

Shaking my head, I stammer, "We can't. We need to leave it. I'm fine."

"No, little one, you're not." His hand caresses my cheek lightly, his touch calming me. "You will be, though. I'm going

to watch you take back what he took. Just as I did tonight. And fuck, it was beautiful.”

My chest heats, body thrumming to life under his touch and his words. I’m fucked up, and I know I am. I shouldn’t be feeling this way for a man who’s clearly a psychopath, but all I want is him to lay me back on my bed and make me forget Emery. Make me forget that his touch ever existed.

“You were magnificent, as I told you. You will be okay. But you’re not right now, are you?” he asks, brushing his thumb over my open mouth as a moan expels onto his rough flesh.

I shake my head. “No. I’m not.”

He nods. “But you will be, won’t you, little phoenix?”

He leans forward, his breath fanning across my lips, calling a depraved side of me to the surface like blood in the water calls a shark. My eyes shut. “I will be.”

“That’s right,” he whispers, his lips a hair’s breadth from touching mine.

My breathing is ragged at best, and I can think of nothing else but him. Of his searing kiss. Of his body moving inside mine.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask.

“Because you’re mine, Carina. And I protect what’s mine. I wasn’t there then, but I’m here now, and he’s going to fucking pay.”

A whimper escapes me at his admission, his words breaking my resolve as tears escape my eyes and betray down my cheeks.

“This flesh will never know another bruise. You’ll never again be broken. Not as long as I draw breath.” His words filter through my ears, waking every nerve in my body as they move through my brain.

“Where have you been? I needed you for so long,” I sob, opening my eyes to see pain slip through his eyes like the shadows he loves to hide in.

“Wandering an empty, dull world, looking for you. I’ve always felt my life’s purpose was beyond the next job, around the next corner...” he trails off, words failing him.

I smile, wiping some of my messy tears off my face. “And then I spilled coffee on you, and you said there it is?” I ask, a laugh bubbling out of me.

He smiles warmly, and it’s the first time I’ve seen something overtake the danger that resides on the surface of his face. And it’s beautiful. “Exactly.”

“I know you said you need time,” he says, sighing and sitting back on his haunches and changing the moment. “But I don’t know if I can go back to the shadows, Carina. If you want me to, I’ll do as you ask, of course. I don’t know why, but I will.” His smirk is something I won’t soon forget. It’s filled with his reluctant admission of how much power I have over him, and I know he’s only given it for that reason. His mission seems to be to give something back to me.

“Too much has happened tonight, Gage. I can’t think anymore.” Dropping the towel, exposing myself to him, I crawl on my bed and slip under the covers. “Stay with me?”

He stands, contemplating. I’m sure it’s strange for him to think about being *in* the bed and not standing *over* it for once.

“You can smell my panties if you want,” I tease, pointing toward the hamper.

His jaw ticks as he tries to fight a smile. “That’s how it is, hmm? You’re already so comfortable with my stalking you that you can joke?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be okay with the idea that you were standing over my bed. Although...” I trail off, rubbing my finger over my lips as I contemplate how to say what I want to say.

He kicks his boots off, slipping onto the bed and lying next to me over the covers. “What? Tell me.”

“You make me feel safe; seen. Knowing it was you standing over me as I slept soundly isn’t all that bad,” I admit, watching his face as shock passes across it.

“Oh yeah?” he asks.

I nod slowly. “Well, it’s fucking weird, I’ll give you that. But I think you probably already know that. But the fact that I was safe from men like Emery because you were keeping me safe is something I don’t think I’ve had before, even unknowingly.”

“I’ll always keep you safe, little one. Even if you send me back to the shadows.”

He tugs me into him, sniffing my hair deeply.

“Sure you don’t want to sniff my panties?” I tease, and he slinks his hand under the covers, gripping my pussy firmly in his hand.

“If I want to sniff anything, I’ll bury my face right here,” he growls into my ear, and I can’t fight the urge to arch into him. A groan leaves my mouth.

My body is already sore from the adrenaline, sex, and electricity I’d used on us both. But one touch from him, and I’m coming alive again, on the verge of begging for him to do as he’s threatened. The idea of him burying his face in my center is already heating my body.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you, little one? For your stalker to lick this greedy pussy until you come all over his face?” he taunts, nipping my jawline, and I don’t know who I am. I open my legs, letting his touch slip through my folds.

“Yes! Please,” I beg on a whimper.

His dark chuckle only adds to the anticipation of what he’ll do next.

“Well, too bad I think you need to rest. You’ve had quite the night, haven’t you?”

Dragging his hand over my clit, he trails my wetness up my stomach, my pussy throbbing and all but quaking at the loss of his touch.

“I thought you were here for me and all my needs?” I ask breathlessly, turning my face toward his.

“Mhm, and what is it my little Carina needs?” His fingers swirl around my aching nipples, my back bridging to meet his touch.

“Fuck,” I whisper. “Anything you’ll give me.”

His games are too much for even him. Grabbing the back of my head, he tugs me to him, ravaging my mouth with a kiss that could burn the world he’s so desperately trying to protect me from.

He’s been watching me, taking care of me from afar. Slinking through the shadows and caring for me from a distance, as he knew I needed. Until it became necessary to come close and risk the danger that came with me knowing about him.

“Before,” I breathe as he moves his tongue to my neck, flicking blinding circles on my pulse point.

“Mmm?” he grumbles, moving over top of me, resting his massive body between my open legs.

“Before, you said you wanted to... That you wanted to see me bleeding...” I recount, eyes rolling back as his fingers slip over my clit as he pulls back to watch my reaction, as if it fuels him somehow.

“I said that, yes. I’ve thought of you many times with my knife marks, Carina. I’ll not deny it. But I’ll do nothing to hurt you. Knowing now what I do, thinking of you covered in blood has lost some of its luster.”

My mouth has dropped open, fighting to keep the extent of the noises I want to release inside. My brain tries to work out his words.

“But... Oh, fuck,” my words trail off as he slips a finger inside me.

“Damn, you’re such a dirty girl. Look how wet you are for your stalker. And thinking about my blade, too? You’re going to be the death of me, aren’t you, little one?” he groans, adding another finger and twisting as he pumps in and out of me slowly.

My hands find my hair, slipping through and tugging it to add an element that'll ground me to reality.

“God, Gage!”

My hips thrust in time with him. It's not lost on me. He's trying to distract me from my line of questioning. But he's wrong if he thinks I'm going to give up. The moment he'd told me about his depraved ideas, I'd thought them disgusting, fucked up. But after what we did in the warehouse, thinking about his blade skewering my flesh while he fucks me makes my blood boil in my veins.

When he removes his fingers, I whine like a petulant child, and he smiles, reaching behind his back, his weight on his arm next to my body.

“Is this what you want, little one?” he asks me, his knife shimmering in the small amount of light filtering into the room from the hallway.

“I—I don't know...”

In an instant, I know I've fucked up. The tip of his blade meets my neck, nipping my flesh and causing me to gasp.

“No fucking lies. You know I hate them.”

I nod. “I'm sorry.”

He smirks, and I know what his words are going to be. “Are you?”

“It's what I want,” I admit.

“Why?” he asks.

“Something about the danger you pose, paired with the safety I feel with you. I don't know... It makes me feel—”

“Powerful,” he whispers, leaning down and kissing my lips lightly.

“Yes, powerful. I wanted to try. Ever since the night you said it...it stuck with me.”

Something crosses his face, and he gets off the bed. My mind races with confusion, trying to discern if I've upset him

by asking for it, by admitting my thoughts.

“Run,” he says.

I slip out of bed. “What?”

“Run from me, little one. Don’t let me catch you. If I do, you’ll fucking regret it,” he snarls, knife pointed toward the door.

It’s much like the night he didn’t trust himself not to touch me. The night he held my throat in this very room and looked at me like I was a fucking priceless treasure.

Laughing, I bolt from the room, body moving as I move through my house, completely nude and unabashed. The day had taken such a strange turn, me ending up in a warehouse with my stalker and my attacker. Now, it seems it’s time to let it go and have fun. Fuck if I don’t deserve it.

I skid to a stop in the living room, knowing right where to go. The closet closes lightly as I slip into the small crawlspace, knowing I’ll only stay here long enough to taunt the fuck out of him.

His footfalls are loud, and floorboards creak as he looks for me.

“Carina! You’d better be hidden well. The things I’ll do to that body if I find it. I can’t be held accountable. I’m a dangerous man, after all.”

I cover my mouth as I giggle.

Thinking only twice about it, I reach down and open the small door so when he sees it open, he’ll be able to crawl in, and then I move through the dark hidden hallway, pressing up against the wall in the shadows.

“Now, what do we have here,” he says, as I hear him clamber through the small opening.

It’s hard work to keep silent.

My body is throbbing, begging to be touched. It seems at some point in my life, I’d become something of an adrenaline junkie. Every time he’s near me, the excitement is more than

tangible. Breaths come in waves as his movement draws closer.

“Is that you, my little Carina?” he asks, and my pulse batters my throat as my pussy tightens in waves in anticipation of what he’ll do when he finds me.

A small part of me wonders if there was truth in his threat.

A pinch crosses my throat, and I drop my head back, letting go of the breaths I’d been scaling back the best I could.

“There you are, sweet girl,” he says, and my chest floods with blooming feelings. So many. Too many to unpack at this moment. Something about him makes me feel again. Feel more than fear. It’s been so long since fear wasn’t something that was ever present.

“Here I am, my voyeur,” I whisper as he presses his blade in, my skin screaming at me to push him off. But as the pricking melds with the drumming of my pulse, my pussy convulses in foreshadowing of events to come.

“You didn’t hide very well. It’s like you wanted to be found,” he assesses.

“It did seem that way, didn’t it?” I ask.

His blade clinks as he removes it from my throat and drops it to the floor.

Part of me is sad to hear it, and another part takes a deep breath.

“It’s too dark in here to watch you bleed for me. But one day, when I think you’re ready, your blood is going to run down this beautiful flesh for me,” he says. “But don’t think you’re off the hook.”

Before his words register, he lifts me, slamming my back against the wall as he reaches between us, releasing his cock and finding my center expertly.

He hovers under me, so close to entering me, driving me wild with need.

“Is this okay for you? Please tell me that this is okay, Carina. I don’t know how much more self-control I have left in me...”

“Please! It’s okay, I’m okay. I need you,” I beg.

Later, I’m going to shed a tear of appreciation over the fact that he had any self-control at all to stop and make sure I was okay. But right now, all I can think about is feeling him again. Just he and I, in the dark, holding onto one another like we’re the last two beings on the planet, breathing with one another, for one another.

He’s not gentle when he slams inside me, fucking me. Both of us crash our mouths together at the same time, my hands finding his hair as he squeezes my ass, lifting me up and down with each stroke. It won’t be long for my body right back to the edge he’d had me on upstairs in the bedroom. I can already feel climax begging for release.

“God, you feel like you were made for me,” he says, breaking our kiss and moaning languidly. The sound tugs my body even higher than it had been.

“Who’s to say I wasn’t?” I moan.

“The mouse made for the snake to eat?” he asks gruffly, moving in and out of me, and making the edges of darkness prickle with little dots dancing in my vision.

“Such is the circle of life,” I cry, edging too near something I never want to end.

As if he knows, he leans in and bites my neck, giving me the same searing grip that his blade had before he dropped it. “Come for me, little phoenix. This will never end; you and I will never end. You. Are. Mine.” He punctuates every word by pressing inside me deeply.

I break, shattering around him like glass hitting the ground, small visages of me becoming something different within his hold.

“That’s it, sweet girl. Fuck, you’re going to make me come...” he groans as he pushes deeper, emptying his pulsing orgasm inside me.

“Holy fuck,” I breathe, trying to catch any semblance of my sanity as I float high amongst the clouds of pleasure.

“Was I too rough? Are you okay?” he asks.

I shake my head, forgetting he can't see me well. “No, I'm fine. God, I'm so good. I never thought I'd have this. It feels ___”

He laughs. “Yeah, there aren't words for how this feels. I agree.”

He lets me down, steadying me as he picks up his blade. “Is this where you wandered to the last time I told you to run?” he asks.

“Yeah, I found it when I was hiding in the closet. I never knew it was here. It came in handy, though, when a madman was in my house.”

He scoffs. “Madman I might be, but a threat to you? Never.”

“Well, if I'd have known what would happen to me when I was found, I would have hidden in plain sight,” I tell him, ducking out of the small door and moving into the living room.

His face is apprehensive when he exits behind me.

“What?”

“Well, two times tonight we haven't been so careful. We should discuss it probably, right?” he asks me, face reddening.

The things this man has done to me and that's what makes his face red?

“Well, I'm on birth control. It's in my arm,” I reply, moving forward and pressing his hand against the implant in my upper arm.

He nods absently. “Coming inside you is my favorite thing in the world to do, Carina. It's addictive.”

“Don't get me going again, stalker. I need sleep.”

He laughs as I tug him toward the bathroom to shower.

I don't know what the fuck my life will turn into in the next few weeks, or even hours, but I know that something about him is right. Something about us is right. And I don't care what logical shit my brain tries to spin up in retort.

My stalker is my soulmate.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Gage

Sneaking out of Carina's bed isn't my finest hour, but the incessant buzzing of my phone in my pants on the floor is driving me insane. Closing the door silently behind me, I move into the hall. Dawn is cresting, and I know Trevor wouldn't be calling unless it was something important.

"What, Trevor?" I whisper-yell into the receiver.

"I got some information for you about the girl you texted me about. Oh, and that Emery Stanner guy? Yeah, his father's a genuine piece of work. Can you meet?"

Sighing, I look back at the door, as if I can see through the wood to gaze on my favorite thing to watch. But alas, I can't.

"Yeah, let me get my clothes on. Coffee shop in thirty?" I ask.

"Mhm, that works. I'll be there in ten, but I'll order your latte and have it waiting. Some of this shit is wild. I don't know what you're mixed up in, man, but you need to be careful. And why are you whispering?"

I roll my eyes. "Mind your business."

"Is there a woman with you? Did you finally get a girlfriend? Fuck, man, it's about time!"

Hanging up the phone, I can't help the smile that tugs my lips upward. The shit that's happened between Carina and me is fucked up. I'll admit that. But it's the best couple of days I've ever had in my life. Being someone with a checkered past

of my own means I draw in like-minded people like bugs to a light.

Curiosity is building in me, making my heart race with anxiety to get to the coffee shop to find out what he found. Trevor can hack any system and find anything on anyone. I swear he could find dirt on the Pope.

I slip into my clothes and a groggy moan comes from Carina as she rolls over. Tigger prances in front of me, eyeing me as if he's judging my being here in the daytime as I zip my pants.

Don't judge me. You sleep with her all the time.

He turns his furry head and pounces onto the bed, prodding Carina with a paw to wake her for his breakfast.

"Tigger, go away!" she groans, shoving him off without even opening her eyes.

This is a part of her day I'm not privy to.

A car door slams, and I look out the window as Detective Dickhead rounds his patrol car. He opens his trunk and grabs his bag. When he turns and looks at the house, I don't back away from the window. Instead, I let my gaze bore into him, hoping he can see me, hoping he can sense that he needs to stay the fuck away from what's mine.

"Gage?" Carina whispers, the blankets shuffling as she crawls down the bed toward me.

And like that, detective shithead is forgotten, and I'm lured right back into the trap of the spider who wants to devour me whole.

"Good morning," I tell her, leaning down and capturing her lips. The kiss is brief but enough to tell each other how much we enjoyed last night.

Fuck, there aren't words to describe fucking her in a corner of the house only we two know about. She'd wanted me to cut her, and I'd wanted to. Shit, it was the forefront of everything I could think about. But flashes of everything I'd learned about

her in those twenty-four hours beforehand stopped me. I never want her to view me like she does him.

No matter how sick and twisted the shit I want to do to her is, I won't. Unless I'm certain it's what she wants. I can never hurt her. She's slowly becoming the other dark part of my soul. The part I was born without.

"Why are you dressed?" she asks, sitting up on her haunches and eyeing me warily. Her face says it all. She thinks I'm leaving after I got what I wanted. Which couldn't be further from the truth. But what I am doing isn't very admirable. I'm going to find out information on her and Emery, and I'm not going to tell her until I think it's pertinent. I know how to do this This is my job.

"I've got to meet my business partner this morning. Work," I tell her.

She eyes me. "You've never told me what you do."

I nod. "You're right. I haven't."

She rolls her eyes, getting back in the bed and covering up. "How are we to become something if you don't let me in?"

My chest all but seizes, heart stopping completely. Sure, we'd fucked around, we had a string of amazing moments, but in my mind, she'd never be with someone like me. Ever.

Suddenly, I'm wracked with urges to climb back in bed and say fuck the world, lie next to her an open myself raw and let her see every fucking inch of me, scars, and all. But I don't have time.

"Are we going to? Become something?" I ask, boring my eyes down into hers and waiting for her truth to shine through her features.

But it doesn't. "Gage, if that is your real name..." *Ouch*. "I really want this to go somewhere, but I can't be with someone who hides anything from me. I need to be with you a hundred percent or not at all. I've never felt the things I feel when I'm with you. You make me feel...alive."

I sigh, knowing that's far from love or emotional entanglement. "Yes, but what about when that wears off?"

She laughs awkwardly. "This is really heavy shit for first thing in the morning."

I nod. "Well, I'm an intense man, little one."

"I gathered that," she agrees.

"Listen, I have a work thing. We will pick this up, yeah?" I ask, leaning over the edge of the bed and kissing her forehead lightly, lingering to take her scent in. Her usual lemon verbena wafts up my nose, mixed with my own rustic scent. I can't say that I don't fucking love it on her.

I marked her as mine last night, but something still feels disjointed between us.

"I'll see you later?" she asks.

"I'm sure I can find a moment for you." I smirk wickedly as she slaps my arm playfully. It's the most unguarded I've seen her with me.

"I'll feed Tigger so you can get some more sleep. I know you're tired," I tell her on my way out the door.

She yawns and it carries down to my ears as I hit the first steps. "Thanks, babe."

Stopping on the landing, I look back up to the door. It's not what she called me, it's the easy, nonchalant way she'd said it. As if it was the simplest word in the world to utter.

Fuck, I'm in deep.

After feeding Tigger and getting to the coffee shop, I plop down in front of Trevor, who I notice is on edge. His leg is constantly shaking as he looks around the room.

"What is the deal with you? Too much caffeine, already?"

"What have you gotten into with this Emery guy?"

I eye him, shrugging. "Nothing I can't handle. Why?"

"Well, to start off, your father and his are in business together. Well, suffice it to say, Emery Stanner is in business

with your father because his father is dead, and he took over that company.”

The blood leaves my body, ringing pounding through my ears.

“What do you mean?” I ask, my body feeling like I’m floating.

“Okay, there was an incident, and of course your father loves to keep records on his clients for blackmail if needed. A cleanup crew was sent to a house in Rochester called Westpoint House—old historical house, the significance doesn’t matter. Your father sent the crew, but also had them take evidence from the scene...”

“As he usually does,” I say, cutting him off.

He nods. “Anyhow, there were two bodies in the house, three if you count a female in the bathroom. Your father took IDs off all three. Declan Smith, Carina Eder, and Amanda Eder. Two of the bodies were removed and disposed of. Your father notes that upon going to get the third, it was gone. The crew looked high and low for Carina, but she’d escaped somehow. The place was burned, and the authorities were paid off to look the other way. Case closed. Until you asked me to look into this, and now you’re poking around in the case and I’m not too sure you should be because your father is fucking scary.”

Don’t I know it, Trevor.

Sighing, I try to make sense of all the news. “Wait, you said Amanda Eder?”

Trevor nods. “Carina Eder’s sister was in that house, G. She died of a massive overdose on rohypnol and about three other drugs found in her system according to the blood samples your father had pulled before burying them with fire.”

“What the fuck?” I say absently, scrubbing my face and letting my eyes graze over two kids fighting over a cake pop at a table across the café. Such a mundane, everyday moment they’re having, while my world is becoming increasingly more complicated.

One instance, one run-in with Carina in an outdoor market had spun my life out of control. Spun me right back in the path of my father.

“So, my father covered up her rape and their deaths?” I ask.

Trevor nods.

“Not only that, G. You started that fire.”

And like that, my world tips upside down and darkens. “Excuse me?”

“You were there. That’s the first time he used you. Remember the old Victorian he wanted you to burn in Rochester? It was the only job he let you go on, your first job,” Trevor tells me.

Flashes of that night come meandering back through my brain. My father letting me out of the backseat of an SUV right as someone else left, telling me what he wanted me to do after months of me begging to be let into the family business. He’d finally caved, and my first job almost killed Carina. The only woman I’ve ever fucking felt anything for. And when she finds out I’m involved in this, it’s going to crush her. It’s going to ruin any chance I had with her.

I was an accessory to the worst night of her fucking life.

My head drops into my hands. “Did you find anything else on Stanner?”

“Not too much, but I’m still digging. He’s a tough one to crack. We’re not the only company in his employ to keep his dirty laundry hidden. But what I found odd was that one Wes Black is absent from the reports. Your father noted he was there when he showed up, but I can’t find any record of him after that night. Anywhere.”

“I stopped dealing with cases like this. This is beyond what should be fixed. He couldn’t turn a fucking job down. These scumbags should be rotting in prison, not living it up in their penthouses. What about the other creep who was there, Conner Whitfield?”

“I’ll check on him and report back to you. I’ve been focused on Emery and Carina, like you asked.”

I wave him off. “Of course, of course. You’ve done what I asked. Just do me a favor, don’t leave a trail. I don’t need my father knowing I’m sniffing around one of his cases.”

Trevor nods. “The Bancroft’s are having an issue with their landlord sniffing around again. We’re going to need to step into that situation. Did you get my e-mail?”

“Yeah, I’ll look into it.”

One thing I love about Trevor is that he doesn’t dwell on what I ask him to do. Just like that, we were back to two normal guys, sipping our coffees and discussing work. But this news forever changed one of us. If I’d have gone by the house, maybe it would’ve sparked my memory, forced me to recall the night Father had me burn the inside the best I could with gasoline. But I hadn’t. I’d left and gone back home... How the fuck am I going to tell her?

How the fuck is she going to react?



BACK IN THE SHADOWS.

Carina’s in her living room, on her couch, watching Netflix with a bowl of popcorn. Randomly, she’ll look out the window, and I’ll slip back into the pine’s dark outline, hiding from view.

This fucking mess of a situation has all been brought on by me falling for the girl beyond the windowpane. I don’t know how to fix it, and it’s what I do for a fucking living. Sure, my side of the business had gone softer than my father would ever be, but I still fix everyone’s issues. Yet, I can’t find a way out for myself.

I can't be like them; that I know. I don't want to be another lying piece of shit in her life that can't tell her the truth.

Sighing, I trudge up the steps and ring the doorbell. The television pauses on the other side of the door before her shadow moves through the room, casting a silhouette across the very tree I'd been hiding near for hours in the cold.

"Oh, finally, I was getting worried." She ushers me inside, and I pause near the back of the couch. Piglet hisses at me, as if he can sense the shift in my energy through some empathetic power he has.

"Don't mind him. He's an ass sometimes. Shoo, shoo," she tells the cat, and he gives me one more backward, threatening glance before hopping off the couch and heading toward the cat tree.

Carina steps into me, tentatively putting her arms inside my coat and around me. Sensing something's wrong, she pulls back and looks at me. "What's the matter?"

"We need to talk," I say, feeling the most unlike myself I've ever felt. It's like my entire personality has come unplugged for what I need to get through in the next few moments.

"That's never a good statement to lead with, don't you know that?" She laughs but leads me to the couch and waves toward the seat next to her as she sits.

"My meeting today was... It was—"

"Gage," she says, grabbing my hand. "Whatever it is, I'll listen and try to keep my mind as open as I can because you're being honest with me, and that's something I respect people for."

I nod, praying inwardly that she's telling the truth, but knowing at the same time, this is going to be hard for her to wrap her head around.

"I'm a fixer," I start.

"Like a handyman?" she asks. I know what she's doing, she's trying to break the tension in the room, and I adore her

for it, but it's not going to work.

“No.” I sigh. “I’m a fixer for the rich. It’s a business I grew up in. It’s been passed down for generations. Where there’s a rich man fucking up, there’s someone behind him with a vacuum cleaner,” I explain.

Her face reddens. She’s smart as a fucking whip, I’m sure she knows where this is headed, or so she thinks.

“My first job was in Rochester, your hometown.” She drops my hand back onto my lap, moving backward, and it stings me like I’ve been stabbed with a fucking icepick.

“I was nineteen years old, and I’d been begging my father to let me start working at the family business. What I didn’t know, however, was how fucking dark and depraved he’d let the business become under his management. He’d been cleaning far dirtier messes than my grandfather ever did, and far more fucked-up cases than I’ll take on, too.”

She nods, taking in the info. “So, you were there that night?” she asks, closing her eyes and bracing for my answer.

“I was the one who set the fire.”

My first instinct is to grab for her, to comfort myself by touching her, but I resist, knowing it’s the wrong thing for her. So, I clasp my hands together and try my damndest to do what’s right. No matter how bad it fucking hurts. Because I never meant to be a part of any of this. I need her to see that. I need her to know that I didn’t know the extent of my father’s work.

“Did you know? Did you know what was inside?” she asks, eyes still closed as a tear slips down her cheek. One tear to let me know how much I’ve broken what I swore never to hurt.

I’d fucking vowed it only hours ago, and yet look at what I’ve done.

I’m not worthy of her.

“No, I didn’t know. He didn’t let me out of the car until he’d done what he needed to inside. I wasn’t even paying

attention to him either. I had music playing.” My admission makes me feel like a fucking tool, but I was young and stupid and as naive as they come.

“Carina,” I breathe, “how did you get out of that house?”

“I told you. Conner,” she says, finally opening her eyes.

“Was there smoke?” I ask. “Tell me if I set that fucking house on fire while you were inside.” My voice cracks, and she reaches for me.

“There wasn’t smoke. But he told me to be quiet. Said there were people in the living room. That I remember vividly. I’ve never questioned it, though. Because I’d heard people partying before Emery knocked me out...” Her eyes flick to mine. “Who was in the living room?”

“My father and his team. You said Conner smelled like sex, could he be the one who—who...” I can’t even finish my question. I don’t want to be having this conversation with her. I want to be snuggled up on this fucking couch, keeping her safe from men like them and feeding her popcorn. But the stars aligned and intertwined our past and present and now we have to deal with it.

“I don’t know. I’d never...I don’t know,” she says, chest heaving breaths of fitful fear.

I nod, pulling her to me slowly, watching for any resistance.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know that I was there. I didn’t know I was a part of this,” I tell her. When she comes to me and falls into my arms, an inward wave of relief ambles through me.

“There’s more, isn’t there? It’s why you still feel rigid with worry?” she whispers up at me, eyes still damp from her tears.

I nod.

“Your sister was one of the bodies my father was charged with cleaning up. Amanda Eder died that night of an overdose, along with another boy. My father hid her death.” My eyes close as she gasps in shock.

“I thought she was missing all this time. I hadn’t seen her in months, long before that night. She moved out and never looked back,” she says, her mind working through confusion and set on grief.

“Well, she probably was on her own, before she ran into the likes of them,” I tell her, holding her as she breaks. Sobs leave her in quakes, and I do my best to hold her together against them.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Carina. I don’t blame you if you want me to stay away, and I will. I know our start was a fucked-up one, but I never meant to hurt you. I meant to be your protector, the one you could fucking count on,” I admit, breathing in her hair as I drop my face into it.

“You didn’t know. You’re as much a victim as I am. God, that fucking night! It’s had its icy claws in me for over half my fucking life!”

The fact that she’s brushing off everything I’ve admitted to her is a shock to my system. But then, she looks at me, her mind working as she pictures me. As I appear in her nightmare, where I hadn’t been before.

“I’m going to need some time. I need to work this out, I’m sorry,” she says, standing and moving to the front door and opening it. “I hope you can respect that I do. I don’t blame you, but I need time.”

My heart sinks, but I know that she’s not trying to hurt me. She’s trying to heal, and as the answers roll in, she’s going to have to process the fall-out. And tonight, there was a lot.

“Well, you know where I’ll be if you need me,” I whisper in passing.

The door clicks closed, and I breathe in the cold night. The one thing I was so adamant about was not hurting her, making her mine. And from the start I was the wrong man for her all along.

Monsters are bred, not born. I was groomed to become one for my entire life. No matter how you try to slice it, I’m not any better than the men who’ve harmed her before. The group

of us descended on her under the clear, winter sky and set her up for a lifetime of hurt and trauma.

Knowing that, how can she ever look at me the same?

The answer is simple: she won't.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Emery

Something in the Orange by Zach Bryan plays softly through the living room. The crackling of the fake fireplace is the only noise joining my ice clanking against the glass in my whiskey. It's been days since a stranger saved me from the warehouse, and since then I haven't emerged from my penthouse.

Bits and pieces have been moving in and out of my brain while I try to rest. Therefore, I've been fighting the urge to shut my eyes. Even when my eyes burn, and my body begs to rejuvenate itself. Conner has come and gone, and I haven't had the stomach to ask him what happened that night. What *really* happened. Because of all the memories I have—and they're awful—none of them have Carina in them past me hitting her. And that's bad enough.

Something isn't right.

I have to stop this. I know I do. I can't run my company from my living room. And I can't continue without sleep.

If this is eating me alive, I know it has to be killing Carina. How has she survived all these years?

I need to find out what happened after my father sent me away in his car.

My father:

Hurrying to slam my drink down on the small table next to my chair, I rush across the penthouse, nearly breaking the handle off the study door when I snatch it and try to open the door. It's locked. It's always locked. Because it has all my

dad's intimate files inside it. The ones that can't see the light of day. Or the eyes of a detective. My dad was everything but above board. Not that I had any clue until I took over the company. Deals with mobsters and mafiosos alike, not to mention things he *cleaned up* whilst he sat behind his absurd mahogany desk.

Reaching above the door, I feel for the key and unlock it.

When the door swings open, the scent of wood and dust invade my nostrils.

I kept all the files I couldn't bear to look at or throw away in my study. I come to a stop, chest heaving from my efforts, in front of a five-foot tall, black filing cabinet. One that has a keypad with a code necessary to look inside it.

Punching in the code, I begin to open drawers and look through files. None are clear and concise. It seems he named them for how he'd remember what was inside. Code names, random facts about a case, or just simply a first name.

Didn't make it easy on me, did you Dad?

Minutes fold in on themselves as I get to the third drawer from the top, skimming over names and getting discouraged.

I stop when I come to the word *fire* in bold letters on a file label. And fittingly, the file has black markings on it, as if maybe he'd built it with char still on his hands.

But that's ridiculous because he'd never get his own hands dirty. He would use a fixer. As I've done before.

But I have a feeling I've never cleaned up half the shit he has. After all, business back then was a lot laxer than it is now. It was nothing to fall in with the powerful men in town, association with crime be damned.

"Please be the one," I tell it, closing my eyes as I pull the file out. It skids across the files it's packed away next to, the sound causing my stomach to twist.

I make my way back to the living room, sitting down and taking a tentative sip of my whiskey before daring to open it.

When I do, the wind is knocked out of my chest. Photo evidence of the job *carried out* is inside. With a note on the back requesting prompt payment.

The home is burnt to a crisp, inside nearly gutted.

At least you got your monies worth.

Thinking of Carina having to fight to get out of the blaze makes my stomach churn. I sift through more photos, some of it on fire before firemen arrived.

There's some state issued IDs inside, too.

Amanda Eder, the name reads on one of the stolen licenses.

“Holy fuck.” I breathe out, but it doesn't help the burning emotion in my chest. I'd known a girl died, of course. But her name —

I never knew her name.

Never cared to know her name.

What is wrong with me? For years after the fire—after their deaths—I'd lived on the edge of insanity. Guilt nearly made me come clean to authorities many times. Conner always talked me out of it. Always kept me sane.

And how was I going to tell them about my involvement if I couldn't remember anything? I still fucking can't.

It was always how he kept me from coming clean. The facts.

And the fact was, I'd been high and drunk, and had no recollection of anything I did to Carina. Besides hitting her. That one moment lives in my mind as fresh as anything I've ever done in my life.

My fist connecting to her face, bones cracking beneath it.

It's what my nightmares are made of.

It was as if drugs were in the driver's seat, and I was the passenger just along for the ride.

When I find a handwritten list, clearly done by my father, I stop and look it over, heart racing.

Declan and Amanda's bodies disposed of via fire. Evidence will be burnt beyond use.

Pay off local police department to close the case.

Make sure Conner is solid in his role.

Emery recalls nothing.

Find and pay the missing girl from the bathroom.

Have fixer get solid blackmail for event girl is found.

Ensure Wes remains quiet.

Bury everything.

The last line goes around and around in my head. But one thing that strikes me is the list itself. Why make it? And why leave it here where it could be found? I guess by the time it would be, he'd be long gone. So, not his problem.

Another thing that bothers me is the mention of Wes. Now that I'm thinking about it, I haven't seen him since that night. I don't know if he went to Stanford as planned. I know nothing more about him, other than he tried like hell to revive his friend that night and he was awfully worried about being implicated in it all.

I drop the list onto my lap, back inside the file. Scrubbing my face and sitting back, the words rustle around inside my brain.

Make sure Conner is solid in his role.

Closing the file, I move toward the kitchen island, where my phone is plugged into the side of it. Sliding it open, I text Conner.

I need you to come over.

Now? It's midnight, man. Don't you ever sleep?

Now.

Ugh, I'll be over in twenty. I have a guest if you cared to ask...

I don't. And for all I know, I'm saving the girl from an awful night of sex and having to sneak out in the morning. I don't bother to get dressed, but I do bother to pour a massive glass of whiskey and plop back down into my leather chair.

The fire's heat is almost too much now, but it reminds me I'm alive when they're not. The chill of death is in the air tonight, and it's hard to escape.

“What is the damage, man?” Conner asks, shuffling into the living room and dropping onto the matching leather couch across from me.

I throw the file towards him, and some of the papers fall out and hit the ground. He picks them up, grunting in annoyance before looking them over one by one.

I allow him plenty of time to get to the list and read it, watching for every little detail on his face. He's as stoic as always, giving nothing away.

Ever the cool, collect character. It's what Father demanded of us, after all. He was always better at it than I was, though. Mine has always been a mask I wear. One I can drop when I'm alone.

He's just bred this way. Groomed to be vile and cold.

The mask he wears is warmth, and I watch it slip away as he looks up at me. “And? What do you want me to do with this?”

“Well, I was just wondering what your role was, Conner?”

He packs all the photos and papers back into the file and flings it to the other side of the couch. “What is this, man? An interrogation?”

I shrug. “No. I just want to know how much deeper that night ran. You know, since I don’t remember much. Oh, and who is it you hired to come boost me from the warehouse the other night? Who’s tracking me?”

His brow lifts in confusion, and it seems genuine. But a snake wears many skins. “Warehouse? Look, Em, I know you’ve been a funk for the last few days, but I...”

A ridiculous drunken laugh erupts from me. “Funk? Conner I was kidnapped, chained to a fucking chair, and had a good dose of electroshock therapy given to me. I think my funk is warranted, don’t you?”

Conner stands, blood draining from his face. “What?! Who did that to you? Why are you just now telling me? Let me make some calls.”

That’s when I see it.

He’s my father’s progeny. The one *fixing* everything for me. And God only knows how he’s been doing it, or how far he takes it. Because I never cared to look hard enough.

“What did you do, Conner?”

He doesn’t listen, and I stand and slam my whiskey glass down on the floor. “Hang the fucking phone up, Conner!”

A beep sounds as he hits the end button, his eyes flicking to mine. And finally fear cascades through them. And it’s the first time I’ve seen my best friend truly look human.

When I’ve always thought him immortal. Always in control. It’s what I admired about him. His ability to stay calm under any circumstance. Now, I know it’s because he has power. Far too much power.

And I'm about to take it from him.

“Tell me what the fuck your role that night was, Conner. And don't leave any details out. Because I need to know what I did, and I need to know everything.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Carina

I haven't worked since coming back from the warehouse. I mean, in all honesty, once you've tortured your boss while he's chained to a chair, I don't think he expects you to come back to work. I grumble and cover my face, and Tigger meows as he jumps onto the couch and brushes against me. Sitting back, I let my legs fall open. Tigger crawls into my lap, making himself comfortable as he kneads my leg with his nails.

Normally, I'd throw him off me, but it's oddly comforting. Like he's helping me release something with the focused little pricks of his claws.

"What the hell have I gotten myself into, huh, buddy?" I ask.

My mind has been whirling since Gage left last night. Amanda was my older sister, and even thinking about her now, in past tense, is odd. But I guess I have for years. She got picked up by CPS when I was only sixteen. I was always the best at hiding when they came calling because the Westpoint House was my solace.

Until it became my nightmare.

To think of Gage with a gasoline can, lighting the house up with Amanda's body inside, churns my stomach. My first instinct was that he was as much a victim as I was. A victim of his father, and his grandfather before him. He wanted into the family business, wanted to prove himself, and was handed a task that changed the trajectory of his entire life.

I'd looked for Amanda everywhere. Waited for the car to pull up when Dad got out of jail with her in the backseat. I'd begged him to go and get her. He'd always just ask me what the use of fighting was because he knew he couldn't keep his nose clean.

Where Emery escaped that night unscathed and was comforted at night with a warm bed and all the money surrounding him to keep himself fed, I was out in the cold from then on. Especially when CPS would show up. It wasn't until I figured out that they don't lock the gym at school that I found a new solace after Westpoint burned.

My memory had been so spotty afterward that I walked around in a haze for weeks. The only thing that stuck with me was Emery's eyes before darkness washed over me. It was all I had until I saw him a year ago on a television broadcast. What it was about, I can't recall. I was locked onto his eyes. Ethereal blue and lethal. And that's when bits and pieces trickled back to me. Snippets I wish would go away.

"Come on, let's go to bed," I tell Tigger, unable to spiral any longer. I'll drive myself insane. I switched from wine at night to chamomile, and I also uninstalled the cameras that did me no good, changed my locks, hid the hide-a-key somewhere less obvious, and put-up wooden blinds on all my windows.

I spent the day fortifying my castle.

And then wondering if I'll ever let Gage back inside it.

When he left last night, I spent thirty minutes wishing he'd come back. That he knew I needed him somehow, even if he's so tangled up in this mess that he can't see his way out. But then, anger had set in. Right on schedule.

Anger for Amanda. For my father, who never got to bury her and have her casket open. Men like Gage and his father don't leave a trail. The cats follow me upstairs as I reel, emotions hot in my chest.

All the men in my life that don't have four legs are the reason I ache, and I can't ignore that fact. How can I ever trust Gage again? How can I ever trust anyone again? Only two

nights ago, he was inside me. I stupidly thought it was the pivotal moment between us, and the foreshadowing for what was to come between us. That we were turning a corner, down the path where the sun was only just rising.

But I was wrong.

Half of this is my fault. Who lets their stalker this deep into their life? Someone with deep-rooted issues, that's who.

I sigh, brushing my teeth and slipping into a hoodie and boy short underwear before sliding under the covers and clicking the light off on the bedside table. I shove my phone in my hoodie pocket. Because these days you never know when you're going to need it.

Unbelievably, my lids grow heavy the longer I lie on my bed and listen to the off-kilter spin of the ceiling fan overhead. And I can only hope that what I see behind them is dark oblivion.

Instead of the eyes of a millionaire.

"Carina, come on. We have to get you up," Conner pleads, tugging my pants up around my hips and fastening them.

But when I sit up, the room spins. My head is throbbing so hard, and my face feels like something is broken.

"I can't," I slur, shaking my head as I try to clear my vision.

"What? Why? Come on."

He's not listening. No one ever listens. But I also can't seem to form words all that well. My movements are heavy, as if I'm underwater. Walking through fog is hard, especially when it won't clear.

Conner tugs me toward the door, and I struggle to get out of his hold. "My stuff," I get out.

He looks back at the bathtub as I try my best to get to it. Fighting sluggishness, I try to repack all my things. My body hurts, and my pants are soaked through with my blood. I

already had my period, so I know while I was out something awful happened.

“Leave it, we have to go.”

I turn on him. “Of course, you wouldn’t understand. This is all I have, Conner.”

Something in him changes. His eyes grow concerned, but more concerned about what he’s trying to do, rather than helping me with my few belongings.

Smoke billows under the door, and I gasp.

Conner tsks, rushing to my side and quickly packing my things, rolling my sleeping bag back into the cloth bag. After securing my backpack on my back, he carries my sleeping bag under his arm, holding me steady with the other as he opens the door.

“We’re going to make a break for it to the back door,” he says, but there’s fire roaring beyond my bathroom of solace.

A beam from above breaks and lands over what looks like a body lying on the floor in the living room, and I scream.

“We have to help him!” I sob, tugging on Conner’s arm.

Coughing wracks my body as Conner steps in front of me, deadpanning as he grits his teeth. “No one can help him. I need you to focus. If you want to live, you have to focus!”

I nod frantically.

Conner grabs hold of me again, dragging me to safety.

I give the body one backward glance before turning around and putting it out of my mind.

‘What the hell happened here tonight?’

One thing I do know is that I chose the wrong house to sleep in.

When we get outside, Conner immediately releases my hand but keeps moving toward a small black car on the street. When he ushers me inside, I find the eyes of a boy I know little about, Wesley Black. Normally when I see him in the halls, he

wears a look that could make a Mack truck take a dirt road. But now he's crying, tears making streaks down his cheeks.

"Take them to the penthouse," Conner says to the driver. "Come back for me."

"Yes, sir," the driver replies.

"Conner, wait. I need to stay here in town. Where are you taking me? Hey!" I try to ask, but Conner slams the door, running back up toward the house.

When I look back out the back window, I swear I see Conner taking photos.

"What the hell?" I say more to myself than to Wes.

"Hell is what is to come," he replies, sobbing after he gets it out.

"Conner! No!"

I sit up and look around the room. The chill of night is all I find, though. And Tigger and Piglet in a full-out paw war as they wrestle on the end of the bed.

Kicking off my covers, I pull my phone out of my hoodie and shuck it off. My sweaty skin hits the cold air and chills my bones.

There had been smoke. More than that, I'd been there while it was on fire. But I don't know if I should trust my memories, being that, in the dream, I felt sluggish. Gage nearly killed me! Everything about Conner in my dream was odd. Where was Emery?

Why was Conner so calm?

Not once had he looked alarmed.

My phone vibrates and I look down to see an Instagram notification from some random follower liking a photo of my cats. But when my screen lights up, I see that I've missed fifteen calls from Emery, and my blood runs cold.

I swallow as I hit play on the only voicemail he left.

“I know what you’re thinking, but I haven’t called the cops. Carina, we need to speak. Even if it’s not face to face, I need to talk to you.” He sighs and then it cuts off.

I listen a few more times and note the shake in his voice.

Conner smelled like sex.

Conner helped me to safety.

Conner didn’t look afraid.

Did Conner rape me?

Panic grips me. If it was Conner all this time, then I tortured the wrong man.

A gag is the only warning I get before my stomach tries to eject my dinner. I rush for the bathroom, cats protesting when one gets knocked to the floor in my haste.

After retching up everything I’ve eaten for at least two days, I brush my teeth and look into the mirror at myself. I spent years in therapy. Years repairing what Emery had broken. And to think I’d paid hypnotists hundreds to try and regain the memories that seem to be flooding out of me now.

And I can’t make them stop.

I want them to stop.

I’d seen a body when Conner took me out of the house. And a sob chokes out as I close my eyes and wonder if it was my sister.

I left her behind.

That entire night fractured my mind into bits. Such tiny, inconceivable shards that my mind tucked the memories away, hiding them from me for my own protection.

“I’m stronger now,” I tell myself, repeating the mantra over and over, each time my voice getting more confident.

It’s why they’re coming back. Because I’m ready to face them.

I’m strong enough to face them.

Stomping into the room, I open my phone and hit call, pressing it to my ear.

“I thought you’d never call,” the voice on the other end says.

“Well, I have. Now, talk.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Gage

Walking through the Westpoint House is jarring. The inside is ruined beyond repair. The upper levels are inaccessible. And the downstairs bathroom, where I now know Carina was lying on the floor as I doused the historic house in gasoline, is in disrepair. But the tub is still intact. I clear my throat of emotion as my phone rings in my pocket.

Without looking, I answer it. “Yeah?”

“I need you to make a house call.”

It’s Trevor, and I know it has to do with the Bancrofts and their crooked landlord.

“Send me the info. I’ll head there now.”

“Alright, sounds good. You okay?” he asks, and I know it’s because of the tremble in my voice.

Looking at this hell she’d escaped makes me want to run right back to her and hold her to me as tight as I can. But she turned me out. She’s processing. She deserves it. Shit, I wouldn’t blame her if she never spoke to me again. Even if inwardly I’m in a state of flux. I was used to being on the outside, the man in the shadows. Now I’m not. I’ll forever pine for the feel of her flesh, the grip of her when she comes with my name on her lips.

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine. Just send the info.”

Trevor sighs. “Sent. Be careful. And don’t go if your mind isn’t right, man.”

How do I tell him that this is what will make my mind right? Because admitting that is admitting to myself that I'm more like my father than I want to confess to.

Getting back into my car, I don't look back at Carina's past. To mine. Because if we're going to get through this, it's what we have to do. Even if she can't go forward with me in her life, I hope she can move on without me. She deserves to be happy.

Even if I have to watch that happiness from the cold outside the house.

Peeling onto I-5, I head toward Seattle.

The Bancrofts have a rent-to-own situation in a building near the downtown district, but their landlord is corrupt as they come. After the first six months, he ended their rent-to-own, but when something broke in the rental, he said they'd need to handle it. Even though their contract had reverted to a rental, and as the landlord, he was responsible for the damages to his home.

I thought I'd dealt with him. Scared him enough to keep their agreement intact and at least get the house fixed up. It's been six months since I've seen hide or hair of either of them. The family or the landlord.

When I arrive, the Bancrofts are outside the apartment building, suitcases surrounding them.

"I thought we handled this," I say. I'd gotten the landlord to reinstate their rent-to-own contract, because he had no legal right to terminate it once it was signed. So, the only reason he could have them standing outside the building is if he'd taken court action against them. Which, as scheming as Mr. Garcia is, I don't assume he has.

Mr. Bancroft has his elderly hand on his wife's shoulder, and he flexes it, comforting her in my presence. I don't let it bother me. I'm used to it. It's instincts that kick in when a predator is near. Goes back to our origins on the food chain. "He evicted us, had a policeman come and oust us this morning. But I got no notice of our contract having any issues.

We haven't bothered him at all. I even fixed the stove myself, didn't bother asking him. Just like you and I discussed."

I grind my teeth, looking up to where I know the little weasel lives only one floor above the Bancroft's apartment.

Pulling out my wallet, I hand over my credit card. "Go to a hotel, on me. Let me handle this. I'll find you afterward."

Mr. Bancroft looks between the building and me apprehensively. He likely doesn't know if he's making the right choice, nor what I'll do to Mr. Garcia when I get inside. But you can't have a conscience when dealing with a man like me. You have to go in wholeheartedly.

And in this world, as corrupt as it is, the only way to deal with people is through someone like me. And that's the sad thing about trying to survive anymore.

"Don't worry about anything happening here. I'll get your home back for you."

Mr. Bancroft ushers his wife toward the underground parking lot, only looking back at me once as I enter the apartment building. Going up a few floors on the elevator, I ready for whatever might have to be done. I slip on my black gloves, closing them with Velcro as the door dings open to the tenth floor.

Sighing in front of the door that says *management*, I press the doorbell with my gloved hand, pulling my revolver from behind my waistband. When he doesn't arrive at the door in a timely fashion, I ding the bell again.

"I'm coming! Hold the hell on!" he shouts from behind the door.

For the life of me, I can't understand why this man continues to torment people who have nothing. I hate doing these 'house calls', as Trevor likes to call them. It's what makes me different than my father. But they're necessary when men like Howard Garcia prey on people beneath him. Because I won't stand for it.

The Bancrofts won't owe me a thing after today. Because I owe them more than they realize. They've never understood

why I've protected them. They just know a card slipped under their door a few years ago, telling them to call if they needed help.

There aren't traces of the little boy they fostered in my face any longer. None of my innocence is left behind. For a moment earlier, I thought Mr. Bancroft remembered me, as he traced my face with his eyes. But then he looked away, and I knew they'd forgotten.

I tried to run from this life. And they tried to help me. But here I am, doing what I tried to run from to protect them. It's the reason people like me are necessary, and I find the older I get, and the more darkness I see in the world, the more I agree with my father.

Which isn't something I want to do.

The chain slides behind the door, and it finally opens. "What is the problem?" Garcia growls as he whips it open, likely thinking I'm one of his disgruntled tenants.

His eyes go wide when he sees me.

I cock my gun, lifting it with two hands, and stepping toward him. "Let's have a chat, hmm?"



HOWARD IS TIED TO A CHAIR IN THE MIDDLE OF THE KITCHEN, his face bloody from our discussion. I lean against the counters, heaving in breaths after losing my cool. Rage has been something I've been trying to keep a lid on. But Howard Garcia and his cocky nature and razor-sharp tongue made me lose my fucking cool over an hour ago.

I close my eyes, thinking of Carina, trying to muster her calming scent to let it wash over me. But it won't come, and I snarl.

"You're fucking insane," Howard gurgles.

“Well, you seem to like to toe the line of insanity, Howard. Because I told you what would happen if I came back, didn’t I?”

He swallows.

I’ve gotten nowhere with him, so I’d had Trevor do some paperwork online and contact his son. Now, we’re waiting.

I check my phone, hoping to see a text from her. Anything.

Nothing. I sigh, wiping sweat from my brow as the front door sounds, and Howard eyes me.

“Now the fun begins.”

Howard’s oldest is the head of a bank near here. White-collar, and clean background. He also doesn’t speak to his father much. And why would you? A sleezball tends to isolate himself, his beliefs outweigh all else.

“What the hell is going on here? Dad?”

“Junior Garcia?” I ask.

He eyes me, looking between me and his father a few times before nodding. “Yes?”

“Your father here has been lying, scheming, and not to mention stealing from his tenants. You didn’t think I saw how you were charging people late fees when they were on time, did you, Howard? Well, I did. I’ve had an inside man change the paperwork for this place and all Howard’s other holdings to his power of attorney, citing his recent diagnosis of dementia...”

Howard cuts me off, “I don’t have fucking dementia!”

I lift my gun, stepping into him and placing its cold barrel to his temple.

Howard winces, a cowardly tear slipping out of his eye.

“I knew he was running this place into the fucking ground, but I didn’t know how to get it away from him. My grandfather built this place, he’d be appalled,” Junior says, and Howard looks up, all anger washing out of his eyes, shock replacing it.

“Well, all you have to do is sign.” I text Trevor to send the paperwork to me, and I have Junior rattle off an email for him to e-sign the documents. Of course, Trevor has prepared them under our front company, created to look like a realty broker’s office. All above board on paper. Because he’s a wizard with computers and business. And because my father taught us all we know.

He’d be proud of what I’d done here today, and it doesn’t settle well in my stomach.

“Done,” Junior says, and I nod.

Handing Junior the key to his father’s handcuffs, I pat him on the shoulder. “He’s all yours.”

“Oh, right,” I say, turning back around and lifting my weapon to his father’s temple.

Junior shifts on his feet, wanting to defend his father, but knowing he’s earned everything coming to him.

“The name of the *cop* you had oust the Bancrofts from their home?”

“R-Ryker Bardot!” Howard stutters.

I drop my gun. “Pleasure doing business with you. I do hope your son lets you keep your home. Would be a pity to see you on the streets, Mr. Garcia.”

Before I make it to the door, Junior steps into the living area. “Thank you. I know you’re some kind of vigilante, he’s talked about you before, and I thought he was losing it. But you did me, and the people of this building, a massive favor today. If I can ever repay the favor...”

I turn, cutting him off with the look on my face. “Never give the devil a favor, Mr. Garcia. Just take care of these people.”

He nods frantically. “I will. I promise.”

“It’s done,” I tell Trevor, letting my head hit my headrest in my car, air conditioning blasting the sweat on my face,

making my skin tighten. “Where are the Bancrofts?”

“They used your card at the Hilton Garden Inn, on Boren Ave.”

“Ryker Bardot, send me all you can. Include an address.”

“Uhm, okay? What for?”

“House call isn’t complete.” I cut the call and speed away from the curb, headed to deliver the good news. The only good part of what I do.



I CAN’T FUCKING BELIEVE MY EYES WHEN I STOP NEAR Detective Dickhead’s house, and it’s the same address Trevor found for a Ryker Bardot. He was trying to save her from me, and yet, he’s dirty.

I shake my head.

And it’s not the only thing he’s hiding, either. Trevor couldn’t get much on the man. It seems Ryker Bardot didn’t exist until about five years ago. So, it’s surely an alias. But why?

When I get out of my car and move toward his house, I can’t help but to look toward her house. The lights are on, night falling and creating shadows near my favorite tree.

Even though everything screams for me to stay away, to give her the space she needs, my feet float me closer to the front of her house.

She’s added blinds to the front windows, but she has the ones near the pine open. Does she want me to be able to see her? Was it done purposefully? Or has she not turned them down yet for the night?

When I slip closer, my heart beats wildly in my chest as I look in and see Emery sitting on her couch, both of them

locked in conversation.

My blood rages through my veins, and my hand finds the gun once more, ripping it free and keeping it ready for if I need it.

I grapple with what to do. I promised to give her the time she needed, but her rapist is on her couch. Surely, she'd forgive me for barging in and protecting her, right?

Pacing outside the window, I try to maintain my cool as darkness edges over the twilight sky.

I skim the gun's barrel over my lips as my mind races.

Doesn't she know you can't taunt a monster? And even though I'm *her* monster, I still live on too dangerous of an edge for her to push me.

And it seems my little one might need reminding.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Emery

Her call had taken me off guard complete. Sure, I'd drunkenly texted and called. And left a regrettable voicemail. Leaving a literal trail of my spiraling insanity. Conner had told me the same story he always had. He found me in a state of undress and Carina was on the floor. That he got me out of the bathroom, and that he went back for her. Got her to safety. But something about his demeanor just doesn't sit right with me. I know he's lying, and I needed to speak to someone about it. Now, if less whiskey had been consumed, I'd have probably thought before ringing up the girl I'm accused of taking advantage of, but now we're here.

Winter still has a tight hold on us, but I can't stop sweating. I wipe my hands on my jeans before ringing the doorbell. Being here before had seemed exciting, like we were starting something. But that was before. Before, revisited memories had ruined any excitement that I'd had for us to develop into something.

Carina opens the door, and she's in a teal robe that covers a grey t-shirt dress. She tightens it around herself, shuffling her fuzzy slippers backward to give me room to enter.

The cat's eye me with disdain, and I know I deserve it.

Stepping inside, I try to simmer my heart rate down, breathing as I pocket my shaking hands.

"Now, what was so urgent you couldn't speak to me over the phone? Is a police officer going to burst in and arrest me for what I did to you, because..."

I hold up a hand, cutting her off. “No. Nothing like that. You were more than warranted in what you did.”

She closes her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose, a shame-filled look washing over her. “Was I? Because I think I was a little too hasty in my persecution. I keep having all these flashes...”

“Me too,” I cut her off, and she opens her eyes and finds mine.

Hers are so deep, and it’s not the color. It’s the way she pins you with her stare, as if you’re the only person in the universe she can see.

It’s unnerving.

“Tell me what you remember,” I say almost inaudibly.

She motions for me to sit on the couch next to her. Pulling her feet off the floor, she tugs her legs into her chest, securing them with her arms around them.

“The most recent dream I had was Conner helping me out of the house. There was fire everywhere. Beams were falling. There was a body...” She swallows, closing her eyes and letting the memory come unbidden. Something even I’m not strong enough to do.

She’s likely the toughest person I’ve met in my life.

Besides for her pitbull of stalker. Another thing I need to discuss with her.

“So, that part of his story is accurate. He told me he helped you safely out of the house.” Though I swore either Dad’s file, or Conner, had said she’d been missing from the bathroom *before* the fire. Nothing makes sense, and the one who seems to know the most won’t talk.

She nods. “He did. He put me into a car with Wes, but I don’t remember where he took me. It’s strange. The rest of the night is still missing.”

I eye her, lifting my brows on my forehead. “He hadn’t told me that part of the story.”

“You asked him if...Gage, he wonders if it was Conner and not you,” she admits, licking her lips.

Her pitbull.

I bite my tongue and don't say anything to her about him yet.

“I don't remember much after hitting you, Carina. And I'll live with that image of hurting you for the rest of my life. And every time I dream about it, I wake and I'm so sick about it, Carina.” I hang my head in my hands, and I hear her move towards me to comfort me. She thinks better of it and sits back.

“Well, I know how that feels. I've hated you for as long as the flashes have been coming back to me. Since I saw you on television.”

My head snaps up. “So, you admit you came here to destroy me? This wasn't a happy accident?”

She laughs awkwardly, letting her feet hit the floor again as she flattens her hands on her thighs. “Nothing about our situation should ever be termed as happy.”

She's got that right.

“Do you think he...” She trails off, biting her lip as her beautiful blue eyes meet mine.

“I don't know, Carina. I don't know how any of this shit happened. That night is something I feel like we'll never be over.”

She sighs, swallowing audibly. “I was so hellbent on making you pay, and now I'm just as bad as you, I'm so...”

I stand, pushing my hand through my disheveled hair. “Don't say it. You owe me nothing. It's the least I deserved for what I do recall.”

“You were...You were drunk? I've watched you, well...I watched you. You never seemed like you did that night.”

Her admission she'd watched me before tightens my chest when I have no right to allow it. “I was high, and I don't know

what was in what I snorted, if I'm honest with you. I'd never done it before, and I had been drinking, yes."

She nods, taking the information in. "You could've been another body on the floor, Emery. You're just as lucky as I am. My sister didn't make it out."

"You know?"

She nods. "Gage, he's—let's just say he's good at getting his hands on information he shouldn't be able to."

My interest piques because my father is equally as good at burying things, but I keep my lips sealed.

"He found out it was my sister."

"And Declan," I add.

She eyes me.

"Declan Smith, from the football team. He died that night, too. It was the drugs."

"Gage admitted to me that he was the one who set the fire. I'm assuming your father hired his father to clean this shit up. It's no secret in town that your family is powerful."

The news strikes through my chest like a fucking sharpened knife. "I don't know anything about that, I was ushered off the property as soon as he arrived, but I do know he used many fixers for things like this, yes."

"You called him?" she assumes, and my mouth goes dry.

I shake my head. "Conner did. He was always more like my father. It's how he tried to groom us both to be. Problem solvers in the heat of the moment. But Conner took to it more naturally than I did. Look, Carina, I don't know if I should be here. We don't know if I'm the one who did something to you. I was just drinking, and Conner had just left my apartment, and I was reeling. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

She stands and comes closer to me. "We're both a part of this, either way. I need answers just as badly as you do, Emery. I'll give it to you, it's an odd circumstance, but I needed this. And I think you did too."

Her hand presses to my chest tentatively, testing, and my eyes close. “I’m so sorry, Carina. For everything you’ve been through. For every part I played in it. I’m so fucking sorry,” I sob, breaking and letting the first wave of emotion belt free from my chest.

“I know. I can feel it, Emery. I know,” she says, resting her forehead on my chest softly. Her own tears fall as her body shakes, but I keep my hands firmly planted against my sides. I’ll never touch her again without permission. I’ll never touch anyone else without permission.

It’s not who I am. It isn’t who I want to be.

But what if I am her attacker?

“I should go, but let’s keep open communication between us. We work both sides of this and figure this shit out, yeah?” I ask.

She pulls back, wiping her face free of tears, nodding. “We figure this shit out together,” she agrees.

“Listen, that guy you’re hanging around...” I sigh. How can I say shit to her about her life, when I’m a huge part of where her life derailed? “Just be careful.”

She looks up at me, eyes assessing.

“I know I don’t have the right to say anything about it, Carina, I just...”

I’m cut off when the door bursts open, and in strides the pitbull himself, gun between two hands, eyes intent on murder.

“Back away from her right fucking now,” he shouts, kicking the door closed behind him with his massive boot.

My hands fly up without even thinking, and Carina turns, moving toward him.

“Carina back away from him, he’s clearly unstable,” I shriek, but she moves closer, resting her hand on his arm.

“Gage, it’s alright. I called him here.”

Gage’s eyes don’t clear of any of their rage, and they don’t leave me. I raise my hands higher.

“Why would you call him here? You need time to process what I told you, but he can come sit on the couch and have discussions with you?” he spouts, and she looks between us, her brows creasing with rising tension.

She turns and looks toward the window. “Were you outside again?”

“Did you put up blinds to keep me from seeing you?” he asks, ignoring her question.

My eyes dart between them, my shoulders burning as I keep my hands raised in defense. “Look, I was on my way out,” I start, but Gage laughs maniacally.

“You’re going nowhere, unless I say so,” he growls.

Carina sighs. “Go, Emery. I’ll call you.”

As I pass Gage, I turn my back to the door, keeping my hands up.

“I’ll keep you looped into whatever I find,” I tell her, and Gage steps toward me.

“You stay the fuck away from her. The only reason your brains aren’t on the fucking walls right now, is because of her.”

“Remember what I said about him, Carina. Be careful.”

“Me? What you said about me? What is this?” Gage turns on Carina, switching the gun to one hand and keeping it trained on me.

“Nothing, he just wants me to be careful, and with good right,” Carina waves her hand toward him where he’s showing her his true colors. He’s unhinged and proving every bit of my point without me having to say a thing.

Gage scoffs. “Your rapist wants you to be careful with me, the man who’d never harm a hair on your head.”

I laugh, letting my hands drop. “You have a gun pointed at me.”

He steps past Carina, crowding me against the door, pressing the gun’s barrel to my temple. It’s cold and actually

feels good against the heat of everything raging through my veins. Anger, misery, and shame.

“You, I’d kill. For her,” he tells me. And I believe every word.

Looking between Carina and him, registering the tears falling down her cheeks, respect grows for him. She’s safer with him than with me. I’m the threat, I realize.

“On that, we can agree. And I don’t know if I…” I swallow as Gage turns his head unnaturally, penetrating eyes boring into me. “I don’t know if I took advantage of her.”

Gage takes a moment to look back at Carina.

“Please, don’t,” she pleads.

Her begging for my life confounds me. In her shoes, I don’t know that I’d do the same. Both of them are better than me.

When he removes his gun from my head, placing it behind his back in his waistband, a wave of emotions I’m not ready to unpack overtakes me, and I close my eyes.

I open my eyes and meet Carina’s. “Just go,” she says.

As I make my way outside, moving down the street to where I’d told my driver to wait, I stop and look up at the stars.

Something coils through me as I realize I might deserve what he was about to do. The flashbacks have me so fucked up, too. So fucked up that I was ready to let him do it.

Fuck, I’ve got to sort this out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Carina

Gage and I look at one another for a long moment before he treks towards me. None of his anguish has left his eyes, and his hand still holds a gun. I don't back up, though. Even with his admission, even with all he'd done, I'd been relieved to see him burst into the house. Grateful he was still watching me. Still looking out for me.

Some sick, twisted side of me hated myself for telling him to give me time.

"What are you doing, little one? Why was he here?" he asks, his voice taking on a softer tone than when he'd spoken to Emery.

"I woke up from an awful nightmare, and he'd called a bunch of times. I just thought... I just want to know, you know? I want to know the truth, and I want this to be over."

"And? What did he say?" He messes with the gun before setting it down on the end table near the couch. He towers over me, and I crane my head back to look up at him.

He's got a thick jacket on, and who could blame him? It's barely twenty degrees outside. He has his hood drawn over his brown hair, giving him an edge I find so damned attractive.

"He said he wants to find out, too. He questioned Conner, but Conner wouldn't give him shit. He said he doesn't know if it was either of them. He has no memories after hitting me."

"Odd, that."

I sigh. “Well, he said he was drunk and high. Judging on the fact that two people died that night from said drugs, he’s lucky to be alive.”

Gage rolls his eyes and mutters something about luck running out as I fight the urge to press into him and let him hold me. Let him chase the worries and the nightmares away. Because he dwells in the shadows, he isn’t afraid of them. And they know it.

My mind keeps reminding me that he set the fire. He nearly killed me, too.

As if he’s inside my brain, he stills, looking down at me with a nervous energy skittering off him. “What was your dream about?”

I bite my lip.

“Carina,” he says, voice breaking at the end.

I close my eyes. “There was smoke. It was a memory, and I was inside the house when there was smoke, and flames. But I felt so sluggish, like I couldn’t think, couldn’t move right...”

“Getting knocked out will do that to a person,” Gage adds.

I shake my head. “No, my memory of Conner taking me out of the house was always clear, it’s as if it transformed. Changed. I don’t understand it. How did I see it so clearly both times, but both times I’ve seen it, it’s different?”

Realization seems to dawn on him, but he remains silent.

“What? What are you thinking?” I ask.

“Well, if you were drugged...”

“I don’t do drugs. I didn’t do anything. Shit, I couldn’t even afford to eat.” I look up at him, and sadness washes over him. “Don’t pity me. I am who I am because of my past, as much as anyone else.”

“I know that. Of course, I know that. But it’s just thinking of you without anyone in your corner...It hurts my fucking soul, Carina.”

I notice he's called my name, instead of some nickname as he usually does, and it's causing vibrations to move through my belly. And they're traveling southward.

"If I was drugged, somehow, or had a concussion, can I trust anything I remember?" I ask.

He pushes his hood back, running his hands through his unruly hair.

Seeing him unkempt does something to me. And I have to remind myself of the situation I'm in. Though all I can think about are his veiled threats to make me bleed for him, and my body heats at the thought.

He turns towards me. "Yes, you could be seeing bits and pieces, and your mind is trying to make sense of it all, and..." He trails off, looking at me and narrowing his brows. "Little one, please, don't look at me like that. Because I'm trying to give you space, and there will be no space between us if you keep it up."

I realize I was lost in thought, biting my lip, and letting my mind wander to a dark and dangerous place. I straighten and clear my throat and my head. "How is bursting in here with a loaded weapon giving me space?"

He looks down at his boots. "My darker nature got the better of me. I was headed to Ryker's house, and I saw the blinds, and I couldn't help but to come over here. When I saw you with him..." He growls, and it does nothing for the heat accumulating at my center.

"Wait," I put a hand up, "why were you going to Ryker's?" All the dirty thoughts of what I've done with this man drift away, replaced with intrigue.

"I had a case I had to...fix earlier, and his name came up. Seems your neighbor is a little dirtier than he lets on. He's doing favors for people for money. Well, at least that's what I think he's doing. I was going to start looking into him, starting tonight, but I got distracted."

"Because my blinds were open," I say absently, looking over towards them.

He nods. “You were trying to shut me out.”

His realization makes my chest sting with emotion. I had been. But then I’d been yearning for him to try and weasel his way back in. Because whether I like it or not, he’s slowly branding his mark on me. And it’s one I want to wear proudly. Regardless of what’s happened before.

Because, like I already told him, the past made me.

“I can’t... You don’t have to stay away,” I admit sheepishly, and his answering smirk is delicately dark. The very definition of sinful.

“Oh, I don’t?” he asks, stepping towards me slowly. His movements make the old floors creak under his weight, and it speeds my heart up.

I shake my head.

“I’m still concerned that you have no sense of self-regard. You want to play with things you shouldn’t,” he says, and the gravel in his voice makes my hackles raise.

“I know. And I know I need to stop. Need to stay away from you. But you said you wouldn’t harm a hair on my head,” I recall as he looms over me once more.

“I did say that,” he agrees. “I didn’t say, however, I wouldn’t harm a hair on your body...”

A clicking sound makes me turn to look at his raised hand, where he’s just opened a blade. The light from the living room glimmers on its metal surface.

“No, you didn’t,” I whisper.

“I think that our next step is to question this Conner. Don’t you?” he asks, and I close my mouth, wetting my lips with my tongue and trying to find words.

Because he might be able to carry on, business as usual, while we stand this close. But I can’t. He’s short circuiting my brain, yet he wants to have a full-on conversation.

Get it together, this isn’t you!

I snap to attention, meeting his eyes, and letting thoughts of the sharp blade skimming across my skin flutter away.

“We?” I ask.

He smirks fiendishly. “If I recall, little phoenix, you have a skill for interrogation.”

I nearly whimper at his mention of what I’d done in the warehouse. That wasn’t me either, yet thinking about it simmers my blood in my veins.

“I can’t do that again. It’s not—it’s not me,” I tell him shakily.

He closes his knife, and I let out a full breath. “No bother. I’ll do it myself. Once I’m done with Detective Dickhead,” he announces.

He turns and grabs his gun, replacing it behind his back as he heads for the door.

My mouth gapes for words as I already feel his loss tugging at my insides.

“Gage?” I finally manage as he opens the door.

He turns, blue eyes locking on me.

“Will you stay? I mean, I know you’re busy, people to torture, and all that. But I’m...” How do I tell him I’m scared to close my eyes? Scared to be alone when more memories find me in the dark.

He looks out toward Ryker’s house momentarily before closing the door and locking it up tight.

“Only for a little while, little one. I am a monster, after all. We do our best work at night.”



FOR A WHILE, WE'RE BOTH SILENT. THE CEILING FAN IS DOING its thing, knocking side to side, and lulling the stress of the last few hours away.

“Are you okay?” Gage whispers through the dark, and a warmth wraps around my heart. How the man who thinks himself a monster cares more than anyone ever has, I'll never know. But I lean into it, and smile.

“Yes, I am. It took a lot of years and therapy to get where I am today. I won't gatekeep. But I think I'll be alright.”

“Even when we find out the truth?”

We.

That he stepped into this mess, realized he's involved in it, and still has stuck around to get the answers I need, makes a stupid grin lift my lips.

“I think so. I already know what happened, physically. I just need to put a face to my attacker. I thought I knew it.”

“And you still might.” He turns towards me. “Please, Carina, even if you do it for me, at my insistence, don't let him back into the house. And for fuck's sake, move the hide-a-key.”

A giggle makes its way out before I can help it. “I'm sorry. I know it was stupid of me to have him over. I just wanted to know so bad. And he seemed like he really had something to tell me. My need for answers outweighed my wits. I won't let it happen again. And I already hid the key and changed the locks.”

This makes him grumble. “Oh, did you, now?”

The reverberation of his low tone skitters through me, like a wave of excitement laced with poison.

“I did.”

“And whom is it you're trying to keep out, little one?”

At first, I'd hated his pet name for me, but now, it makes the hairs on body dance upward, begging for his attention.

“You,” I admit on a whisper, my hands coming up to the covers over my breasts, clenching tightly.

“Forgive me if I’m a little annoyed by that,” he says, leaning forward and skimming his lips over the shell of my ear.

“I needed to know I was in control of who walked into my home,” I pant, blood pulsing in my ears as a dark chuckle rustles through it.

I whimper, and the laugh deepens.

“And how did that work out for you?” he asks.

I think of the door he kicked in, the locks that’ll need tending tomorrow. It’s half the reason I asked him to stay.

“It didn’t. But...”

His tongue darts over the edge of my ear, and I lose the fight with a moan.

“Tell me,” he commands.

Admitting that I wanted him to be watching, and that it’s the reason the blinds were open, gives him too much power. So, I bite my tongue and shake my head.

His massive hand reaches up through the darkness, wrapping around my throat and pinning me to the bed. Just as every other time he’s touched me, my nipples bead, and my core pounds with thrill.

“Tell me,” he demands in a deeper, more threatening tone.

“I wanted you to come for me,” I say, aching at the admission.

“Did you now?” he says, tone turning rueful. “And why is that, little phoenix?”

When his tongue finds my jawline, slithering up my face menacingly, my entire body shudders.

“I—I don’t know,” I wail.

“Mmm, I think you do. Tell me, little one, are you afraid? I do so love the taste of fear.”

My mouth gapes open, but I manage to keep my reaction soundless.

“I’m not afraid of what you’ll do to me,” I tell him.

When I turn my face towards him, his hand allows the movement, slipping under the covers.

My eyes fight to find his in the dark. “I’m only afraid of what you’ll deny me.”

When his lips find mine, the world tilts. Somewhere in hell, Lucifer is clapping at two damaged souls that’ve finally found one another in a world he created. One full of pain, anguish, and misery. For when two inky souls find one another, nothing can hurt them anymore, and the dark lord is who they now answer to.

Who we answer to.

Gage is depravity made flesh, and I don’t fucking care. For so long I’ve been a ghost, a walking illusion no one stopped to try to see. I’ve been a dull shade of grey. But when he touches me, when he breaks into my house and defends me, when he kisses me like I’m the breath that will keep him alive, I’m a bright rouge.

I turn into him, and his wandering hand finds the heat between my thighs after yanking up the thin dress I’d worn to bed.

Our tongues sway and twirl, each of us swallowing the others moans and pleasure-filled breaths. I grind against the hand he’s pressing through the front of my panties.

“Very needy this evening, aren’t you, little one?” he asks, breaking from my lips and earning himself a whimper for the loss.

“Please, Gage,” I beg, and he growls at the use of his name.

I still don’t know if that is his true name. But I don’t care. The only thing I care about is leaving the fantastical world I’ve stepped into where I’m the focus of a who-done-it case, and gaining more soft touches, more kisses. More.

“Fuck, you don’t belong with someone like me, Carina,” he breathes, removing his hand from center and lying on his back, thrusting his hands inside his hair.

No!

For a moment, I try to come back to reality. Because I can’t think with his hands on me. Not coherently.

“Why? I’m just like you,” I tell him breathlessly, grasping at straws. Ones that’ll make him come back.

It’s the lust talking. But I don’t care. I need him.

He scoffs. “No, you’re not. And you don’t even know me.”

“So, tell me. Show me. Make me understand, Gage.” I’m exasperated, and I know he can hear it in my voice.

He moves so fast I almost can’t fathom what’s happening. One moment I’m on my side, facing him, and the next, I’m on my back, pinned to the bed by my throat.

When I arch into his hold, his darkness feeding mine, he leans down and snarls. Full-on animal snarl.

And for some fucking reason, I don’t balk.

I don’t know who I am with him, but I feel reborn. Like the Carina before her stalker was only waiting for him to arrive. To awaken her.

“You want to see me?” he asks.

I can’t speak. Not because he’s choking me, but because I’m too excited for what’s to come.

I nod.

“You want to know me?”

Another nod.

“Mmm,” he groans, rolling his neck, “allow me to introduce myself then, little one.”

He straddles me still as he leans back, releasing my throat. The telltale flicking sound of his blade sends fear rippling through me.

He stands, and I don't dare to move.

"Push the covers down and remove your panties," he orders.

My pulse is pounding as I heed his demands.

He's stepped back into the shadows, where he's comfortable.

I remove my panties, deciding to go ahead and remove my dress, too. I drop them both to the ground next to the bed.

There's a long beat of silence. I imagine he's taking me in, watching me from wherever he is in the room. I have to admit, he's good at hiding. Even though I can feel him lurking, I can't see him. No matter how hard I try.

"I didn't tell you to remove the dress, but I'll let it slide this once. For the enthusiasm you've shown me."

I swallow. *Oh, fuck.*

He's not made a move, and yet, my core is wet, dripping for him. My body is alive. My nipples are hard, the air from the ceiling fan curling down over every inch of exposed skin as the idea of him and what he's going to do drives me crazy.

A laugh unfurls through the room. "I wonder how long it would take for you to go mad just lying there. Waiting."

"Gage, please," I whimper, rubbing my thighs together.

"I did say I would introduce myself, didn't I? I can't help but take advantage of the view, can I? After all, it is beautiful."

The window casts an eerie shimmer of moonlight across my body lying on the bed, and he's taking his time basking in it.

When something pinches my stomach, I finally see his outline come from the dark.

I squeal, and he breathes out.

The tip of his blade moves over my stomach, inches away from vital organs. With just one thrust, he could kill me. My life is in his hands. And fear races through me at the thought.

What are you doing?

This isn't me. I like my life. I don't want to die.

Don't you?

The thought stops me in my tracks. Adrenaline and shame tango together, and my mind reels from the thoughts whirring inside my brain.

I haven't been living, and he makes me feel alive.

It's why the edge of darkness is so appealing. Why, he's so goddamned addictive.

When his blade pricks the underside of my breast, I come back to the present, worry choking in my throat. I remain as still as I can be, so he doesn't cut me.

It's a strange thing, the allure of my stalker. While I know I don't want him to cut me, and I know I'm afraid, I'm also exhilarated at what he could do. At how he'll react if I bleed for him. His earlier words twist in my brain, and I whimper.

"Tell me, little one, are you afraid?" he asks, leaning down.

"Yes."

He stands straight. "Good."

The pressure on the blade lets up some as I feel him retreating inside himself.

I grab his hand, turning the blade and pressing it to my throat. "Not afraid of you, though. Show me."

"Carina," he whispers.

"Show me, stalker. Or I'll live the rest of my days wondering."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Gage

Everything in my brain is screaming at me to leave her. Even with her curvy, beautiful body on display beneath my blade. She's not built to be with a man like me. She's leaning into the way I make her feel, sure. But for how long? How long until she realizes the derangement that infects me has leeches into her? That I've infected her.

Because that's what will happen.

But as she holds my blade to her throat, her small hand shaking around mine, I have to fight not to jerk. Not to let it draw her blood for me. Because depravity is where I dwell when I'm not lurking in the shadows. And she's coaxing the dark side of me to step closer to her. Not knowing how much danger it poses for her.

I shouldn't have stayed.

I broke the fucking door is why I had. Right now, there's a kitchen chair beneath it, holding it closed from the wind. I planned to fix it as she slept, but she planned to toy with me. And now there's a slithering power beneath my flesh that needs to be fed.

"Do you know how much I want to see you bleed for me? Don't taunt me, Carina. It's not a game."

"I don't think it is," she whispers.

"Then, why?" I nearly strangled the question in my throat.

"Because you make me feel."

“I make you feel, what?” I ask, now not knowing whose hand is shaking around the blade.

“Everything. Fear, excitement, lust, greed,” she rasps, dropping her hand away from mine.

I pull the knife back, moving to straddle her once more. She’s so beautiful. Her large breasts are pressed slightly upward by gravity, her perky nipples beaded under the current of air in the room. Her stomach isn’t flat, and it gives way to round hips my teeth itch to bite onto and make her scream for me.

Every inch of her is a fucking canvas. If I flipped her over, I could mark her more than generous ass with my teeth and my blade, and I know she’d let me.

She’s a fucked-up man’s dream come true, and her submission gives me something I didn’t know I needed.

Power.

She looks up at me, her blonde hair fanned out on the pillow, her blue eyes seeming to glow in the moonlight as she bites her lip. It’s all I can do to keep my composure. But she needs to know who I am. Needs to know the full extent of what she’s getting into with me.

There’s an innate sense in all humans if we look hard enough. If we listen. One that tells us when a predator is nearby. And it’s that very sense that keeps women away from me. Even in broad daylight, they turn and walk the other way when I’m near them. I don’t blame them; I just know that’s how it is.

Women I fuck are paid handsomely and have signed contracts with the companies I buy them from to keep their mouths shut.

Reaching into my back pocket, I grab the handcuffs I’d brought to use finishing my house call at Ryker’s house. I let them dangle from one finger, her eyes skimming over them as she breathes out.

“Hands above your head, little one,” I tell her, and she obliges too quickly.

Everything she does puts *me* on edge, and it should be the other way around. What happened to her is always at the back of my mind. Always looming. And what role I played in it. Unknowingly, of course, but still.

She's either the strongest woman I know, or she's playing a game. And I don't have time to figure it out. And if I'm honest, I don't want to. I'll ride the board she's set against me for as long as she'll keep me in play.

I make quick work of handcuffing her to the bed frame that's made of iron-worked metal, patterns of flowers if I remember right. I usually only visit in the dark.

Her breathing has increased as I've subdued her, and I realize she's going to need an out.

"Pick a safeword," I tell her.

"What?" she squeaks.

"Pick a word that will bring me back from the edge. One, that if uttered, will alert me to stop."

Her beautiful blonde brows crease together in thought. "Voyeur," she says, and I can't help my smirk.

"That's your word, keep it in your head the entire time. I will stop if you need me to. You are in control, Carina. Not me."

She laughs heatedly when I lean down and capture her nipple in my mouth. "I'm tied to a bed with handcuffs. I'm not in control."

I pop off her breast, and she whimpers. It sends a thrill right to the tip of my cock. "Test it, then, hmm."

She sucks in a breath when I place the tip of my blade to her pussy lip, twirling as she's seen me do to my leg. The tip spins, pressing further and further into her flesh.

But she opens to me like a flower on the first day of spring, a moan decorating the air.

"Fuck," she rasps, lifting her ass off the bed and pressing into my blade's bite.

“Carina, fuck,” I groan, watching her come alive under my touch. At every turn, she surprises me and drives me wild.

She might be the death of me.

When I pull the blade back, the smallest drop of blood metallicly tangs the air. I drop and find it with my tongue, lapping it up before sucking her pussy lip into my mouth. She bucks against my mouth, and I grin wickedly.

Her wetness coats my face where she’s writhed against it, and I wipe it off, licking the mess from my hand as she eyes me, writhing in the cuffs and making enough noise to grate my soul.

“So fucking wet for me, little one.”

She nods. “Always.”

Something about her admission solidifies her feelings toward me. She might not know me personally, she might question her sanity at how much she wants me, but she does want me, all the same.

“How did that feel? Bleeding for me?” I ask.

“At first, it hurt. Then it felt so good, like everything was racing in my veins, like I was skydiving off the highest cliff.”

I lean over her, letting my hardness brush her center through my pants, and she bucks again, meeting it with fervor. My lips find hers in the dark, like they were made to, and our kiss is like nothing I’ve ever felt.

It’s the sweetest drug.

The highest high.

She kisses me and commands a power over me with just the flick of her tongue. And the tiny noises she makes nearly make me forget myself and come for her before it’s time.

I lean on one arm and reach down with the knife, skipping it up the flesh of her leg. “You’re so fucking beautiful,” I tell her, and she turns her face toward me, searching.

But I want to watch her.

Watch as her eyes close, and her breathing turns wild. As her body writhes in fear and in sensation overload. When I reach her inner thigh, I let the tip prick her. Not enough to make her bleed, but enough to make her moan for me.

“That’s it, pretty little songbird, call out to Lucifer,” I tell her, and she whimpers. “Because surely that’s who you pray to.”

“Gage,” she begs, her voice shaky.

“Tell me, what is it you need, little one?” I ask.

We haven’t even breached the surface of the things I want to do to her, but I don’t want to press her too far. I don’t want to overwhelm her.

“I need your touch, please, I need you!”

Flicking my blade closed, I press it back into my pocket, letting my hand skim down her body slowly as I lie on my side next to her.

“You look so beautiful tied up for me, little phoenix,” I tell her in her ear, pinching her stomach and making her groan.

I want to watch her come apart, but before that, I want to make her so needy she loses herself. Her sense of reality.

“Did you like it?” she asks, and my hand pauses over her mound.

“Did I like what?”

She turns her face into mine, her lips a breath away from stealing mine. “Watching me bleed for you.”

And there it went. My breath gone. My mind blown.

She was fucking made for me.

I rear back and slap her pussy, and she whimpers, arching off the bed.

“Mind your manners, little one.” I worry for a moment I’ve gone too far.

“Yes, Sir,” she whispers against my lips, and I groan, worry falling to the wayside.

I slap her again, this time giving it more power, letting the sting simmer in her center.

“You like the bite, don’t you? The claws of darkness as they give you pleasure?” I ask as I slap her again. This time I can feel how wet she’s growing for me, and pre-cum beads at the tip of me, seeping into my pants.

“Yes, Sir.”

Fuck, to have her beneath my hand.

“How do you feel?” I ask as her head lolls back and forth. She’s new to the things I’m doing to her, and I know I don’t want to go too far.

“So good. So alive. So powerful!”

If the light was on, I know her pupils would be blown wide, and her body and face flushed.

Another slap earns me another beautiful whimper, and I relish in it before slipping my fingers over her engorged clit.

“You could come for me like this, couldn’t you?” I tease.

She nods frantically, grinding across my touch.

“Do you see how much power you have? Even bound, I’m at your command. What do you need, little one?”

Every bit of me is at her mercy.

She’s my queen and I’m her pawn.

“Make me come. With your mouth,” she orders on a growl, and I move quickly to heed her commands.

Wrapping my hands under her ass, I lift her to my mouth. Securing it against her and sucking deeply, I flatten my tongue over her from entrance to clit and back again.

She wrestles against her cuffs. There will be marks where she’s fought them. Ones I’ll be glad to leave behind. Ones for her to remember me by tomorrow when this is but a memory.

If only I could fill her with nothing but wonderful memories and replace every single one that taunts her at night.

“Gage! Oh, my God!” She bucks and writhes, and it’s all I can do to keep my mouth on her, fucking her with my tongue the best I can.

When I find her center with my right hand, slipping two fingers inside, the sound that leaves her is guttural.

“It’s too much! God, it’s too much,” she says, and I pop my head up, not ceasing my finger’s work.

“Say the word,” I remind her, and she breathes in panted waves, her chest rising like the fluttered wings of a hummingbird.

She shakes her head. “Please.”

Her eyes plead with me, and I add the heel of my palm to her clit, moving over her with my body to kiss her lips and let her taste herself.

“Gage, Gage!” she chants as I bear down on her with full intent on making her come for me fast, she’s reaching her point of no return, and I don’t want to overwhelm her.

“There’s my good little phoenix, now rise. Come for me, let me hear your screams,” I tease, nipping her lip between my teeth.

“God!” she screams, lifting against my hand and coming violently, her shouts muffled when I capture her lips, demanding.

I slow my movements at her center, letting her come back down before slipping out of her and springing her free from the cuffs.

She pulls her arms down and I slowly massage blood back into them.

“I never knew it could be how it is with you,” she admits breathlessly.

“I never knew it could be how it is with *you*, little one.”

“I think you were right before,” she says, rotating her wrists as feeling comes back into them.

“What was I right about?”

“I’m yours,” she says, stunning me.

Here I was thinking I was going to shove her over the edge she was straddling, making her fear me instead of wanting anything else to do with me. But, then she shows me that she’s a formidable opponent, one I can dance in the terror-filled night with.

“You are. Now, let’s get you cleaned up, hmm?” I ask, helping her to sit up slowly. “Not too fast, we have all the time you need. You might feel a little off kilter after that.”

She looks at me with questioning eyes. “What about…”

I flick on her bedside lamp, seeing her cheeks fill with a beautiful rouge.

“What about, what?” My brow quirks.

“What about you?” she asks, looking down at my obvious erection and the wet spot my greedy dick made.

It jerks, as if her gaze can be felt corporally.

“This wasn’t about me, Carina. It was about you.”

She bites her lip. “You’re sure you’ll be alright?”

I laugh. “It won’t break off if that’s what you’re asking. I’d be a lot better if we can get you into some clothes, though. I will admit.”

She smiles, her eyes taking me in and filling with warmth. “You’re a scary man, Gage. But you’re also the best man I’ve ever known.”

“Mmm,” I say, hefting her up and letting her get her legs under her. “Give me time, hmm?”

I kiss the top of her head as she leans into me, and we make our way into the bathroom to clean her up.

Though my words hang heavy between us, both of us know I’ll never do a thing to harm her.

But what I could do unknowingly to break her trust and change how she looks at me, that list is long.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Emery

“I can just get with Conner on this,” Stan says, turning towards the door in my office.

I stand, slamming my hands on my desk. The sound halts him. He turns, eyeing me with questions dancing on the surface of his eyes.

“You’ll do no such thing. I am your boss, and therefore, you work for me. Your loyalty is to me. I don’t want word of this leaving this fucking office. Do I make myself clear?”

Turning once again, he crosses his arms over his broad chest, his tattoos bulging over his ridiculously sized muscles. “And am I allowed to ask why I’m not to tell Conner? Any other situation we’ve had, I’ve worked with Conner. Yet, he was absent this morning and didn’t greet me as he usually does. And now you’re telling me to keep matters between you and me? It’s suspicious, to say the least.”

I close my eyes, trying to rein my nerves in.

“It’s just usually...” he begins.

“I don’t give a flying fuck how we *usually* do things, Stan. I want them done privately this time. You’re reporting all you find straight to me. Conner isn’t in the office, and this matter is to remain between the two of us. If you don’t think you can do that, I’ll hire someone who can.”

Stan drops his arms to his sides, contemplating the large sum I pay him to work here, likely. He sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face.

He's loyal to Conner. Conner has that way about him, as did Father. I get it. But I can't have this kind of conversation again. If he won't help me, I'll simply find someone who will.

"I'll handle it. I'll give you the report by the end of the day. I don't know that I'll find him within a day, but I will give you updates at the end of every day I'm working the case."

I nod. "Thank you, Stan. And please, be discreet."

He eyes me once more, narrowing his gaze before resigning himself to his task.

"Understood," he answers, turning and moving out of my office with purpose.

"Fuck!" I grumble, plopping into my chair and turning toward the Seattle skyline dancing in the waning twilight. It used to do something to me, looking out over those beneath me. Now, it makes me feel small.

Grabbing my phone, I hover my fingers over the keyboard inside Carina's text message. I told her I'd loop her in and that we were in this together, but after the other night when she allowed her stalker to chase me from her home, I wonder where *her* loyalties lie.

I sigh, knowing I've done enough shit things in my life already. One good deed won't make up for any of them. But it's a start.

I hired someone to find Wes. I feel like he's a major missing piece to this story. Maybe he has some memories that we don't.

Carina texts back almost instantly.

In my last dream I was in a car with him. But I woke up before I got to a destination. I don't trust my nightmares, they keep changing.

I know what she means. Just last night I'd had a dream where I didn't hit her. Where I'd coveted her, held her to me as I sobbed at what her face looked like when I came around.

Something is wrong.

Gage made a good point...

I stop reading, growling at the mention of the vile man she's let into her life. But there's one thing about him. He's fiercely loyal and protective of her. While he's around, no harm can find her. And that makes me thankful. She's been through enough.

My eyes flick back down to her text.

Gage made a good point; he thinks someone drugged us. Well, we know you were. But he thinks maybe I was. Something to help them cover their tracks. Your father, I mean.

My mind works in circles. That would make complete sense, honestly. Because I'm certain there are drugs out there at the disposal of men like my father to *fix* situations like this one. Ones that are tricky, where there are witnesses involved.

God, why did Conner have to call him?

The thought is jarring because if he hadn't, I'd be in a cell somewhere. But I'm uncertain it isn't where I belong for my crimes.

I was born into a family where every move can cost you a lifetime of scrutiny. Where men have the power to hide within plain sight, wearing the demons they house right on their sleeves. And I don't think I'm built for it.

We're going to figure this out. Even if no further memories surface. I have an appointment tonight with a hypnotist.

Admitting it to her makes me feel fleshed open, chest cracked wide for her to peer inside of. But I promised her honesty, and for once, I'm going to keep the promise I've made. For once, I'm going to be a man deserving of a sliver of her trust.

Good luck! They didn't help me. Seen a million of them.

Somehow, her having also been to one makes me feel more normal. Like we *are* in this together. Even if I might be the villain at the end of her story.

I will keep you looped in, but it might be late...

Text whenever.

It's curt and to the point, and I type and delete three responding texts before deciding to let it lie until I had something to tell her. Something to offer.

The door opens, and Suzanne waltzes in, plopping down paperwork on my desk with an obvious attitude.

"Sign them," she says, and I drop my phone onto the desk and look the papers over. A campaign for organically made men's underwear.

"What's your problem?" I ask, signing off on the ones I like, and crossing images with an X when I don't.

"My problem? Oh, let's see... I'm doing the job of two people since that new editor you hired has vanished into the wind, but your partner won't let me fire her for some ungodly reason, which means I can't hire anyone for the position because it's not open. Then, I try to call and speak to the little tart, at which turn your partner suspends me for two days for *getting into his business*." She huffs, heaving breaths as she eyes me, face red with anger.

"Well, I had no idea about any of this." Fuck, what's going on in my company? It seems I've been spiraling so hard, that I don't even know what's happening around me anymore. "But I'll look into it, and I'll speak with Ms. Eder. She's been feeling under the weather, is all. I do appreciate you taking the time to step up to the plate, though, Suzanne. And you will be compensated for your efforts."

This makes her puff her chest up with pride, her eyes filling with confidence. "Well, thank you. I guess I should've come to you before going to Conner." She picks up her papers and makes her way out the door, and I sit back and scrub my face.

Conner has been running my company and micromanaging my life for far too long. It's time to make a change.



“NOW, HAVE YOU EVER DONE THIS BEFORE?” THE THERAPIST asks me. Her voice is soothing, low and even, and it's honestly a little hot. I swallow, trying to chase away the thought as she bends over and presses me back onto the blue couch. Her breasts eye me back when I roam my gaze over them.

Remember why you're here!

I clear my throat. “No. Never.”

She chuckles, and it brushes against my skin. She straightens. Her hands, boasting red-tipped fingernails, find her curvy hips. She's got blonde hair that's pinned into a tight bun on her head, and brown eyes that remind me of French chocolate. “That's alright, that's what I'm here for. I'll guide you through.”

I nod, licking my lips. I know that it's inappropriate to be checking this woman out, when I'm here to find out if she can unlock memories of the night that I possibly raped someone. But I can't help it. I've been a lonely man for a long time.

She walks over and sits in her matching blue chair, crossing her legs before turning a recorder on and letting her back hit the chair. Clicking her pen open and readying her clipboard, she lets out a small breath to prepare.

“Now, we're here to find buried memories, is that right?” she asks.

I nod. “Yes, there was a night when I was young... It involved a...” I clamp my mouth shut, eyeing her as she smiles.

“Anything you say in this room is confidential, doctor patient confidentiality, Mr. Stanner.”

I nod. “It involved a massive fire. I’ve been having flashbacks, nightmares really. Where I see myself attacking someone before the fire. Hitting her, and possibly... Look, I just need to know,” I manage.

She eyes me, all subtle vibrations of flirting gone because she hadn’t known what kind of man I was when she was flirting.

And I can’t blame her.

“I see. Well, let’s begin, shall we? Close your eyes.”

I do so reluctantly. To close my eyes while someone else is in the room feels uncomfortable. I feel vulnerable.

“Now, I want you to envision you’re at the top of a staircase. There’s a wall to the right of the staircase, and on the wall, as you descend, are picture frames hanging on it. Can you see it?”

“Yes, I can see it.”

“Good. Now, inside these picture frames aren’t photographs, but memories, little snippets in time, caught inside the frame and moving like the image on a film reel. Do you see them?” she asks softly.

I feel heavy and sluggish under her direction, but I say, “I can see them.”

“What memory is before you?” she asks.

I step closer to the black frame, small images moving about inside as I lean in to watch. “It’s me and David, we’re kicking a soccer ball in the front yard. We got it for Christmas the year before, but it’s the first time he let me play with him. He was being nice this day,” I admit, smiling as warmth at the memory wraps around my insides.

“Good. Now, I want you to begin your descent down the stairs, and as you go down, you’re going to get very heavy. You’re not going to fall asleep; you’re just going to trek deeper into your subconscious for me, can you do that?” she asks.

I nod. “I can.”

I turn away from the happy memory and begin going down the stairs. It's odd. There's no end in sight, and there's no wall to the left of me. I keep my hand just below the picture frames housing my memories as I take each step one at a time.

"Don't pay attention to the memories, alright? Not until you *feel* yourself near the right one."

"And how will I know it's right?" I ask, but my voice sounds almost robotic. I'm so heavy, asleep, but not.

"You will just know. Tell me when you've found it," she answers, and she sounds far away.

I take five more steps, and then ten, and then all the sudden, I stop. My hand feels warm, tingles rippling through me as my hand catches the corner of a frame on the wall. I don't dare turn. I can feel the weighty emotion tied up within the memory.

"I—I found it," I grit out.

"Good. When you're ready, let's have a look, shall we?" she asks, sounding even further away. "I'm right here," she adds, as if she could sense my panic. I wonder if I'm outwardly panicking.

I finally regain the nerve and turn, eyeing the mahogany frame hanging askew on the wall. There are char marks surrounding it, and embers light the edges of the frame itself.

"It'll only hurt for a moment," I tell Carina, and she whimpers.

I rear back. "You don't have to do this, Emery. I know you; I've watched you. You're a good person! Please, don't do this," she begs.

I halt, staring down at her with drugs and alcohol weighing me down, but I want her. I want her so damned bad. Those eyes. I want to drown in them.

But she isn't mine to take.

I slam my hand next to her head, and she screams.

The door bursts open, and a muffled voice comes from behind. "What have we here?"

When I turn my face to look at them, something hard connects with the side of my head, lights fading as I fall off Carina to the left and hit the floor. My eyes find hers as fear licks between us. Blood oozes from my nose before I'm struck once more.

"No!" Carina shouts, and my eyes flutter closed.

I back away from the frame. "It can't be. I remember hitting her."

"Do you? Or is your guilt twisting your memories? That can happen, you know. So can substances."

"I'm clean. I haven't touched a drug since that night. I mean, I drink, but we all drink," I slur, so heavy and warm. I want to go to sleep. I want this to be over.

But I need answers.

I fight to open my eyes, but I can't. I don't control them. She controls them.

My heart patters away in my chest, running wild at the loss of control.

"You weren't clean then, Mr. Stanner. And substances have a way of twisting things. Now, I want you to take a deep breath for me," she says. "Good, and another."

I do so each time she tells me as she counts until she's satisfied that I've taken in enough air.

"Now, when you're ready, I want you to come back up the stairs, alright? Just as before, don't look at any of the memories. We've gotten what we came for."

I turn and step up. Making it up five steps, I let my hand follow the wall as I ascend. But when my hand accidentally touches a frame, and tingles of joy seep through my veins, I can't help but snap my head to the left.

"Mr. Stanner?" the doctor calls, but I'm lost.

Mom sits cross-legged next to the Christmas tree, her smile bright and warm. The puppy she got us leaps from person to person, beams of joy and barks of play sounding through the living room. Father's in his chair, stoic, but even his eyes radiate Christmas glee.

Puppies have that way, don't they?

Maybe it'll be a new beginning for us all after such a long time of darkness and strife.

Maybe Charley will bring us all back together again.

But when my eyes meet Father's, my smile fades. He looks at me as if he knows something about me I don't. Like I'm a monster, he has to keep his guard up around, and I don't understand why. He lost a son, sure, but I'd hoped that one day he'd move past it. But each year without him, he grows colder.

But I know why he's looking at me like that today. And it's nothing to do with his missing son. It's for the son who sits before him laughing at a stupid dog, when he's had to cover up my sins.

Had to bury things for me in the past.

“Mr. Stanner! Focus, turn away from the wall and keep your eyes forward!” the doctor shouts, and her touch is on my chest. I can feel it, faint and unwavering on my body.

“I'm coming,” I manage, rushing up the stairs and pushing the door at the top open, white light bathing me as I put my forearm up to shield myself from it.

“Fuck.” I open my eyes. The room is brighter than I remember when I went under. Throwing my legs over the side of the couch, I shrug off the doctor's touch.

“There you are,” she says, smiling and then sighing in relief.

“What I saw, what the memories showed me, was it real? Can substances change what’s in there?” I ask, needing to know this is concrete evidence before unveiling it to Carina.

She nods. “It’s real. The subconscious can bury things, hide them from a fractured mind unable to deal. But what’s in there, what’s behind the veil, is real.”

“So, I didn’t...” I sob, letting myself break now that I know some of the truth.

She shakes her head. “Seems to me you’re as much a victim as the girl you saw before you closed your eyes, this... Carina.” She looks down at her notes for Carina’s name.

“It would seem so, wouldn’t it?”

My phone rings, and I pull it out. Seeing Stan’s number pop up, I excuse myself to the hall to take it, pacing in front of the check-out counter as I wait for it to connect with my spotty signal.

“Tell me what you found,” I say.

“You’re not going to like it, I’m afraid,” he replies.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Carina

Watching a stalker is something most don't get to do. He's lying on his back with one arm over his eyes, the other spread toward the empty spot where I'd been lying. Tightening my hands around my coffee mug, I lick my lips and lean against the door frame of my bathroom. All his muscles are corded and on display. At some point, he'd stripped bare of his dark clothes in the night, wrapping around me. I'd woken entangled with him, having slept soundly all night. No nightmares plagued me.

I grappled for a while whether to wake him, but eventually decided to let him rest. It's the least he deserves for the peace he'd gifted me last night. I've already cleaned up the disarray from his abrupt visit. I called a handyman that'll be here at noon to fix the broken door Gage had kicked through to get to me.

I know I should be worried about the fact that he'd done so, but I can't bring myself to because someone finally cares about me. He was worried and it drove him to the edge, so his impulses got the better of him.

I can't blame him because deep down I wonder if the nagging feeling in my gut isn't growing into something more. Something that would make me do the same thing for him if he was in trouble.

Not that a man that looks like that ever gets into trouble that he can't get out of. Sipping my coffee, I make my way to the living room. I kick off my fuzzy slippers as I fold into the

couch and watch the snow falling outside the panes behind my blinds.

The first snow brings a clean blanket for the world. A sheet of white, signaling a new season. I've always loved watching it. Just like the rain, it brings serenity with it each time it falls for those of us seeking it.

My mind is a mess of what ifs and worries, but for a moment, I let it all go.

I take another deep swig of coffee before setting it down on the coffee table, snagging my phone and unlocking it to check notifications. A text from Emery sits unopened. He told me he'd keep me in the loop, but I haven't had the nerve to open it and see what he found out.

I know how men like him get information, and the knowledge makes me hesitant to get involved.

Sighing, I click on it. I started us all down this rabbit hole; I need to finish it. We all need to know. So we can begin repairs to our hearts, minds, and souls.

We need to meet.

It's not what I was expecting. Especially after his run in with Gage only nights ago. Every night since, Gage has been sneaking into my bed, wrapping around me like a shield and keeping the nightmares away. I wonder if the incident with Emery was the catalyst for the sudden change in him.

He's diving into his attraction to me, and I'm reaping the benefits from it.

Tonight?

Sure; where?

Your place?

I don't really know why I suggest it. My eyes flick over to the door where the chair still holds it closed, knowing it's the reason. That and he knows where I live, why not level the playing field?

Sounds good. I'll send a driver for you. I assume your pitbull will be with you?

I smile at the jab. He is, isn't he? My sword, unsheathed and ready to strike.

You're correct. He's a part of this, too. I'm not cutting him out. Plus, I'm more comfortable with him at my side.

I know it's a low blow, one that'll sting Emery, but I don't care. It's the truth. Gage might be as unhinged as they come, but he's on *my* side, and that means more than words can convey to either of them.

So be it. You deserve comfort, Carina. I will tell the driver to expect two.

I'm taken aback for a moment, staring at the text, unblinking.

Breath hits my neck near my ear, and I let my eyes close as I click the phone screen off.

"Good morning, little one," he purrs, voice vibrating my already frayed nerves.

"Good morning," I answer weakly.

"What are you up to, hmm?" he asks, and my insides hollow, wondering what to lead with.

I turn my face towards his, letting my eyes roam over the beauty that is his rugged face. Sleep still clings to him, etched in the relaxed lines of his face. I smile.

"Waiting for the stalker that warms my bed to rouse," I tease, leaning forward and capturing his lips.

Over the last few days, my nerves around him haven't faltered. I haven't gotten used to his all-consuming presence

any more than I've learned to get Tigger to stop fighting with Piglet.

But taking this step, making this move on him, makes me feel strong and in control. He has that way about him. Even when I'm running from him through the house as he counts down to when he'll come to find me, I know one word will stop it all.

His tongue slides against mine, and I open for him, tilting into the kiss, unguarded and growing needy for more.

Voyeur.

I grow wet as the word rolls through my head.

Gage feels the change and pulls back. "What are you thinking about, little one?"

I smirk. "Nothing."

I wish there wasn't so much going on. That we could forget the world and snuggle up as the snow falls in sheets outside the house, warm and cozy as some show plays in the background on Netflix. But alas, we have to figure out what the hell is going on with our skewed dreams.

We have to get closure.

"We have to meet Emery tonight. He's sending a car for us."

He snarls, standing straight and looking down at me. His hands drop and grip the back of the couch, and it creaks under his massive hold.

"I don't like that, Carina. I don't want to be at his mercy."

I nod, knowing how he feels. "I really don't think it's him. I don't know why, but even from the first time he shook my hand, I knew something was off. He's got someone looking for Wes, another person who was there that night. I think he might have found something. Of course, you don't have to go, but I told him I'm more comfortable with you there..." I trail off as his eyes fill with emotion.

Tension wafts from him, shoulders lowering. Walking around the couch, he lifts my feet that are covered in a fuzzy blanket and lets them rest on his lap. “And is that the truth, or just what you want him to think?”

I can’t believe he has to ask, but I realize I’m very much a closed book. I always have been. It’s an effort to let people in, to let them know me, because they could be an enemy. They could hurt me.

I nod. “It is true. I haven’t...” I swallow. “I haven’t been having nightmares at night since you’ve been here.”

His eyes are locked on mine. “Well, they’d be stupid to show up with me here.”

A laugh escapes me, making Gage’s face light up.

“And what would you do if they did? Fight them?”

He nods. “Yes.”

One simple term wipes the smirk off my face, my laugh silencing as my blood thrums and a low hum stirs between my thighs.

“I’ll go with you,” he says, his Adam’s apple fluttering as he swallows.

It’s cold enough outside for the snow to stick to the ground, but here on the couch with him, it feels like the surface of the sun.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

A knock at the door breaks up the moment between us. I look at my phone. Noon.

“Shit, the handyman!” I get up and drop my blanket off me, sliding into my slippers and making for the door.

“Handyman? I told you I’d fix it.”

I stop, hand on the knob. I don’t want to insult him, but I didn’t want to bother him either. Which is ridiculous because he broke it.

“It’s alright. He’s already here.”

He eyes me narrowly. I know he's been busy, even though his brutish boots are what broke the thing in the first place. He hasn't talked to me about whatever is going on between him and Ryker, but I don't want to press him, either.

Knowing Ryker has a dark side to him that Gage is fixing makes me anxious, though. Because all those nights I'd run out of my house or had him run over here, it was to save me and now I wonder if I should've been anywhere near him.

But with all that's going on, Ryker is the least of my worries. When I open the door, a rotund man in overalls and a thick jacket that doesn't seem like it can zip over his round belly smiles at me. His cheeks are rosy from the cold. I can't help but smile. Gage's disinterest in having the man here is evident, his annoyance flows through the room and skims down my back, and I fight a shiver.

"I have an order to fix a door. I assume this is the door?" The man asks, looking at the splintered door frame.

I nod, stepping back. "Please, come in out of the cold."

He wipes his boots on my *cat lady* front door mat, hefting his massive tool bag inside with him. "Thank you. It's beautiful to watch from the comfort of the living room, but it'll nip your nose nearly clean off, won't it?" He laughs.

I smirk. "That it will. So, you were right, this is the door. Let me know if you need anything at all. Even if it's a warm drink," I offer.

"I will. It shouldn't take me too long to sort it out." He runs his gaze over the door, planning how to approach it, and it's clear he's fighting the urge to ask how it happened as he flicks his eyes between Gage and me.

Gage grumbles loudly enough for an embarrassing blush to color my cheeks before he stands and stomps upstairs.

The bedroom door slams, and I smile once more at the handyman, moving over to the shelves next to my television and grabbing a book to pretend to read while I wait for the man to be done.

Normally, I hate having people in the house to service things, especially when they're strangers. But I know if Gage caught a vibe off this man, he'd have never left me alone with him. It's calming. And it's something I'm not used to.

I fall into the book I snatched off the shelves hastily, slipping into the world of fantasy easier than I have in a long time. Letting it consume me.

Before I know it, the man says he's done. I look over his work where he shows me there will still be visible evidence of the *break-in*. But it's solid and the locks are back in place.

I pay him and give him a cup of coffee to warm him on his way back home, but not before he tells me if I need help, I can call the cell on his business card, and he'll be happy to oblige. The look in his eyes makes it clear he's not talking about handyman work. He's more concerned about the enormous broody man that's hidden himself away in my bedroom.

I close the door and lock it, looking up the stairs with a grin on my lips. Throwing the business card onto the coffee table, I make my way upstairs. I burst into the room, finding Gage toweling off, his ass on full display.

He eyes me, straightening and letting the towel lift as he dries his hair. "Little one, you're drooling."

I close my mouth, licking my lips. It was a joke, but it's possible I was drooling.

He's a specimen all his own. He should be studied. "You know, the handyman gave me his card with his cell number on it. In case I need *help*."

He throws his towel into my hamper near the bathroom's entrance, slipping into boxers he'd brought with him. It's when I notice a bag on my bed.

He brought an overnight bag.

I inwardly squeal. It's probably not the time to build something with someone, but I can't help myself when I'm around him.

"Is the door fixed?" he asks.

I nod. “Yes, still visible proof you kicked it in, but I kind of like that there is,” I admit.

He fights a grin. “Good. Now we can see to your punishment.”

I swallow, blood rushing from my face as my heart speeds up. “Punishment?!”

He stalks towards me, massive thighs and torso flexing with each purpose-filled step. “I told you I would fix that door.”

That can't be what this is about.

“I’m an independent woman, Gage. Even though I love that you want to do things for me, I can do them myself. And besides, *you* broke it.”

He halts in front of me, looking down at me with his beautiful blue eyes, but they’re dancing with dark flames.

“And you’ve been so busy. What with me and our situation and whatever is going on with Ryker...I didn’t want to bother you.” I swallow, more out of anticipation because there’s nothing to swallow. Nervousness has dried my mouth out.

“I’m never too busy to take care of you, Carina. I was waiting for a new door to come in. And that’s not the point. When I tell you I’m going to handle something, I expect you to listen.”

Anger palpitates in my chest. “Excuse me?”

He lifts his upper lip in a snarl. “You heard me. Don’t play stupid, little one. It doesn’t suit you.”

I don’t know if I’ve ever been as angry as I am right now. At first, I thought he was kidding, toying with me to turn it into some sadistic, sexual game.

But the way he’s looking at me tells me he’s serious. He’s pissed at me.

“I’m not playing dumb. I was trying to wrap my head around you acting like a complete dick!” I spew, shoving his

chest as hard as I can, which doesn't move his solid body whatsoever.

In a flash, I'm turned around, his hand wrapped around my throat from behind, his hard length against my back, and his heated, panting breaths on my neck. "Don't fucking test my good nature, little phoenix. You know I don't have much left."

I can't help how my body tingles in his hold. The anger that had been raging through every cell has dissipated, buried beneath heavy arousal.

"When I tell you I'm going to take care of something for you, I need you to take my word for it," he says, his voice raspy and filled with gravel as it brushes my ear. "Do you understand me?"

I nod.

"Your words, Carina." He tightens his grip.

"Yes, Sir."

You've lost your fucking mind.

I don't argue with the inner observation, because I agree. Lost my fucking mind over my stalker. And there's nothing I can do about it.

"Better," he says, voice heated with a rueful tone. "Now, bend over the bed and pull your pants down."

What?!

He releases me, and I turn and eye him, absently rubbing my throat.

His dick is straining against his boxers, and even though I vehemently detest where I think this is going, the fact I affect him so much makes my feet start moving before I even second-guess them.

Hesitantly, I bend over the edge of the bed, lowering my leggings as I do. His eyes grow heavy as he watches, and it builds confidence in me. His words from before sound in my head.

You're in control. Say the word.

Voyeur.

I face front, letting him look his fill as my breathing speeds.

“God, Carina. Your skin is so beautiful. It’s going to look so good painted with my handprints, isn’t it?”

I swallow.

His hand comes down, caressing my right ass cheek softly. Then the left. The devil on my shoulder screams for him to touch the junction that’s slowly becoming slick for him with each pass of his hands.

“Now, why are you being punished?” he asks, and as his fingers swirl in circles over my skin. I can’t think straight.

“I disobeyed?” I manage.

“You sure? You don’t sound as if you believe what you did was wrong.” His hand finds my ass, cracking against my skin and making me squeal.

Warmth spreads through my belly, my center throbbing.

“I disobeyed!” I moan hoarsely.

A deep chuckle twists through the room. “You sure did.”

Another thwack of his hand shoots a sting of excitement through me. Rubbing my thighs together, I try my hardest to rub out some tension.

“Spread your legs,” he orders. Clearly, he’d seen me, and now is going to make it harder on me.

I listen, quickly spreading my feet apart. Hopefully, he likes what he sees and takes mercy on me.

“Good girl,” he praises, and I nearly choke on how much heat rushes through me. Coursing like the rapids over a riverbed.

I bite my lip, but when he spans me harder, my mouth drops open. The humiliation is gone and worry about what I’m letting happen is nonexistent. I’m lost in the feeling. The way

the pain sings the dark edges of my soul and feeds it at the same time.

On the fifth strike, he stops. Breathing heavily, just as affected as I am. “Pull your pants up.”

He clears his throat and steps back.

I pull my pants up, turning and eyeing him. I can’t help the tears that rim my eyes, lashes threatening to let them fall.

“You wanted to know me. I’m fucked up. This is me. I’ll be back before dark.”

With that, he slips into pants, grabbing his boots and bag and storms out of the room.

My chest rises and falls, burning with the need to cry, but I refuse. Breathing in deeply, I close my eyes and smile.

He let me in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Gage

I'm trying not to freak out too much when I get into my car and crank it. Rubbing my hands together, I blow heat into them, cupping them around my mouth. The image of Carina's feet spread, ass in the air, and slit teasing me as I spanked her raw is going to live in my head for the rest of my days.

She'd been on the verge of tears when I left her standing in her room, still holding the waist of her pants as she pulled them over her ass. Her cheeks are going to be chapped later. A thrill seeks its way through my veins when I realize they're going to be throbbing while we're with Emery later at his *meeting*. I had to let her see. Had to let the urges out that would eventually surface.

It's better this way.

I know she probably won't want anything to do with me after today. But she hadn't used her safe word, and that I can't wrap my mind around. Because the tears she'd been hanging onto for dear life told me what I'd done was too much for her.

When we find her answers, she's going to shut me out. I just know it. As the car finally heats up, I use the wipers to get the collecting snow off so I can see. Looking over to Ryker's house, I find it quiet.

I haven't had too much time to delve into him yet, but something is fishy. He doesn't spend every night here in this house, and I haven't had the energy to follow him to wherever he goes. I know that his patrol car is one he'd bought at

auction in town. He'd been let go from the department nearly two years ago. Even though it's an unmarked car, it's evident it's a police car. It's likely why it hadn't raised any red flags to Carina or anyone else in this area. The neighbor to the left of Ryker is sporting a *back the blue* sign proudly in his front yard.

I grumble, tabling whatever is going on with him for later. I have to meet with Trevor to go over any work we have for the week, it being Sunday and all. Then, I need to swap out all the clothes in my bag and get back to Carina's before Emery sends a car. Because I'll be damned if she goes to meet with him without me.

I don't care if she has a good vibe about him, he's still a red-blooded man, and he needs to stay far away from what's mine.

Pulling away from the curb, I make my way through the winding streets. Snowplows and salt trucks are already hard at work keeping most of them drivable as the frozen hellscape continues to grow. They're calling for a massive storm within the next two days, and I need to make sure I'm prepared. Make sure *she's* prepared.

I've been staying at her place every chance I get, which means the nights where I stalk my prey have been spent wrapped in her warmth, with cats surrounding us. I don't regret it one fucking bit. Even if Trevor isn't amused that we haven't closed out the Bancroft case yet.

When I pull up to Starbucks, I spy Trevor already at a table, chewing on a toothpick as he leans over his laptop.

I shut the car off, pulling my hood over my head and trekking out into the blistery cold. When I get inside, I shake off the collected snow and make my way to his table, knowing he's already ordered me a coffee.

I plop down, eyeing him as he lifts his eyes to me over his glasses. Usually he has contacts in place, but today he hadn't bothered. I fist my coffee, lifting it and sipping before setting it down. My eyes catch the name on the side *late* instead of my actual name.

I smirk. “You really can be a pain in the ass.”

He grins. “Where were you? Your new lady friend’s house?”

My chest tightens. It’s not that I don’t want to tell him about her, I just don’t want my two lives to cross. Especially with how dangerous some of the people are that we work with. And I don’t even know how long it’s going to last between us. Considering I just spanked her ass red and left her pussy glistening for me, probably not much longer.

He clears his throat, sensing he’s overstepped. “Where are you with the last few things you wanted to tie up on the Bancroft case? Because I checked on them today, and they said they’re back at home. His son has taken over and things are running smoother than ever.”

Half of me wants to tell him what’s going on, and how it’s tied to the woman I’m head-over-heels for. But the other half knows how he operates, and I don’t want him tracking me or Carina, or looking into anything further.

If he finds out I’ve been stalking a woman all this time, I’ll never hear the end of it.

“It’s probably nothing,” I tell him, lifting my cup to my lips. “Just some dirty ex-cop that was paid to do Garcia’s dirty work. Something felt off about it, and I wanted to look into it. I just haven’t gotten around to it yet.”

He narrows his gaze but bites his lip.

“Alright... Then, we should probably discuss your father,” he says sighing.

I sputter and nearly spit my coffee out. “What about him?”

Trevor winces, giving me a look that says he knows how the rest of this conversation is going to go. “He wants to meet. He knows you’ve been sniffing around some of his old files.”

“I thought you covered your fucking tracks!” I shout, looking around as eyes fly toward our table. “Why weren’t you careful?” I whisper through gritted teeth.

He slams his laptop shut. “I thought I did. But you know what kind of fucking people work for him. What kind of tech-savvy bastards he employs. Fuck, we used to be two of them, Gage!”

I scrub my face and sit back in my chair. “I know. Sorry, I’m just a little on edge lately.”

“A little? What’s going on with you, man? Is it the Stanner thing you’ve been looking into? Because if your father knows, it’s probably best to drop it. Him sniffing down our backs every day is the last thing we need.”

I close my eyes. “I’ll handle it. When does he want to meet?”

Trevor’s annoyance with me grows as I dismiss him. “Tomorrow.”

I nod. “I’ll be there. Same place?”

Trevor nods. “You know it. You want company?”

I shake my head.

“Listen, I’m going to need a little while away from work. Can you hold it down?”

Trevor and I built this company with the skills we learned while working for my father, taking on clients that couldn’t afford a big firm like my father’s. We have around ten employees beneath us, so I know the load won’t solely be on his shoulders.

“Of course, man. Do what you need to. Just...be careful,” he tells me.

I grab up my coffee, looking down at him before I head out. “I will.”



SITTING OUTSIDE OF CARINA'S HOUSE, I IDLE THE ENGINE. THE blinds are all open, and she's moving about as she readies to leave. I look over at Ryker's house. Still dark and empty. Something is going on with Detective Dickhead, but it's not enough to deter me from dealing with what's in front of me.

Carina.

She stops at the window, eyeing my car sitting outside. Even from where I sit, the worry on her face is clear. She's never seen my car. She doesn't know it's me. I sigh, turning off the engine and pocketing the keys. When I open the door and stand outside the car, letting her realize it's me, I head for the door.

I knock on the door, hoping it's locked. That she's been a good girl and kept herself safe while I was handling business.

Locks sound, the chain being the last before it opens to me. She looks up, tentatively biting her lip. A simmering heat flickers across her face. One I'd left on to boil before leaving earlier.

"I was worried," she says softly before moving back and allowing me inside.

It's past dark, the time I told her I'd be back. But I packed for a few days and cleaned up a little before running a few errands that took far longer than I'd anticipated.

"Yeah. Sorry about that, I should've texted."

I'm not used to texting. I'm not used to having anyone give a shit where I am.

"It's alright. Did you get everything done that you needed to?"

She's making small talk. Why is she making small talk?

She turns around, toying with the hem of her long sleeve shirt that's over dark jeans. She's got boots over her jeans that nearly touch her knee, and they look so fucking sexy.

As I take in the intricacies of what her posture and movements are telling me, her breathing changes.

“Mmm, I did, little one. And what did you do with the rest of your day?” I ask, stepping forward. She backs into the bar that separates the kitchen from the living room area.

“I read,” she admits, barely a whisper.

A book lies open on the bar, flipped open and upside down.

Credence, the title reads. Looks mundane enough. But when I lift it and read the page that she'd placed it down on, I lick my lips and look down at her, tscking with my tongue three times.

“So, is the rouge on your cheeks from what I did before I left here, or is it because of this filth you've been reading while I was away?” I ask.

She breathes out. “And if I said both?”

I shake my head, letting a laugh go before I even realize she's struck another crack in the wall surrounding my heart. It's been like this ever since my lips touched hers for the first time. Me trying to hang onto my good sense, and her breaking me down at every fucking turn.

“I was going to apologize for what I did earlier. It's all I've been thinking about since I left you standing in your bedroom,” I admit, placing the book back down, careful not to lose her spot. Because if what she's reading has her this ready to see me, I don't want to impede her finishing.

“You don't need to apologize. I asked to see you. I wanted in,” she taps my chest, “and you let me come in.”

I had, hadn't I? I'd let her see a sliver of the dark thoughts I fight in her presence. That I fight because of what I've seen. What I've done.

“I appreciate you trusted me enough to let it happen, little one. Because your trust means the fucking world to me.” I palm the bar, caging her in with my arms, leaning down and capturing her lips with mine.

I peck her lightly, pulling an inch back and watching her eyes close and her breathing grow shallow as I affect her just

as much as she does me.

“I do trust you. I’m safe with you.”

“What did you feel? During your punishment?” I ask breathlessly.

She’s so fucking intoxicating. I can barely hang onto my common sense after this morning.

“Everything. I was angry, and then it felt good, and then I wanted more. So much more,” she admits. “But when you left…”

I bite the inside of my cheek, bracing for what comes next.

Her eyelids open. “I was throbbing, Gage. Aching for your touch, and you just walked out.”

I swallow. “And how did it feel?”

“I was so fucking mad.” Her beautiful face grows even redder.

“And? Did you touch yourself, little one? Did you sink your fingers inside your soaking wet pussy? Did you fuck yourself while you thought of me spanking you?” I ask, hovering over her lips as her eyes flutter closed again.

A whimper escapes her, her heated breath fanning against my lips. My dick is aching in my pants, and I step forward with my left foot, placing it outside of her leg. Bending my knees, I drive my hardness against her jean-clad center.

She moans, grabbing for my hips and digging her nails in.

“Well,” I ask, “did you?”

“N—no,” she replies finally, and it makes me stop dead.

“You didn’t?”

She opens her eyes, shaking her head at me in answer. “No. I wanted you to be the one to make me come.”

Right before I self-combust, the fucking doorbell rings.

I growl, and she smiles. “Looks like we’ll both be punished a little longer, huh?”

She ducks under my arms that are still braced against the bar. If I'm honest, the bar is holding me up.

"Good evening, ma'am. Sir. I'm Henry. I'm here to escort you to meet with Mr. Stanner," an elderly man says when she opens the door.

I adjust my semi-hard dick in my pants before turning around.

Carina grabs her purse off the couch, clicking off the lamp next to the couch. "You ready?" she asks with a wicked smirk across her face.

"As I'll ever be, little one."

The man looks between the two of us, a knowing smile on his face, and I spy the wedding ring on his left hand. He knows the torment of the female variety all too well.

If he can survive, so can I.

He sent a fucking limo. As I get down the steps, snow crunching under my dress shoes, I move around Carina to hold the door open. She smiles brightly at me and then gets in, sliding across the leather seat to the other side.

I get in and close the door.

"The drive is about thirty minutes without traffic, and drinks have been provided in the mini-fridge if you'd like them," Henry tells us, and Carina looks around the limo with wide eyes and her mouth open.

I can't help but feel like it's a slight against me. He knew I was coming and he's flaunting his money. Probably unaware that I'm just as wealthy as he is.

"Thank you, Henry," Carina tells the man, and he smiles in the rear view at her before closing the divider to give us privacy.

Something that'll only make the drive there harder on me.

But then, Carina pipes up, "I think I want to sit where you are, swap seats with me?" She stands as Henry takes off from the curb, playing a game I wasn't ready to play when she's

thrown backwards into my lap. When she wiggles free, it hardens my dick all over again.

I groan as she apologizes and then sits back down.

When I lift my heated eyes to hers, she smiles knowingly.

I lied. I might not survive this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Emery

Opening the door, my eyes land on him first. He scowls, and I return it. Carina flicks her gaze between us before sighing and crossing her arms over her chest in distaste.

“Come in,” I tell them, backing away and holding the door open.

Carina looks between us again when we all settle into the living room, her pitbull heeling at her side on the leather sofa.

“I don’t think you two have formally met. Gage, Emery. Emery, Gage.”

She’s uncomfortable with both of us in the same space, so I let my grudge drop, if only for tonight.

Gage grunts in my direction, and I return it.

“Something to drink?” I offer, lifting my freshly poured whiskey toward them.

Gage shakes his head but looks at Carina. The way he eyes her is like nothing I’ve ever seen. Like she’s the only person in the world. The one his revolves around.

She shakes her head at me. “Why did we need to meet? What did you find?”

I take a tentative sip. I’m not looking forward to this conversation.

“I hired someone...rather, I have someone on my staff who investigates things for me. I set him to the task of finding Wes.

Because the more I thought of it, I couldn't recall ever seeing or hearing anything about him after that night."

Carina turns toward Gage. "So, someone like you?"

Gage's lips quirk, but he doesn't look away from me as he nods.

She turns back. "Alright, go ahead."

So, he's a fixer, then. Makes sense he has the same aura as the ones I employ. The arrogant air surrounding men who know their way around the law is unnerving.

"He didn't find so much as a breadcrumb about him. The only person that he could get to talk was his ex-girlfriend from high school. She said the last time she heard of him, he was homeless and not doing well at all and that was years ago."

Carina's face pains with emotion as she looks down at her hands. "So, even though we're going through this shit still, we made it, at least."

She's right, and guilt washes through me. "But Stan thinks he found him, though. He's been living in The Jungle."

The Jungle is an area near the greenbelt, where homeless have made a decent sized encampment. It's sad to know how far he's fallen.

"My God," Carina says, covering her mouth, and Gage rests his hand on her knee in comfort.

"Stan tried to get him to come with him, but he wouldn't. He's in bad shape, apparently."

Carina drops her hands to cover Gage's, and it's all I can stare at.

"I wanted to speak to you about that, but also about my hypnotherapy," I start, sitting forward and setting my whiskey down on the table.

She sits a little straighter. "Did it go well?"

Hope is what echoes in her voice, and I don't know if she's hopeful for answers, or hopeful I got what I needed out of the experience. Either way, it takes me aback.

“It went well, actually. She unlocked my memory of that night. I didn’t hit you. I hit the floor next to your head. But someone came in. Someone knocked me out. And the blow is probably where I lost memories.” I continue to tell her what the person said that entered the room, and how I couldn’t see anything but something striking my head.

“So, you didn’t...” she covers her mouth again. Tears overflow from her eyes at the realization that all her hate and planning had been directed at the wrong person.

“Now, I know you’re going to suspect everyone that was there, as you should. I’ve spoken to Conner, but he was tight-lipped. I won’t get in your way with him, however.”

Gage smirks. “You know how we interrogate.”

I nod. “If he was a part of this, he will deserve it.”

Carina shoots up, shaking her head. “I can’t... I’m so sorry, Emery. I shouldn’t have done what I did to you. I tortured you, and you weren’t even—”

I stand, moving for her with Gage’s eyes on me the entire time. I hold her to me. “Hey, it’s alright. Everyone should get electrocuted once in their life, right?”

She laughs before her sobs get louder. “It’s not funny!”

“It’s not, but it is. I’m fine, and it’s the past.”

“I should get arrested,” she says, pulling back and wiping her eyes.

“You should come back to work. Before Suzanne makes sure you get arrested. She’s floundering without you.”

Her lip quivers, and it’s adorable. “You’re sure you want me back there after what I did?”

I can’t help it, even with him staring a fucking hole through me. I pull her back toward me and wrap around her. “Of course I want you back at work, Carina. You’re the most capable person for the job. I still stand by what I said when I hired you. You’re overqualified.”

She tugs back, wiping her face.

“Unless you don’t want to come back to the office, but I’ll understand either way,” I add quickly.

Gage clears his throat.

Here the fuck we go.

“I think before she decides, we need to be certain of what Conner’s role was in all this fucking mess.”

“Mmm, like we’re sure what your role was?” I snap, knowing it was a low blow but letting it loose anyhow.

Carina sighs. “Can we not?”

Gage and I glare at one another for a beat, neither one breaking the silence. While I know she’ll never be mine—too much history and all that—there’s still an envious little voice in the back of my head that says to make his life hell. To give him shit for being the one who was her comfort instead of the one in her nightmares.

“What are we going to do, find Wes?” Carina asks.

I break eye contact with Gage and look over at her. She’s moved closer to the couch. Closer to him.

“We can. Or I can. However, you want to play it,” I reply. Letting her take the lead is best.

She grips the back of the couch, dropping her head in thought for a moment. “I think you should find him, and we should get him somewhere safe. Somewhere he can eat and bathe. Let’s see for our own eyes how he is before we bombard him with questions. Especially if he’s in bad shape.”

I nod. “I’ll have Stan start his search and let you know when it’s done.”

She lets out a weighty breath, her shoulders dropping. “I’m glad it wasn’t you, Emery. Because if it would’ve been, I would’ve never trusted my gut again. Because even when I knew I needed to be careful, that I needed to keep the walls up when I was near you, I never once felt threatened by you.”

A piece of my shattered soul heals under the warmth of her statement, and I smile at her. It’s all I can do. Words are

choked under emotion.

“We should go. I’ll be in touch once I—we—speak to Conner,” Gage says, standing and rounding the couch. His hand lightly touches her back as he looks down at her. It’s when I see the monster soften. Likely not something he lets anyone but her see.

I know she’ll be alright, then, because the world can’t get her with a villain standing guard.



IT’S BEEN HOURS SINCE GAGE AND CARINA LEFT, AND I’VE been leaning against the glass wall that faces the Seattle skyline for what seems like hours, looking at all the people below. It’s a wonder anyone gets through a fucking day if they’ve got half the shit going on in their lives that we do.

My phone dings and it’s a text from Stan, confirming he has his orders and will be in touch when he finds Wes and has him settled somewhere. I instructed him to rent an apartment and furnish it and fill it with food and amenities. It’ll be somewhere soft Wes can land. He was in my inner circle. I played football with him three out of four years in school. To think that after I went on to become C.E.O. of a fortune five-hundred company, he’d fallen into disrepair confounds me. Makes my heart fucking bleed and ache for him.

Our junior year was when it happened, the infamous night at Westpoint House. Looking back, it’s easy to see the signs he wasn’t okay. He dropped out of football, quit coming around Conner and me. He also was more withdrawn in class, and he ate lunch by himself. But we were all too self-absorbed and too stupid to see it. Or maybe we did see it, and we just didn’t care.

Either way, he was struggling, and we did nothing.

Well, that stops now.

I know I'm going to be on edge until I hear from Stan, so I've been drowning my inner thoughts with enough whiskey to kill a lesser man.

My phone rings in my pocket the instant I'm going to shove it inside, and I pull it back out.

Conner.

Why is he calling me?

The clock on the top of the screen tells me it's three in the morning. Unless something's wrong at the company, he never contacts me this late. Or early.

"Hello?" I answer.

Sounds like sobbing or gurgling sound from the other end.

"Conner?" I ask, setting down my whiskey on the bar as I move to the kitchen. "Conner, what's wrong?"

"I hid it all, Emery. I put her in a car with Wes," he manages.

Something's wrong.

Half of me wondering if he's not chained to a chair, a gun trained on him with Carina's hand holding the damned thing.

"Okay?" I answer.

"Listen, he's coming for you. You and anyone who knows. You didn't do it," Conner rasps, and my heart speeds in my chest. I hadn't told him about my appointment yet. I wasn't sure that he wasn't a bigger player on the board than I thought. I didn't want to give him any information.

"Who? Who's coming for me, Conner?"

"Be careful! Protect her," he whispers, and then the line goes silent.

"Conner?" I shout a few times, panic ripping a hole through my chest.

Hanging up, I dial 9-1-1 and rattle off Conner's address before slipping into shoes and a shirt.

Dialing Carina a few times, I finally get an answer.

“Emery? What’s the matter?” Her voice is full of sleep, and I wince at forgetting the hour before I called.

“I’m sorry I woke you. Did you go to Conner’s house? Are you with Conner?” I ask, even though she sounds as if she’s not coherent at all. I just woke her; I know I did. But still, my mind demands that I cover my bases.

“No, why? What’s wrong?” She’s alert, and I hear the bedspread rustle as she sits up, and then the clicking of a lamp.

“Where is he?” I grit, turning the engine over on my car, having raced down to the garage and ran to get into it.

“Who, Emery?”

“Your little pitbull, Carina. Where is Gage?”

“He’s right...Well he was right here when I fell asleep. I don’t know where he went. Emery, tell me what’s going on!”

“I don’t know what’s going on. But I’m betting your murderous other half knows. So, when you see him, why don’t you ask him, hmm?”

I hang up, knowing I’m not conducting myself in a manner befitting how I should, but I can’t help it. Conner has been my best friend since elementary, and me thinking him guilty is likely why he’s lying somewhere injured. I didn’t protect him. I didn’t let him in. Into any of this shit I’ve been working on with Carina.

Slamming the gas to the floor, I race across town, blowing red lights and skidding around corners.

If he’s dead, someone’s going to pay.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Carina

My mind is whirling when I set down the phone. Standing from bed, I look over to where Gage had been when I fell asleep. Emery sounded as if something was wrong with Conner. Something awful. I know he's going to want to blame Gage. But before we'd gone to sleep, we agreed to see it through to the end. To make sure revenge was served to the right individual. To the guilty one. I didn't want another mistake on my conscience.

Had he gone rogue? Did he wait for me to fall asleep and then sneak out?

Picking my phone up off the edge of the bed, I realize I have no way to contact Gage. Even though he's become a constant in my life, he's still very much a mystery to me. My heart hums in my chest, and I swallow down worry and doubt.

My phone pings, and I unlock it, hovering my thumb over the message app, where a new notification sits and waits for me to open it. I don't understand the hesitation, really. Is it because I'll have to face the music if it's Gage messaging? Will I have to face who he really is? Or is it because it could be Emery, telling me what harsh reality is happening with Conner?

I steel myself, wrapping my emotions in a metal box as I click onto the app and see that it's Emery.

He's gone. Conner is dead. Please tell me you've found Gage. Tell me this wasn't you guys.

I gasp, covering my mouth as tears begin to fall down my cheeks. Even if Conner had something to do with this, did he deserve to die? Did I want death to be my ultimate revenge for what happened to me? It's in this breadth of a moment I realize my answer is no. I don't want someone to die for what happened to me. And it makes my trail of vengeance seem like a waste of time. A life has been stolen, and we don't know the truth he took with him.

I'm so sorry, Emery.

Tell me it wasn't you.

It wasn't me. I can't speak for Gage, though. He's not here. I swear to you he was when I went to sleep.

I don't know if it's right to give Gage up to Emery in such a way. To not alibi him and say he's here with me. But it's the truth, and I've always prided myself on telling the truth. No matter what. The truth being covered up got us all here in the first place. What just lost Conner his life.

Guilt eats at me as I realize my path of seeking the truth could've just gotten someone killed, and now I have to live with it.

The cops say it looks like a drug deal gone bad.
But I can't help but feel like that's not right,
Carina. Not with all that's going on right now.

Was Conner on drugs? I don't know him well enough to answer any of the questions racing through my brain.

Do you need me to come over there?

I don't know what makes me ask him that. Maybe just the fact that I now know I'd wronged him. Maybe it was guilt that drove me to do so. Maybe it's just me extending the olive branch to someone who's hurting just as much as I am.

No. I'll come to you when I'm done here with the police.

Alright. If you need anything, let me know.

It feels odd to be so cordial with him, but I feel like last night we turned a corner. The nature of our relationship is evolving.

“Why are you awake so early?” Gage asks as he enters the bedroom. He’s in sleep pants and no shirt, his muscles on full display, and for a split-second, I almost forget all of what’s going on.

“Where were you?” I squeak, fresh tears making an appearance.

“What? Why? I was just out in the living room. I couldn’t sleep.” He rushes to me, pulling me into him. I can smell the cats on him, so I know he probably was inundated with all three of them, since none were in the room when I woke up.

“What’s the matter?” he asks, pulling back and holding me by the shoulders to peer down at me.

“Conner is dead. Killed. Emery called, thinking it was us, and then you weren’t in the bed...” I trail off, hoping he’s not offended that I instantly wondered if he’d done this. But how can he blame me?

“I was in the living room, little one. I couldn’t sleep after you fell asleep, so I went out and watched some television. Plus, we agreed last night that we’d see this through. I wouldn’t break my word to you.”

Tension leaves my chest as he reaches up and threads some of my hair behind my ear. “I was so worried you’d done it.”

“Did Emery say what the police are saying?”

I nod. “The police are saying drug deal gone wrong.”

He shakes his head in disbelief. “I looked into Conner when you took a job with him and Emery. He’s not into drugs. Booze and women, sure. Not drugs. Someone is setting it up to look like he is, though. But why?”

“Do you think this is related to the fire?” I ask, sniffing some more, trying to clear the sadness from my sinuses.

He turns away from me, pacing as I see the cogs in his brain turning furiously. “Why kill him all these years later, though?”

“That’s what I don’t understand. Unless he’s into something else you didn’t see in your research?”

“Possible. Men like him go to good lengths to hide the truth.”

“We’ll never know what his involvement was. We’ll never know his truth,” I say absently, sitting onto the side of the bed in a huff.

“Hey,” Gage says softly, coming closer and dropping to his knees in front of me. Grasping my hands in his, he looks up at me. “We will figure this out. It seems impossible, but it’s not. And this isn’t your fault. Alright?”

I nod, fighting the burning in my throat to not let emotions take over.

“Come back to bed. It’s where I was headed. Once it’s light out, we will go over and speak to Emery, huh?”

He leads me back under the covers, placing his body behind me as silence washes over the room. As Gage rubs my arm lightly, his warmth giving me something to cling to, my mind spirals out of control. Because even though he says it’s not my fault. It damn sure feels like it is.



“AND YOU THINK, WHAT, THAT I SNUCK OUT, KILLED HIM, AND then snuck back in?” Gage’s voice draws me back to the surface of consciousness. I rub sleep from my eyes, swinging my legs over the side of the bed and giving my brain a moment to come back online.

“I wouldn’t put it past you, *Gage*.” Emery is downstairs, and he’s said Gage’s name like it’s a curse. Or a leading insinuation that it’s, in fact, not his name.

“Listen, I know you’re hurting, as I would be if my best friend was just killed, but...”

“But nothing,” Emery cuts Gage off. “You of all people don’t get to stick your nose all in my fucking feelings. You’ve given her strength back, that’s clear to see. The Carina who walked into my office, and the Carina I’ve seen blossom since the night we three shared in the warehouse, are two different people. But don’t get so cocky that you can’t see past the tip of your own fucking nose!”

Gage scoffs. “Pot, kettle.”

I roll my eyes and make my way out of the room to the landing. I turn and head down the stairs slowly toward where I can still hear them bickering in the living room.

“Does she know what you do? Does she know who you truly are, Gage? Who your father is? You’ve done far worse things than setting a house on fire. Which reminds me, I don’t believe you forgot about that fire. Too convenient if you ask me,” Emery spews, and my feet stop shy of the last ten steps. Leaning against the wall, I wait for Gage’s words.

Because I need to hear them, and I need to hear them when he thinks I’m asleep. What will he let loose while he thinks I’m unaware?

Gage sighs. “I never said I didn’t remember setting the fire. I just didn’t put two and two together. Rochester, the fire, it was the first thing I’d done for my father. It was the least of the things that keep me up at night.”

My heart skips a few beats before getting back onto a healthy rhythm.

“Does she know you’ve killed?” Emery asks. “Because it wasn’t hard for Stan to dig up bodies that trail in your wake. None that can be tied to you, of course, but bodies that were surely your doing, under the direction of no one, too. It seems

you run your own business now. One that competes with your father's."

That has me backing up the steps a few paces. I always assumed he was still working for his father, handling orders blindly for him. I don't know why I had because he'd never expressly told me that fact.

It has me looking inward. Do I want to be near a man with a list of bodies he's stolen life from? My soul feels like it knows him. Like he'd never do anything unless he thought it was necessary. Is that where he and his father differed? Is that why he separated from his father's business?

I rub my eyes, worry building in every cavernous space of my body as the moments go on.

"She and I are none of your business, Mr. Stanner. You came here for a purpose, now what is it? Was it to accuse me of something I didn't do? Well, you've done that; you can leave."

Emery sighs, and it's almost palpable, the tension he releases into the atmosphere with it. "I just wanted to talk to her, man. All that's going on, it's just..."

"Do you truly think it was drug related?" Gage asks when Emery trails off.

"No. Conner and I might have partied back then, but I've never known him to be into that kind of shit. Booze and women were his thing."

"Maybe it would do to pull Stan from trying to find Wes and put him onto this. I can work on it with him, if you'd like. Though, your sentiments about me seem as though you don't want me anywhere near it. Which is also fine. Just a suggestion."

I step down a few stairs, waiting anxiously to hear Emery's answer.

He lets out a sigh that's wracked with emotion. "You're right. And even though Stan is the best at his job, he hasn't found Wes. It was like the lead he was given was fake. And

my feelings aside, you're also good at your job. Your track record proceeds you. I'll get you in touch with Stan."

Emery must look toward the end of the stairs because Gage says, "Let's not wake her. She's been through enough without having us disrupting her sleep, hmm?"

"Tell her I stopped by. When I know more, I'll be in touch."

"I will."

I pad back up the steps before Emery can see I've been eavesdropping the entire time, slipping closer to my door as I listen to him leave. Gage locks the door behind him.

"You can come out now, little one," he calls up, and even though I try to keep myself level-headed, my blood warms.

"You knew I was down here the entire time?" I ask, moving back down the stairs to where he stands by the front door.

He nods, a massive smirk tugging his sinful lips up. "I did. I can *feel* when you're nearby. Like a coming rainstorm. My hackles raise."

I chuckle. "I don't know if that's a compliment or not."

He laughs. "It is from someone who loves storms."

I lick my lips as my smile fades. It's easy to get lost in this thing between us. To forget that there's so much I don't know about him.

"So, you have questions I'll bet," he says.

And I nod.

He sighs from a place of resignation. "Well, come on. I'll make you breakfast and coffee while you carry out your inquisition."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Gage

As I fry bacon and scramble her eggs, taking a moment to pop a bagel into the toaster, she sips her coffee and arranges her questions in her mind. It's in the way she watches me with a careful gaze. Surely, she's wondering who the hell she's let into her life. With good right. I was her stalker at one point. And if she asks me to leave today, I will be her stalker once again. Because she's mine, and I'll never let her go.

"So?" I ask, not able to take the strained silence any longer.

She grips her mug tighter. "You've killed people."

It's not a question. Rather, a realization formed into a sentence. One constructed to get a rise out of me. To test my reaction to the words strung together.

I nod as the bagel pops up, maintaining her eye contact. "I have. And I don't think I've ever told you I was a good man."

She sets her mug down on the bar, pulling her hands back. I notice the shake in them, but I don't want to acknowledge it. "But you've killed for good reasons," she says. Once again, not a question.

"Not until I was free of my father." I set to plating her food, adding cream cheese to her bagel, and setting it down in front of her. She stands, moving to the fridge, grabbing apple butter and a butter knife from the silverware drawer and then sitting back on her barstool.

She smears apple butter over her cream cheese, and I smile. Decadent little thing.

“So, your father had you kill for the wrong reasons?” Her brow quirks as she eyes me, biting into her bagel and making me wish I was a pastry for a split-second.

“No, it wasn’t that. He likely could’ve had the same reason I do for ending people’s lives. But he wouldn’t let me in. I wanted to know the *why*, and he thought I should carry out orders blindly. Loyally. I’m not a man who kills without reason. It’s not who I am. So, I had to strike out on my own. Took a few of his finest with me, people with the same mindset as me, and started my firm.”

She digests it as she takes a bite of egg.

I grab a glass from the cabinet next to the sink, using the fridge’s ice machine to add some cubes. And then fill it with water. Sliding it across the bar to her, I let my hand linger on the glass so that hers will graze it.

She eyes our connected hands when she reaches for it.

“You didn’t forget setting the fire. It was just so long ago,” she murmurs as I pull my hand back.

“So long ago, and I didn’t know you were there. And I think part of me locked that night away in my head. Not knowing why I was setting it, but needing to do it anyhow, you know? I wanted into his firm, and to do so, I had to make a call. I didn’t know what I was covering up, or who could be in the house. I just had to act if I wanted to change my future.”

She nods along as she eats mindlessly, her entire brain likely trying to determine if I’m lying to her.

But I’m not.

I’ll never lie to her. Others, sure. Her, never.

I’m loyal to those I love.

“What if I decided that I didn’t want you in my life? Would you leave?” Her question hangs heavy between us, and I swallow against its weight.

“I would. But I would never be far, Carina. I’d be in every shadow you passed. The edge of every dream. Every alleyway. Hidden in every tree. Lurking behind every corner.”

She breathes in but holds my eye contact.

“I meant it, Carina. You’re mine. I’ll give you whatever you want. If you don’t want me here, I won’t be. But you’ll never be alone again.”

I mean every word.

“When I’m with you, I feel like I’m losing my mind. You feel safe, you feel like home. But you’re a killer. A person who makes things disappear. Someone who almost made me disappear.”

I come around the bar, and she turns in her stool to face me. Her teal robe slips a little, the top of her breast teasing me in the warm morning light.

“I think that’s what called me to you. I think that’s why I couldn’t forget you after that day in the market,” I admit.

She quirks a brow in question.

“Because you and I had unfinished business. I needed to right my wrongs against you. And though I can never give you back your sister, or your memories, I can protect you for the rest of your days. And love you to the ends of time.”

Her breath hitches. “You can’t love me. You don’t know me.”

I scoff. “Love has no timeframe. There’s no minimums or maximums to feelings, Carina. I know myself, and I know I love you. And what you do with that is your own business.”

“You didn’t kill my sister,” she whispers as I reach up and cup her cheek gently. Her eyes close, her face leaning into my touch.

I love these moments between us. How far she lets her walls drop when she feels me near. How one touch between us changes the particles in the air.

“I know that. But I ruined your chance of knowing where she was. Of her having a funeral. Even though I didn’t know it, I hid her from you. And I am sorry.”

She opens her eyes, her face still in my palm. They pin me in place, the world seeming to go on around us, while she and I are suspended in time. “Did you kill Conner?”

I shake my head. “No.”

She nods. “We need to find out who did. It’s too much of a coincidence. Do you think your father...” she trails off, likely worrying she’s just offended me.

“It’s crossed my mind since I found out. But I have people watching his every move, and they all say he’s not involved in this. I do think it’s too much of a coincidence, though. I agree with you there.”

“I’m going to go back to work for Emery when this is all over.” I know she’s said it to test how I’ll react, and I smirk at her brazenness.

“You know, as much as I think Emery Stanner is a blond-headed twat, he seems like a good man. I’ve vetted him, long before you even stepped foot in his building for your first day of work. I won’t stand in your way.”

She smiles. “You two have a hate for one another, that’s for certain.”

I cup her face with both hands, leaning forward and kissing her forehead. “No, little one, we both have a love for you. It pits us against one another naturally.”

She scoffs. “He doesn’t—Well, I don’t think he...”

“Trust me. He does.”

“Well, I don’t have feelings for him like that. There was a moment...”

She trails off, and now I want to know about this *moment* they’ve shared. So, I can cut it from her memory with my fucking blade. But that’s not fair to her. She’s lost enough already. Though the darkness simmers beneath my skin, I keep my hands and voice steady.

“Oh, a moment, eh?”

She swats my arm. “Not like that. There was an attraction between us. Nothing like the fire between you and I, though.”

I grunt. “He wouldn’t chase you and fuck you in a dark passageway with his blade against your throat, hmm?”

She swats me again. “You’re insufferable!”

I put my hands up in defense. “Hey, good men are hard to come by. Or so I hear.”

She stands off her stool, and I back up a few paces. When she tries to right her robe, I get a momentary shot of her bare pussy beneath it.

I move towards her, grabbing the string that binds it together with both hands, unraveling it slowly. “So, what’s the verdict? You going to keep the killer that’s been sleeping in your bed? Or are you going to turn me back out to the shadows?”

When the robe falls open, and the air caresses her skin, her nipples harden. I find it difficult to not imagine they’re beading for me.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she breathes when I slip my fingers through her folds. Something I need to think on. Don’t you agree?”

I growl at the feel of her velvet cunt stroking me right back as I move over her clit, her hips swirling and swaying with my hand. “Something you need to think on, or something you want to test drive a few more times before buying?”

“Gage!” Her shout is half pleasure, half annoyance when I pass over her entrance with my fingers a few times without entering.

“You can’t toy with darkness, little phoenix. You either dive in headfirst, or back away slowly. Which will you do, hmm?” I tease, rubbing over her clit with more pressure, her bucking against me as she grabs for the stool behind her for leverage.

“I feel like I’ve already been wading in the darkness with you since the first night I ran from you,” she breathes, admitting to me what I already know. But I need her to know it. I need her to want this. Because it’ll never work otherwise.

“Gage, please,” she begs, and it’s all I can do to not to lean right into her. To drown in her. Never coming up for air ever again and letting her essence feed me until the day she allows me to pass.

“What is it going to be, little one? The darkness with me, or the light without me. Because as hard as it’ll be to slink on the edges of sanity, watching what I can’t have, I’ll do it. I’ll do it for you.”

Her eyes open as I slip two fingers inside her. I watch as her mouth opens, letting out a groan of pleasure, her legs opening, and her cunt blossoming for me.

“I don’t know if you can’t see it, but you were made for me. Made to wade in the inky depths of madness with my hand the only thing keeping you afloat,” I tell her, pumping my fingers through her wet heat as her grip on the stool becomes harder.

A flash of awareness passes through her eyes. “Oh, so you do know. I don’t like to be toyed with, Carina. You need to let go. Let go and be mine. All fucking mine. And come hell or high water, I’ll protect you until my dying breath.”

“I’m already yours, you daft man,” she whimpers, grinding against my hand when I stop moving.

I lean forward. “And how am I to know, when the queen never told me?”

She captures my mouth with hers, and I savor the taste of her mixed with the breakfast I’d fed her. The simple way she kisses me stokes a flame I’ve had burning since the day I laid eyes on her.

When I lift her into my arms, she wraps her legs around my hips. I set her on the bar, robe splayed open, her body bare for me.

“It’s so strange to think how you came into my life,” she breathes. “That’s all that held me back. What would anyone think if they knew I was fucking my stalker?”

A laugh comes out more menacing than I’d meant. “Baby, no one on the face of this planet matters when it comes to you and me.”

She sits straight up, sinking her hands through my hair and tugging my mouth to hers, hovering there and just breathing with me. “You’re going to infect me with darkness, aren’t you? I’m going to become more depraved the longer I’m with you.”

“I think it’s the other way around. I think you’re going to bring me back into the light.”

“A balance,” she says softly.

“Mmm, I like that. We’re going to balance one another.”

Her lips come down on mine, her soft pillowy feel caressing the darkest parts of me, and for a moment I feel like one of those damned cats she dotes on. She’s petting me, giving me the attention I need, and I damn near purr for her.

Her hands make quick work of opening my pants, and I’m inside her in the next breath, moving slow and steady with her body as we both devour each stroke, each kiss, and each second of this joining.

Because we came into this kitchen as two people dancing around something delicate. Not knowing if we’re going to come together or be at odds. This is different than any other time I’ve been with her. This is comfortable. This is going to become our new normal. I don’t have to rush; I don’t have to worry that I’m being too soft or too gentle. Because there’s always next time.

“Gage, where’s your knife?”

Something wicked inside me smirks.

Oh, yeah. She’s mine.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Emery

The last few weeks have been a blur. Meetings with the cops. Meetings with the board of directors. Meetings with funeral directors.

Conner had no family other than mine, and my mom was beside herself with grief. I stayed with her until after the funeral was behind us, giving us a few days together. I had to let the world fall away and leave Carina and Gage to whatever it is they're going to do in the wake of this mess. Stan is still working to find Wes after the fake lead from his ex, who's since gone missing.

Conner's last words to me were a warning, and they've been repeating themselves over and over in my head. Since getting home, I've been drowning in whiskey and not wanting to come up for air. I know I can't go on like this. Things need to change, and it's what brought me back to the exquisite Dr. Glass, the hypnotherapist.

It's my third session with her. Tonight, we're dealing with my repressed memories, and a few of the harder memories I can't stand to face, even though they're very fresh and on the surface.

"You did great tonight, Emery. You've come a long way since the first time we met," Dr. Glass says, and I smirk as I slip my suit jacket back on, one arm at a time.

"Well, it's a lot of work, but I've got a good helper." I smirk, and she steps into me, buttoning my suit before I get the chance to do it myself. This is the way it's been with her and

me for a couple of weeks now. She gives the subtlest of hints that she has an attraction to me, while I get caught staring down her blouse every chance that I get.

But she never gives tell she's put off by the way she affects me. Even when I tried to help her reach something in a cabinet last week that she insisted she could reach, and her backside brushed against an obvious sign of my attraction to her.

I swore I felt the air between us tingle with glee, but I'm still raw with all that's going on, so I'm trying to keep my head on straight.

"About that," she says, swallowing obviously as I track her throat's movement.

I quirk a brow.

"I think it would be best if you see my partner from here on out. Dr. White is just as skilled as I am, if not more. And he will give you great care."

It's the thing I've been dreading because I knew it was coming. I'm not an idiot. The brief interactions between us can't happen. She could lose her career.

"I don't think that's necessary, Dr. Glass." I step closer, and the air changes.

"You and I both know that's a lie," she murmurs, looking up at me with a sinful pout to her lips I can't ignore.

"As you wish. But, if I'm his patient..."

She gets where my leading question is headed, and she swallows again. "It would still be wrong for you and me to... He's still my partner, so...I think it will just make this easier, though. In the long run."

I nod, thinking a few things over before speaking again. "Well, then, you're both fired. I don't need either of you. I'll find a new office to visit."

She steps backward. "What? Mr. Stanner, I didn't mean to offend you, I just think you'll be better suited to Dr. White, is all. You're doing so well in treatment; you need to keep going."

“And I will. Just not here. The next time I come here, I’ll be picking you up for dinner,” I say.

She opens and closes her mouth a few times, no words coming to her. “Well, I don’t think that will be appropriate.”

I turn and open the door. “Mark my words, Dr. Glass. You’ll be mine soon enough.”

I wink at her and then move out into the hall. I scold myself inwardly for the wink as I pull my keys from my pocket and slide into my car.

It feels good to drive myself, and it’s become something I’ve been doing more often. Giving Henry the night off to be with his family. Paid, of course.

You winked? You’re an idiot.

I grip the steering wheel as I shake my head, a wicked grin on my face before pushing the start button and letting the engine hum to life.

The world tumbles on its head when the cold barrel of a gun presses into my temple. My smile fades as my eyes lift to the rear-view mirror.

“Awe, and here I thought that smile was for me. Guess not, huh?” the man says, and I narrow my gaze on him.

I’ve seen him before, but I can’t place him with so much going through my head.

I open my mouth to ask who the fuck he is and what he wants, but he presses the gun harder into my skull. “Drive.”

He rattles off an address that I put into my navigation, and then I’m driving on autopilot through the streets of Seattle. It’s as if I’ve never driven them before, as if I’m seeing them like this for the first time. And I guess I am.

My life isn’t flashing before my eyes. But close enough.

“You killed Conner,” I say abruptly, and the gun twists against my head.

“Didn’t you hear? Conner was bad into drugs. Sad, really. When such talent gets washed down the drain like that. Such a

waste.”

I swallow as we pull into a warehouse. One that looks just like where Carina and Gage took me.

The man gets out of the back seat, opening my door and keeping his gun trained on me as he motions for me to get out.

Looking at him full-on, I realize I do know him. “You’re her neighbor. What the hell was your name? Ryker?”

He growls something under his breath. “Move into the building. I’m not dealing with you out on the street like this.”

I put my hands up in defense, following his every command, and hoping to God the mystery man who keeps an eye on me comes and saves my ass *before* anything happens this time.

He leads me inside of a dilapidated warehouse that houses tons of conveyer belts. It seems at one point in time they canned and shipped something out of here. Something that’s probably done on a much larger scale somewhere else now.

Every now and again, he shoves the gun into my spine urging me forward. It’s dark, save for the moon that’s illuminating the warehouse interior through the rows of upper windows where the walls meet the ceiling, casting a glow I’ll likely never forget. Because if I don’t die tonight, it’ll be the closest I’ve ever come to death.

“Tell me why. Why Conner, why me? Why were you living across from Carina? Were you stalking her, too?”

He laughs. “She no more has a stalker than she is crazy.”

Oh, she has a stalker, alright. Well, I guess *had* would be the appropriate terminology. But I keep my mouth shut. I don’t need this psychopath going after her. I don’t know what his motivations are. Could he be mentally unstable, and just going after men who are seen with her? Because if so, this is what Carina and I had already ruled out. Coincidence.

“Conner was getting close to blabbing, and I don’t need him running his fucking mouth. He found out about me weeks ago. Too fucking nosy for his own good. My fault really.

Shouldn't have walked over to the car that day. I knew you were too fucking wracked with guilt to remember. Or rather, too concussed." He smirks, like there's some unspoken joke only he's privy to.

Confusion is muddling through my brain rapidly. "So, Conner found out who you really were. And he was going to tell me? Or tell Carina?"

"Both. Fucking blabbermouth. Don't worry, though. My years on the force helped me cover my tracks well. No one will know it was me. He'll go down as a fucking dope head, like he should."

"Conner doesn't use drugs. Not since..." I trail off, shifting in my chair as he turns and points the gun lazily at me.

A grin spreads wide on his face. "Since what? Westpoint House?"

Rocks sink to the bottom of my stomach. "Yes. Since that night he hasn't touched a drug. Neither of us have."

"Well, he hid it well, at least. Conner has been abusing pills for years. Right under your nose. But you've been a shell of what you used to be. You were going to be someone remarkable before you came to the wrong party, Emery. Shit, so was I, I can't say anything."

Alarms blare in my head. "Wes?" It comes out as nothing more than a cracked whisper laced with fear.

"I wondered when you'd put two and two together. For Conner it only took one look to get him suspicious. He began following me in his off time, couldn't shake the little rat."

He'd never told me. I never knew he was following anyone. But he was that way. He always kept information close to the vest until he knew it was pertinent. Until I needed to be looped in. He took on a lot while we were friends. While we were brothers.

I drop my face as tears build in my eyes for the last brother I had and now have lost.

It never gets any easier, loss.

“Tell me, Stanner, how did it feel to wake up thinking you’d raped that girl?”

“I—I didn’t remember. Not until recently when memories kept coming back in these odd waves. But some weren’t right. Some were skewed.”

“Mmm, the brain will play tricks on you. Especially when drugs are involved.”

“Wait, you...” I lift my face towards him again as pride washes over his features.

“You know, when she let me into her bedroom willingly awhile back, I don’t think she realized that I was the very man she was looking for. But man was it sweet to have her open to me willingly. Though, I’ve always like it when they scream.”

“I think after today I’m going to like the sound of screams, too,” a female voice sounds, and Wes is too late in turning around. Carina is on him with a gun, her faithful pitbull pressing another gun to Wes’s left temple in a flash.

A tremble of relief moves through me, but it’s tangled with pain and worry for what Carina just had to hear firsthand.

“Drop the gun, Detective Dickhead,” Gage snarls, and respect grows in my chest for him.

Wes drops the gun to the ground, and Carina kicks it away from him. Gage nods at her.

“Emery, get out of that chair,” Carina tells me, her voice quaking with emotion.

I quickly stand and push it toward where she is backing Wes up.

“Sit,” she commands, and I think both Gage and I feel both our own knees try to buckle under the power of it.

Wes drops down as I round behind Carina. His face is still smug as ever. That is, until she rears back with her weapon and cracks it across his face.

Wes turns back, nose bleeding, and spits blood onto the floor near her feet.

“What is the matter with you? Who the fuck are you? I remember riding with you somewhere and you looked scared!” Carina’s voice is wavering, but the strength she exudes is beautiful.

Gage doesn’t move his gun an inch, only keeps it fixed to Wes’s temple in case he needs to take out the threat to his girl.

And I’m forever grateful that he’s the kind of man he is. For her. For me.

“Oh, honey, you didn’t know me too well. Did she, Stanner?” He looks around Carina to me.

“What’s he talking about?” She turns toward me, not moving her weapon off Wes.

I sigh. “We had a running joke about him having multiple personalities back in high school. He could cry on a dime if he was in trouble. Or look afraid if a teacher scolded him. It got him out of so much shit. Now, I think we were right. He’s a fucking sociopath!”

Wes chuckles, rolling his eyes. “I know you are, but what am I? Get on with it already, either shoot the fucking gun or let me go.”

“We’ve got far better plans for you,” Gage mumbles, and Wes eyes him.

“Who the fuck are you again?”

I laugh. “That’s the stalker you swore was in her head.”

Wes’ brows raise. “Well, that’s a plot twist I didn’t see coming.”

“Why?” Carina breaks in. “Why did you do what you did to me that night?”

“Oh, don’t be like that, sweetheart. It only hurt for a minute, right?” Wes taunts, leaning forward as Carina gasps and steps backward into me.

It’s as if his words are the key to unlocking everything she had inside her mind. Everything she’d hidden from herself.

“He did it. It was him. It wasn’t you. His face. It’s so clear!” she sobs, turning into me.

“Make the call, Carina!” Gage shouts, pressing his gun further into Wes’ temple. “Or I’m going to.”

Carina turns in my arms and looks at Wes and then looks back at me. “Don’t think badly of me after tonight,” she says to me.

I lift my hand and brush the blonde hair that’s escaped her messy bun away from her face.

“I could never.”

She nods, turning and aiming her weapon at Wes.

He laughs. “Like you’d ever—“

The gun goes off, echoing through the warehouse and making my ears ring. When Gage holsters his weapon into the back of his pants, he moves towards Carina.

“Alright, little one, hand it back to me. Just like we practiced, alright?”

She’s shaking, grappling with what just happened.

She nods, handing Gage the gun, and he puts the safety on and curls her into his body as she holds onto him like he’s her life raft.

“Oh, good, you’re not the one tied to a chair this time,” a man says, and I whip around in panic. We’ve got a man dead in a fucking chair, shot point blank and bleeding out. We don’t need company.

“Trevor?” Gage says, and my savior from before eyes him.

“Oh, damn.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Gage asks.

“Well, boss, if I’m honest, I’ve been doing some off the books stuff, ya know? You don’t pay too well, being that you’re always doing free fucking jobs. I’ve got a mortgage to pay, and kids to feed.”

Gage smirks. “So, you’re the one who untied my captive?”

Trevor shrugs. “Never imagined that both jobs would ever cross wires, but it all worked out in the end, didn’t it? Want me to get this cleaned up? I can get Stephanie and her team out here for a good cleaning.”

Gage nods. “Yeah, handle that. I’m going to get these two home.”

“I have my car,” I say, “but I’ll follow you. I damn sure want to know how you knew where I was.”

“Your place, or ours?” I don’t miss how he calls her place theirs, but it only makes me happy she’s found him. For a while I thought I wanted to be the one with her, but she’s found a man who can protect her from the world. One that can hold her to reality, while letting her linger in the dark side, too.

“Let’s get her home,” I tell Gage.

He and Carina head for the door to the warehouse.

I turn back to where Trevor is ending a call with who I assume is a clean-up crew. “You know, you’re always just a touch too late?”

He laughs. “Yeah, well, you try to be a fixer, a fucking P.I., and a wealthy dude’s babysitter, all while raising kids and keeping a marriage alive.”

I laugh. “Touché.”

“She going to be alright?” Trevor asks, nodding his head in the direction of where Gage has led Carina out to their car.

I smile. “She’ll be just fine. She’s got Gage.”

“Lucky girl,” Trevor says, and for once, I have to agree.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Carina

After a shower and change of clothes, I'm sitting in the living room, surrounded by cats and men. Emery followed us home, likely to figure out what we've been up to the last couple of weeks that led us to saving his life.

And boy, what a journey it was.

"So, don't leave any details out," Emery says, a forced laugh coming out of him.

"I was following *Ryker* for an unrelated job. And while I was doing so, I found he was following not only you, but sitting on Carina's house. He had houses near your house and hers. Not only that, but his true house was hours from here. I knew he wasn't who he said he was, so we started down the path of finding out who he was."

"I actually found an old yearbook of ours buried in my closet, and I was showing Gage some photos and we stumbled upon Wes' picture. He does look like he used to in some respects," I tell Emery. "But in others, he didn't. It didn't make sense."

"Not until I dug up medical files on him. He'd had some face altering surgeries done. Now, as to why he was following you both, and what his plans were, we'll never know. What I do know is that your father had been paying him handsomely until his death. After which, the money stopped going into his account. So, likely he was scheming a way to get his cash flow back," Gage tells Emery.

Emery sits back, a look of disbelief washing over his face. “So, he was going to figure out a way to get more money? What the fuck?”

“He was a piece of shit. He did become an officer but was let go when he was accused of raping one of his fellow officers. It was dropped and swept under the rug, so the department didn’t take the heat for it, but I don’t think he’s ever stopped hurting people.” Emery looks at me with pity in his eyes, and I don’t fight it.

I don’t have the energy.

“Are you alright?”

No, I killed a man.

Still, I nod.

This will be my burden to bear. But I don’t feel guilty for what I did. He’d have never gotten what he should’ve. It’s been too long since he hurt me, and they already hid his other rape. He would’ve walked. And Gage already looked over Conner’s case, he framed it too well.

We found women who were silenced while he was an officer, and women who have since put in reports on him. He was a fucking predator. Now, he’s hopefully at the bottom of some river, with cement shoes.

I know it’s going to take me a long time to be okay with what I did. But I will eventually be alright. Because he will never harm another.

The plan was to call the cops. For me to call when I got my answers, while Gage kept him hostage. But once he’d said the words that he said to me all those years ago—once my memory fully unlocked and the floodgates were opened—it was like I snapped.

In that moment, I wasn’t just Carina, seeking justice. No, I was all his victims. We all held the gun together; we all got our revenge together.

“So, Trevor is your man, huh?” Emery asks Gage, shifting the conversation, and I’m forever thankful.

Gage grins. “Yeah, he is.”

“You should work on his timing. It’s kind of shit.”

Gage laughs. “Will do. Though, he’s overstretched himself, to be fair. I think I’ll put a different man on you from now on and start actually charging clients.”

“Oh, you don’t have to protect me...”

“Yes, he does,” I bite.

Even if Emery doesn’t want protection, I need to know he’s okay. Once we get past our combined pasts, I know we’re going to be good friends. And the world is a sick and fucked up place.

“Well, alright then,” Emery concedes. “I’m glad you all were there tonight. But why didn’t you loop me in?”

“You mean during the funeral proceedings, or while you were drinking yourself stupid? You had enough going on. Plus, we needed it to be believable when he moved on you,” Gage says nonchalantly.

“Wait, you used me as bait?”

“I mean, in not so many words. But we always had your six,” Gage replies, and I giggle.

I’d tried to get him to tell Emery, but I think Gage had been right all along, he was too far into his grief to handle having to go through something like this on top of it.

It needed to happen the way that it did.

“Well, I’m going to take my ass home and have some whiskey and go to fucking bed for a week,” Emery says, standing.

Gage shakes his hand, and then Emery comes around to hug me tight.

“When will I see you again?” he asks.

“In two weeks, when I come back to work, Boss.” I smile up at him, and for the first time in a while, true happiness glimmers in his eyes.

“Good. I’ll see you then. Thanks for having my six, whatever the fuck that means.”

I chuckle. “You’re most welcome.”

We watch Emery pull away into the night, the heat from his tailpipe making a trail of smoke behind him, lights growing dimmer as he speeds off.

Gage puts his arm around me. “Are you really alright? I know the plan didn’t go as we wanted it to.”

“It needed to end that way, Gage. You knew it. You just didn’t know how to break it to me.”

He sighs, turning me into him and wrapping around me. “Oh, my little phoenix, ever the wise little bird.”

I close my eyes, letting the feel of being in his arms soothe my damaged soul. But for once, I don’t feel demons nipping at it when the edges of darkness creep in. I wonder if this new path will be easier to navigate than I thought it would be .

“Come, let’s get you into bed,” Gage says softly, kissing my hair and leading me towards the door.

“Mmm, let’s.”



HIS FACE IS BURIED BETWEEN MY THIGHS, AND MY MIND IS muddled with pleasure. His tongue laps swirls around my clit, fingers curling brazenly against my inner walls. My back arches off the bed, and I groan. One of the cats is scratching to get in from in the hall, and I grin before his teeth graze my clit, and the world tips.

I reach down between my legs, gripping his hair tight in my hand and lifting his face to look at me. “More. I need

more,” is all I manage as our eyes lock.

His pupils are blown in the low light of the lamp on my bedside table.

“Your words,” he growls, lips glistening from his efforts, and a heat already blazing in my belly turns up a notch.

“Fuck me,” I tell him. It feels foreign on my lips to be so outspoken about what I want. To demand something from him in such a manner.

But he doesn’t seem to mind.

Crawling up my body, he doesn’t drop eye contact. The head of his cock slides between my folds as he places both hands next to either side of my face, looking down at me with intensity. A look that curls around my clit, lapping at me like his tongue just was.

“I’m so proud of you,” he tells me, voice low and full of arousal.

“Wh—what?” I stammer, trying to make sense of what he could mean.

He can’t mean... Some of the excitement thrumming through me gets doused in ice water.

“You mean you’re proud of me for what happened? What I did?” My hands find his solid chest, placing a barrier that appeases my racing heart.

He shakes his head, dropping onto his forearms, cock sliding backward and reminding me just how much I want him.

“No, sweet little phoenix. I’m proud of you for emerging. For becoming stronger from the flames.

His words ripple in my head, settling something inside me, and my hands slither up his neck, finding either side of his face. “I was strong before you, Gage. But with you, I’m immortal. At least, that’s what it feels like.”

A wicked smirk plays on his lips. “Oh, you bleed just like any other mortal woman. Trust me.”

“Do I?” I ask, toying with him. His earlier threats were ones I know he’d love to carry out, but he never has.

“Always pushing the envelope. It’s as if you want me to sting you,” he groans, pulling his hips back and sliding home.

I wrap my arms around his neck, and my legs around his ass, arching into him.

“And what if I do? It’s not my fault. What if I want you to cut me up and use me like your little fuck toy?” I breathe as he fucks me deep and hard.

His mouth drops, his lips bruising mine in a punishing kiss I never want to end. I swallow a growl that reverberates through my entire body. When he lifts onto one elbow, wrapping his hand around my throat firmly, eyes wild with fire, I don’t have time to catch my breath from his kiss before I’m under his command.

“Is this what you need, little one? To straddle the edge?” His question makes me question my sanity. Is it what I need?

He slows his thrusts to a near punishing speed, drawing his cock to the tip and then pushing back in with a roll of his hips that has my body on fire.

I nod, answering his question before I think better of it.

He smirks. “Alright then.”

His hand tightens. “You’re my dark girl, aren’t you? You’ve always been drawn to the shadows, looking for something more. Needing more. You were waiting for me.”

I can’t answer him. My body is ablaze. My chest is burning with the need to breathe, but that’s not what I’m worried about. I’m worried about the building pressure in my stomach, the tingling traveling my nerve endings. The one that says *shatter for him*.

“No need to answer, little one. I know you were waiting for me. I’ve known you were mine since I first saw you. Fate tried to bring us together once. Tried to get me to save you early in life, but I wasn’t ready. I wasn’t a man worthy of you yet.”

His words are beautiful, but I'm lost to his body, lost to the ache in my bones. The call of death beyond this room.

"You need to breathe, don't you, little one? Yes, you need air," he tells me, but he grips my throat tighter, whispering, "Come for me like good little girl, and I'll let you live. Come or die."

My mouth gapes as the edges of my vision blur right before my pussy breaks and grips him tighter. He hisses, giving into the feel of my orgasm latching onto him, clutching him like a vise. His hand instinctively loosens as he forgets the need to control me, give me what I need, and he chases his own end.

Air leaks back into my body, blood rushing from my head downward. The room spins as he pulls out of me, flips me over in one swift movement, and then buries back inside me demandingly.

"Fuck, you feel so fucking good. The way your pussy clenches when you come, it's all I want to feel for the rest of my life, Carina," he snarls through gritted teeth.

A moan rips from me, body racing for another cliff as he fucks me roughly, hitting a new depth I've never felt before with the new angle. His massive hands grip my hips, squeezing and giving me a pain to cling to. One to clear my post-orgasm fog out and allow me to focus on the way he's giving me what I didn't know I needed.

Even in his arduous, punishing strokes, he's tender in his own way with me. He's what I need. He's what's been lurking in the dark, waiting for me to be ready. He's who gave me the revenge he promised.

"God, look how well you fucking take me. I'm going to fill this pretty pussy up, little one. And one of these days, I'm going to claim this hole as mine, too. Every fucking part of you is going to know my cum."

His words register as his finger rims my ass hole.

I whimper as I feel another orgasm barreling towards the surface.

“Fuck, fuck,” he grits, gripping my hips painfully. It throws me over the edge, and I come. A string of curses fly off my tongue as I grip the pillows under my hands and ride the wave of my second orgasm. Gage breaks, pressing forward in one hard thrust, the warmth of his cum searing my insides and making me anew.

Because if I’m a phoenix, he’s the fire I rose from.

“I love you,” I moan as the last shudders simmer in my bones.

He grips my hair, yanking my head back. He looks down at me, cock still twitching in my pussy, cum leaking from our junction. “And I love you, little one.”

Something seals between us. I feel it in my chest. And I know that we’ve just turned a page. We left the haunting bullshit on the last page of the last chapter, and this new chapter is going to be epic.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Emery

Two Years Later

Logging out of my office computer, I spin my chair and look out the windows behind my desk. The twilight skyline of Seattle dances and twinkles, telling me it's time to get home. Today had been a long one, full of meetings and bullshit I'd rather not be doing. Because lately home is where I want to be.

Walking out of my office, I make a beeline for the elevators, passing Conner's old office. Sparing a moment, I stop and rest my hand on the door, touching his nameplate solemnly. Just as I do each time, I leave work.

No one will ever use this office again. Until I've moved onto a new building, and the offices are repurposed by someone else. Because if I take his name down and fill this room, he'll be gone. I simply can't do it. I need some piece of him alive with me. So, I keep him nearest at work. The one place we usually agreed on things. The place we spent the most time together. Even when Father was grooming us both to become more. To become perfect in his image.

“Goodnight, old friend.”

We've had many a dinner, Carina, Gage, and me. Ones where we rehashed everything. Pieced together what role Conner played in everything. And don't get me wrong, he played a big one. He was the hand shuffling the deck. He was the one who offered Carina water when he found her on the floor of the bathroom. Water laced with the same drugs that

had been pumping in my own veins. He was the one who'd gotten a car from my father, put her and Wes into it, not knowing he was her rapist, and sent them to my father, where both were to be *dealt* with.

Carina had escaped. That was the part she didn't recall until almost a year to the day after Wes' death in that dingy warehouse. She jumped from the moving vehicle, and it was where she'd gained the majority of the injuries on her hospital report. Where Wes had gone on and made a sweet deal with Daddy Dearest. He'd gotten paid handsomely, up until the day my father took his last breath. And then I took over the company and cut him off, unknowingly. I recall absently Conner questioning me about cancelling the account, but I gave him a stern, no bullshit answer.

"I'm not going to stay in bed with any of the shady people he did. I'm doing this thing right, Conner. The end."

Without access to the accounts that paid Wes, or the information I'd already shredded about the account it was being wired to, I'd left Conner in a tricky situation. He likely knew Wes would come. Knew a shitstorm was brewing, but how could he tell me?

We'd gotten as close as brothers over the years, and I'm certain he didn't want to rock the boat. Didn't want to ruin anything between us. But I've had help. Dr. White and I have done extensive work to get my memories back, and even some of Carina's. And it's helped us both deal with a shit-ton of past trauma.

I had Westpoint House torn down. Carina and I watched it go in pieces. It rained the entire day while crews worked to remove chunks bit-by-bit. And I thought it was fitting. Like it was washing us clean of the smudges on our past. We left from there new people, fully in control and trying to become something different.

I finally let my hand drop from the door, and I move to the elevator, bumping into Suzanne when I round the corner too quickly.

"Shit! You scared me!" she shrieks.

I place my hand over my heart, breathing heavily as a chuckle leaves me. “Sorry. I didn’t know anyone was still here.”

“You know I am. Carina overloaded me with work. Took my campaign and threw it back at me, citing too many errors and that I didn’t give it enough sensitivity. She thinks the mainstream media will eat it alive.”

I smirk. *Sounds like Carina.* “Well, you’d better get to it, then.”

Carina had come back to work the day she said she would and hasn’t left. She’s an intricate part of Stanner Enterprises now, and I can’t see the company without her. She drives us all to do better and keeps on our ass until we do.

The elevator dings, and I bid Suzanne good night as I move onto it and hit B to get to the underground garage.

The drive home is serene. Snow has begun to fall as Christmas approaches, and it makes the world magical. And when I finally pull up to my house, I take it in. No longer do I live like a bachelor lording over those beneath me. I have a home that is warm and inviting. Something I love to just sit back and look at. One I have friends and family come to in the summer for backyard gatherings. One I never saw for myself looking forward. And this journey Carina took me on is wholeheartedly the reason for all of it, and I can never thank her enough.

I slam the car door, tightening my jacket as I crunch up the thin layer of snow on the walk to the door. Using my key to get in, I move inside. The scent of something baking with a hint of cinnamon wafts up my nose, and I close my eyes and let it wrap around me.

“I’m home!”

No answer comes, so I shuck out of my jacket and hang it, kicking my shoes off so I don’t get my ass kicked for tracking wet footprints across the floors.

“Camilla?” I call out.

When I get to the archway that leads into the kitchen, I see the reason she can't hear me. Her AirPods are firmly in her ears, body moving back and forth as she listens to music while she bakes. There are muffins cooling on every surface and flour on her backside, where she's likely been wiping her hands for the last few hours.

I smirk, leaning against the fridge to take in the show.

She sings off-key, and I laugh, covering my mouth even though she can't hear me. She turns, eyes me, and screams, throwing the spoon she'd been using to sing into behind her. It hits a cupboard and then drops to the counter, bouncing and making its final landing on the floor.

She removes her Air Pods, tucking them into the pocket of her apron that's spread across her curvy body perfectly.

"When did you get home?" she asks breathlessly, her eyes accusing.

I smile, pushing off the fridge and coming in front of her. My hands find her hips, pulling her into me as I drop my face into her hair. "Only just."

"You scared me," she says lowly into my chest.

"I didn't mean to, my love. I just wanted to watch you. What is going on in here, anyway? Do you need all these muffins? And should you be on your feet? The doctor said..."

She pulls back, crossing her arms over her swollen breasts and it only accentuates the curve of her stomach. "I'm a doctor too, you know?"

I laugh, my hands coming down to find either side of her pregnant belly. "You're a psychologist, my love. You're not trained in child rearing, are you?"

She tuts. "It can't be that hard. And I'm making all this for the baby shower."

"I thought you and Carina agreed you were going to let her do it? You said you'd behave."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm just helping."

I nod, pulling my phone from my pocket and unlocking it. She lurches forward, snagging it from me in a flash, and I grin at her. “She doesn’t know what you’re doing, does she?”

“Not really, no.” She drops her eyes to the floor.

I lift her chin, finding her lips with mine. “That’s your last batch. And then I’ll clean this mess up. Do you understand me, Dr. Stanner?”

She growls into my kiss, deepening it as her hands slip into my hair.

Blood rushes through my body, dick lengthening for her instantly, as it always does.

“You know,” she says, pulling back as I lead her out of the kitchen and toward the dining room. “I could hypnotize you, and you’d never know what happened here.”

“Oh, using your skills for evil, hmm? That’s what you’re doing nowadays?”

I lift her, carefully placing her onto the table, her legs spread open under her nightgown she has on beneath her apron.

“Emery,” she whimpers when my fingers find their way home, sinking into her wet pussy, teasing and readying her for me.

“Hmm?”

“Do you think we should?”

“I asked the doctor. She said it was fine. Only that I needed to keep you off your feet the next few weeks. You’re off your feet. You’re on the table,” I groan, finding her lips with mine and silencing her answering chuckle. Her tongue meets mine, sensuously moving against it.

Her hands work my cock free, and I lift and move her to the edge of the table before I reach behind her to untie her apron.

“You don’t have to... Leave it on...” She’s impatient for me. She has been since she got pregnant. Her hormones are

my best friend.

I shake my head. “When I fucked my babies into you, I had you naked, splayed out for me like a perfect art piece. And that’s how I’ll fuck you the rest of our lives. You’re so fucking beautiful. I want to see every inch of you!”

She sighs heatedly as I throw the apron aside and then lift her nightgown over her head, discarding it, too. Her full breasts sit over her protruding belly, where twin boys grow strong and nearly ready for the world.

I bend my knees, tugging her nipples one by one into my mouth, and she leans back on her hands, letting go of her fears and inhibitions, letting me savour what’s mine.

Her nipples have darkened with her pregnancy, something the doctor told us was normal, and she’s been more apt to hide them recently. It’s been my mission to make her feel more beautiful in her skin. To make her see how much it turns me on to fuck her with her body on display. To watch my cock sink into the very vessel growing my children.

She amazes me. This life amazes me. I never knew this would exist for me. And now that I do, I want to do it perfectly. I want it to be right.

I tweak her right nipple, and she cries out, letting her head fall back. Her feet hook behind my legs as I watch milk seep from her nipple. She’s only weeks away from birth, and my fascination with her changing body has been something neither of us understand, but everything about her drives me insane.

She’s my world. My everything. My fucking addiction.

Using my thumb, I pad threw the milk, letting it swirl around her nipple with my touch, and it glistens in the in the light hanging above the table.

“So fucking beautiful, and all mine.”

“God, you love to toy with me, don’t you?” Her eyes are wild, hormones doing most of my work for me while I’m not even home.

I laugh. “Oh, is my wife greedy for me tonight? Might that be what all the muffins in my kitchen are about?”

She chuckles, biting her lip as I find the left nipple, tugging it and tweaking it, letting the smallest bead of milk release. She watches me, moaning and shifting on the table.

Using the other hand, I fist my dick, finding her entrance with it and lining up. When I slowly sink into her, her body makes way for me. She’s swollen inside, body readying and changing for what’s to come, and I hiss at the feel of the way she grips me.

“God, you always feel so fucking good,” I groan, forgetting her nipple, and leaning forward, placing my hands next to her thighs on the table. Her hands move up, gripping my upper arms for stability as she lets go and our moans meld together to make a nighttime chorus in our dining room.

“I need you deeper, harder. Fuck, I need more!” Her request is something I’d love to give her, but she’s going to have to wait for that until our sons are born. And she knows it, but she has to tell me.

I gently lie her back on the table, my fingers finding her clit, pressing hard as I fuck her.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful, baby,” I tell her, one hand on her belly, the other giving her the friction she needs.

Her walls tighten and grip me in waves as she nears her first release, but it won’t be her last. No, I plan to hear her scream for me at least two times before I come inside her. Plan to leave her a simpering mess, so that she can sleep tonight. So, no discomfort or ache is keeping her awake. I’m going to curl her up in that infernal pregnancy pillow she has in the middle of our bed that takes up way too much room and rub her back until her snores lull me to sleep.

“God, Emery, don’t fucking stop!” Her tone makes my toes curl as I continue to fuck her, rubbing her clit even rougher, trying to get her there faster.

“Emery!” she cries out, and ashamedly, I press forward and let the clenching of her walls around me take me with her.

Jutting forward, cum ropes out of me.

“Camilla!” I grit out.

We both come down, and then she eyes me from below, running her hands through her hair as she chuckles.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing. Just, you were right. This is what I needed.”

I pull out of her, stepping back to watch some of my cum seep out of her, finding its way to the table. When I step back into her, she raises her hand for me to help her sit up, but I ignore her.

My fingers sink through our mixed orgasm, twisting upward and brushing her G-spot.

“Emery, what are you doing?”

“I’m not done with you,” I tell her simply, dropping down onto my knees and suckling her clit.

I might not have had the best start in life, death seemed to follow me like an old friend, and situations beyond my control controlled me for far too long. But I’m in control now. And it’s going to be the best second half of life that there ever was.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Carina

My heart hammers in my chest as I look for somewhere to hide. He's going to fucking catch me and the knowledge has me panicked. The woods are cold. Yesterday, snow fell. And even though the morning sun melted it, the temperature took another dip when the sun went down this evening.

Don't panic. You've got this. Breathe.

My inner thoughts only halt my racing heart momentarily. A twig snaps beyond where I'm standing next to a massive pine, and my hand grips the cold bark tighter as I squeal. I'm off again, running through thick overgrowth and trying not to stumble over deadfall and massive roots growing above ground.

"Fuck," I grumble, when my jacket snags a vine hanging too low, and I nearly fall. The ground is wet and soggy. I don't want to fall onto it because being cold and wet isn't what I want to be right now.

I need to focus.

I need to get away.

"Marco!" his menacing voice sounds through the woods, and I know he's close. Too fucking close.

Fuck!

I finally come to a clearing and spot a small shack. I throw the idea away instantly. Too obvious. He'll know.

“I can scent your perfume on the wind. Won’t it be satisfying to have its flavor in my mouth when I catch you?”

He’s even closer. I can’t tell from where I am in the middle of the clearing where his voice is coming from.

Fuck. I’ve got to move.

I run across the clearing, making my way behind the shack and back into the woods beyond it. Resuming my careful, purposeful footsteps, I watch the ground under the moon’s glow for anything that’s going to trip me up.

The air rushes from my lungs when I’m grabbed from behind.

“Too bad you misjudged how close I was. Too bad for you, I mean.” His breath is on the side of my neck, a knife pressed tightly to the front of it.

I swallow as a whimper leaves me.

A shiver wracks my body as his hand wanders over my shirt from the outside, cupping my breast and squeezing. It’s cold, and I hadn’t put on a jacket in my haste, but the shiver is wholly from his touch.

“What a fucking prize I’ve won!”

He leans down, his teeth sinking into my shoulder as he bites me hard.

I scream, pain radiating through my shoulder.

He lifts his lips to my ear. “Yes, little one. Scream! No one can fucking hear you, but you can try, anyhow.”

He’s right. No one is going to hear me. I have no one in my life who knows to look for me. Except maybe Emery. But soon the babies will keep him busy. I’ll be but bones amongst the snow. Left to rot and sink back unto the earth.

His knife lifts off my throat, and I think about running again. But he turns me around quickly, pressing the tip back to the side of my neck firmly.

“Don’t even fucking think about it.”

“What do you want from me?” I ask. I’m getting dizzy. And I know it’s from the shallow waves my breaths are coming in.

“You know what I want. You, on all fours on the ground, shivering as my cock breaks your pussy until it’s mine. Because defiant little bitches like you need to be broken.”

I growl. “Never.”

He sinks the knife into my throat, and I feel the moment my warm blood trickles out of the wound. The drip slides down my throat, finding my shirt and soaking it. And I shiver against the feel.

“You sure about that?” His teasing words find their mark, and I shove him back.

Turning, I run for it, grasping my neck, and holding pressure like I’ve seen in all the movies and shows. Pressure.

That’s what this feels like. An immense weight in my chest to get away. But then, there’s this little voice in the back of my head. One that says let him capture you. Let him do depraved things to you, Carina.

I’m tackled from behind, and I hear the knife when it’s launched from his hand. It hits a pine and falls to the ground with a muffled thud.

“You little slut!” He turns me over, straddling me with his massive body as he growls at me, baring his teeth.

He has a half skull mask on, his face partially hidden behind it. All but his lips. So that I won’t know the face of my attacker.

I try to kick away from him, but he holds me snugly to the cold, wet floor of the forest.

“You’re mine now. You’re not going anywhere.”

And even though I try my damndest, my center heats, and I whimper.

“Like that, do you? Do you want to be my filthy little whore? I’ll use you on the floor of these woods, leave my cum

dripping from this pussy, and then leave you here to find your own way home, shall I?"

I rub my thighs together despite myself.

He grabs my hands, pinning them above my head. "Would my little one like that?"

"Yes," I breathe. "Please, Gage!"

His lips cover where he'd cut me with his blade, mouth sucking at it and moaning like my blood is the sweetest thing he's ever tasted.

"You'd best be my good little whore, or you'll get more than a fucking bite," he tells me, flipping me over and pulling my hips upward until I'm on my knees.

"I'll be good," I promise, breaking scene and not fighting when he shimmies my pants down and finds me bare.

His answering slap against my cold skin leaves a sting behind, and my pussy clenches, my lower belly growing heavy with anticipation.

"Where are your panties?"

"At home," I breathe, wiggling my ass in the air teasingly.

He grumbles something under his breath that I don't catch, but the next thing I know his teeth are sinking into my ass cheek. The bite seems to go on and on as the pain winds through me like a winter wind, my moan dragging out as he lets it continue.

When he releases me, a throbbing remains.

"This ass is mine, and it's to be covered. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, stalker!" I answer, and he groans, rubbing over where he's bitten. Taking in his handwork. I will, too. Tomorrow, while I'm alone, I'll turn in the mirror, look at all the marks my voyeur has left behind to tell me I'm his. And it'll make my heart hum.

"Find something to hold onto. You made me work for it tonight, prey. I'm going to fuck you hard and fast," he tells

me, and I scramble to lift onto an uprooted portion of tree, hanging on as instructed.

“Good fucking girl,” he mumbles, and the praise washes over me, coating in my warmth through the frigid night.

His cock finds my entrance, ripping me open like his blade already had.

“Fuck!” we shout at the same time.

He wasn't lying. He fucks me hard and fast. Skin slaps, echoing through the woods. Fallen twigs nip at my knees, and bark bites into my palms. But I'm lost.

He's filling me, stretching me, and he earned it. He hunted me through the wilderness behind our house for the last hour. I made him work for it.

I'm getting better at running.

But the problem is, I always want to be found.

“Gage! Fuck!” I sputter.

It won't be long and we'll both be coming, but there's always tomorrow. And the next night. And he never makes it any less fun. Whether we're in the house, and I'm handcuffed and bleeding for him, or were running through the wooded property behind the house that he'd painstakingly fenced off to outsiders, I'm a goner.

My stalker invaded my life and my soul long ago, and each day with him is a fucking ride. One I'll never get off.

He tugs my hair into his grip, yanking my head backward, kissing me awkwardly, his thrusts shallowing.

He breaks the kiss. “Tell me, prey, do you like this cock? Does it make you feel good?”

I nod the best I can in his hold. “I love your cock. It feels so good!”

The admission tightens my pussy, making me near finish, and he hisses.

His hand slips out of my hair and around my throat as he uses it as leverage to fuck me even harder.

Each thrust nearly takes my breath, and the night air is burning my lungs, but I never want it to end.

“Goddammit, you feel so good,” he grits, and it’s what makes my eyes roll back and my body bend to him.

“Gage!” I whimper, mouth dropping open as I come.

His movements grow slow and jerky. “Carina!” His moans, make me pulse a few more times before I’m coming down from the heavens.

Dropping back to the floor of the forest with my husband.

“Holy shit!” I breathe.

He chuckles. “Indeed. It seems you missed me while I was away.”

He helps me get my pants up, his cum making its way down into the fabric as I stand, and gravity does its job. “Seems I did.”

He kisses me passionately, and it’s a contrast to the moment we just had.

He goes away now and again for work, to fix the wrongs people need fixed, and when he gets back, it’s always this way. We come together like a frantic storm, finding our way back to a baseline in a few days, but fucking like rabbits until then.

“Come, let’s go home, hmm? It’s cold out.”

“Oh, you’re going to lead me there, hmm? I thought defiant little bitches needed to find their own way home.”

He smacks my ass, reminding me right where he’d bitten me, and I breathe in sharply. “Don’t tempt me, Wife. There’s still time to run from *you*.”

Our wedding had been a small affair, only Emery and his wife, and a few people from work attending, but it was beautiful. It had been in the backyard of our new home in Fall City. We’re only thirty minutes from my job, when I do go in. I tend to work from home a lot, still opting for business up top,

casual on bottom for Zoom meetings, and taking all the moments I can for Gage and me while he's not working.

Life since the warehouse had moved on. Gage found most of Wes's victims and delivered the news he was *handled* and all of them were thankful. Most of them were inconsolable. Knowing he was gone, and by my hand, didn't break me. It healed something in me.

And I choose not to dwell on it.

I've been dealing with my past, learning to retrain my thinking before sleep to not fall into old nightmarish habits while my lids are closed. Dr. White has been a godsend, and so has my friendship with Camilla.

I started this journey for revenge. Not knowing what would become of it. And life has only gotten richer. And I'm so thankful. While there are things that I'm certain most would change about the way they've handled things in their own lives, I've learned to let that thinking go. I wouldn't change a thing. Because each thing in life leads you to where you are.

And as my voyeur leads me up the steps of our beautiful home, from where he just fucked me in the woods on my knees, I know I love where I am.

"Oh, did you get your blade?" I ask, not remembering if he'd bent to get it from where it had fallen.

"Ach, leave it for later."

I smile, and he kisses me.

Yes, later.

THE END.

Did you love Voyeur? If so, consider leaving me a review on Goodreads, Amazon, or any other platform of your choosing. As an indie author, reviews are how I get seen and continue to get stories to you and more readers. Thank you for reading!

COMING SOON...



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PHANTOM BLURB

Best-selling author Hazel Banks needs solace. She needs an escape from the Christmas memories that've plagued her since last Christmas, when everything went to complete shit. She finds that relief in a charming little home in Honeoye, New York. She plans to write and hideaway from the world.

And it's a good plan.

Until she realizes something's wrong with the house she booked.

Pierce Augustine is ex-CIA and has more demons than he can count. But after researching the new tenant that's rented his family home, Pierce finds he has one more to add to the list. And she has red hair, and a darkness lurking in her eyes he can't get enough of.

Their two worlds collide in a whirlwind, passionate story of a stalker obsessed, and a dark damsel seeking an outlet. It'll go down in the books as the darkest December either of them have experienced. One neither will forget.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book wouldn't be finished if it wasn't for all of Cindy's pushing for it. It got a little dark and twisty, so I put it down during winter and never came back. But she was adamant that it needed to be done, and she was right. So, here's where we take a moment to clap in appreciation for Cindy. Okay, that's enough because she already has a big head.

Crystal, thank you for always flying by the seat of your pants with me. Your ability to work with me and not lose your mind is something you should get sainthood for. I wouldn't be able to do this without you. Thank you!

Now, for my readers. Thank you for always trusting me when I veer off my publishing path to throw new fucked-up men at you.

To my alphas and betas, I adore you! You're the reason I still think I'm decent at this job. You all give me life. Thank you so much for always having my back and always being honest with me.

To you. Yes, you. The one who picked up this book, whether in ebook form or paperback, you're the absolute best. I adore you! And I hope you keep going. Because this series is something I'm very excited to continue working in. In fact, I love the men in this universe so much, you might get ten books.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.M. Mixon is an emerging author of dark and steamy romance. She a mother, dog mom, and wife. She lives in the sunshine state; Florida. She has been an avid reader since she could get her hands on a book. Slowly, over time, love turned into a passion for creation. Her books are dark, steamy, and full of plot explosions.

She can usually be found in front of her laptop with caffeine somewhere nearby. Or hiding away with her kindle under the darkness of the covers. More often than not, she'll be found with a book in hand, whether it be her own for edit purposes or to devour another's work.

If you'd like to follow K.M. for upcoming releases and sneak peeks into what she's working on, find her on Instagram/ Hive/ or Facebook using the handle Kmixonauthor.

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NOTES
