



The Cruel Captors Series
Book 1

CRUEL
Beginnings

GINGER
TALBOT

CRUEL BEGINNINGS

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Cruel Beginnings

Previously published as Tamara, Taken

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AUTHOR NOTE

This book was previously published under the title Tamara, Taken. Some elements have been changed.

WARNING: This is a dark romance, containing scenes which some might find disturbing. It is part one of a two part duet. If you don't like dark and twisted, turn back now.

Gray Manor Press hopes you like Cruel Beginnings.

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PROLOGUE

*I was never really insane except upon occasions when my
heart was touched ~ Edgar Allan Poe*

Joshua

Ever since mankind first learned to bang rocks together and spark fire, people have been driven to define themselves, to build neat little boxes and climb inside.

They divide themselves up by religion, race, nationality. And even that's not enough. They make the boxes smaller and smaller. They come up with all kinds of bullshit ways to categorize themselves. Introverts, extroverts. Leaders, followers. Morning people, night owls.

It's part of the human condition—the desperate desire to figure out where you belong. To know the truth of who you are, what you are.

Me? I'd kill anyone who tried to put me in a box. And I learned the only two important distinctions very early on.

Predators, or prey.

Eat, or be eaten.

What difference does it make if you're an introverted morning person...if you're gurgling your last breaths through the wide-open smile that I've carved in your throat?

Are you strong enough to survive an encounter with a predator? Do you *deserve* to survive?

Those of us who are worthy, we take what we want and crush those who oppose us. Money, power, prestige, women—we steal them away and use them as we wish.

We live on a different plane of existence. Our lives are both richer and more dangerous. We constantly seek new sensation. Our Everest-level craving for stimulation drives us to take mad risks.

These days, there are other names for us besides predator—more civilized ways to describe us. More scientific. The one that fits me the best is a name that's flung about far too casually these days, but it's accurate in my case.

Psychopath.

I've taken all the major tests for psychopathy, including the PCL-R. I tick off all the boxes.

Grandiose sense of self-worth? Manipulative? Surface-level charm? Ruthless? Lack of remorse?

Check, check, check, check, check. Although I think “grandiose” is a little unfair. I'd say “accurate”. The things I've accomplished, the billions I've earned, the heights I've scaled, the murders I've gotten away with again and again—my sense of self-worth is certainly quite healthy, but it's not grandiose. It's well-earned. I don't even understand why they ask some of the questions. “I manipulate others to get what I want.” Well, obviously. How else would you get what you want? By saying pretty please?

So how does one become something like me? A designer suit wrapped around a piranha? Well, my father was a monster, and I am the clay he molded. Is that nature or nurture? Would I have been capable of empathy and self-restraint if I'd been stolen as an infant and given to normal humans? I guess we'll never know.

I watched my brothers, both older and younger, those less worthy, fall one by one. Did I feel anything as I watched them gasp their final breaths? I don't know anymore. I don't remember what feelings feel like. They're not useful to predators.

With each death, my father's gaze burned with scorn. My mother's lips quivered, and tears shimmered in her eyes, but she didn't shed a single one. My father was a predator. She didn't want him to devour her.

I learned the lessons my father taught us, and I adapted, and I alone survived.

A predator doesn't ask. He takes.

A predator knows no fear.

A predator is a hunter, and a hunter needs prey.

A predator can only win if someone else loses.

But as the years went by, I grew bored, because it was impossible for me to find a real challenge. I became a corporate raider; I devoured companies and shredded them for profit. Money rained down on me from the sky. I destroyed everyone who resisted me, both personally and professionally. After I got tired of tying up and whipping every beautiful masochist on the East Coast, I started hunting. Not animals; they pose no challenge. I hunted humans who were like me, or

rather, humans who thought they were like me. Humans who thought of themselves as apex predators.

But I never lost. Never. I suffered the dilemma of Alexander the Great, the mighty Greek military commander. As Plutarch said of him, “When Alexander saw the breadth of his domain, he wept, for there were no more worlds to conquer.”

Color and taste started to fade. I gulped down ghost peppers and threw myself into brutal cage fights with men twice my size, just so I could feel something...anything at all. The fierce joy I experienced when I cut down my human prey faded almost instantly. I went from killing once every year or two to needing it every few months, and it seemed as if even that wouldn't be enough.

But then I received an amazing gift.

Tamara.

She stumbled right into my path. Staring up at me with those huge, frightened eyes. The ultimate prey. The ultimate prize.

I knew I'd take her. I knew she'd fight me. I knew I'd win.

CHAPTER ONE

TAMARA

“I can’t believe you’ve been working for Joshua Smith for sixty days and you haven’t seen his dick yet.” Heather, my best friend and neighbor from across the hall, says things like that all the time. And she’s dead serious.

It’s Saturday afternoon. I just got home from the battered women’s shelter where I volunteer once a week. I’m standing in front of the mirror in my bedroom-slash-living room-slash-kitchen, holding up various consignment store dresses to see which one flatters me the most. The mirror was reclaimed from an alley. Dumpster diving, that’s my jam.

“Heather!” I squawk, scandalized.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it,” she teases. She’s sitting on a folding chair at my tiny folding table, stroking on black nail polish. She’s come over to help me pick a dress for the party at Smith Acquisitions tonight. I’ll be working as a cocktail waitress, and I’m secretly hoping to knock Joshua’s cashmere socks off.

Although I’d settle for a glance and a friendly smile.

I put on my huffy, offended air. “I most certainly have not.”

“Yeah, you have.” She smirks at me knowingly and blows on her nails.

Yes, I have. All the time.

I mean, who wouldn't swoon over him? The richest man in Manhattan... But that's the least important thing to know about him. That classically gorgeous face, a Michelangelo carving come to life. That silky hair. All that icy sexiness wrapped in hand-tailored raw silk suits and shod in buttery-soft Italian loafers. His suits are *bespoke*. That means they're not only hand-tailored, but they're also designed, cut, and measured just for him. The fabric caresses his skin the way every woman wishes she could.

And the way he moves. He doesn't walk—he stalks like a tiger, with lethal grace and an air of chilly aloofness that somehow makes him even more alluring.

And once, a couple of months before I started working for his company, he actually flirted with me.

Never since, though. Now I'm working at his company, apparently I've melted into the wallpaper and my vagina has vanished. I'm not a girl. I'm just another office drone to be ignored.

It's not that I think I put Victoria's Secret models to shame, but I've been told I'm attractive. I'm slim, I have small, round boobs, I have a nice thick head of chocolate-brown hair, thanks to my mother's good genes, and my lips could legitimately be called “bee-stung”.

The first time I met Joshua, I'd been working as a cocktail waitress at a nightclub called Heaven, an extra gig I took on so I could afford my shoebox-sized studio apartment in Brooklyn. I was trying to make ends meet while waiting for September,

when classes started. I was pre-law at NYU, on a full scholarship.

We were in the VIP room. I'd just dodged a man who tried to grab my ass while I expertly balanced a tray of glasses. As I shimmed through the crowd to get away from the ass-grabber, I almost walked right into Joshua.

I caught my tray just before it tipped over, and stared up at him. His ocean-blue eyes met my gaze and pierced the depths of my soul. My heart thudded against my ribcage, and I stood there blinking stupidly and gaping up at him as if I'd just stepped out of a convent and this was my first glimpse of a man.

I had no idea who he was at the time. I just knew he was the most gorgeous and terrifying person I'd ever seen in the flesh, bar none. He had silky blue-black hair and cruel, sensual lips. He was almost obscenely handsome, more like an airbrushed magazine ad than a person.

His dusky blue suit was accented with lavender pinstripes and a lavender tie.

"Very impressive," he said. His eyes were as cold as an ice floe, but his voice was rich and warm. The disconnect was jarring. In the dim recesses of my mind, I knew which one was true and which one was the lie.

The eyes are the window to the soul. The warm caress of his words...it was a sweetly spun trap. A sticky spider's web.

"Excuse me?" I said politely. "What's impressive?"

His eyes crinkled with amusement. "The way you dodged him. You saw him out of the corner of your eye—you weren't even looking at him straight on. Very impressive...reflexes."

His gaze drifted over my body. He left no doubt as to what reflexes he was talking about.

It was true. I had a sixth sense for danger—or at least, so I'd always thought. When you grow up in the kind of neighborhoods I did, it comes naturally after a while. I knew all about skirting the alleyways where faceless men skulked ready to lunge and grab, and the subtler peril of men gliding by in their beater cars and crooning obscene invitations. But, like most people, I'd never suspected that true terror would be wrapped up in an exquisite package like Joshua Smith. I'd thought the most I'd have to fear from a man like that was a broken heart.

“Thank you,” I murmured. “Can I get you another drink?”

“How did you know I've been drinking?” He wasn't holding an empty glass. I could smell the whiskey on his breath.

“Oh, you've been here a while. I just assumed.” My cheeks heated.

“Liar.” He grinned at me. “But a very pretty liar.” His words were a teasing caress, stroking some secret inner part of me.

“Er...thank you, I think?” I looked up at him, intrigued. There was an air of danger about him, but the sexy kind of danger. The kind that said he'd throw me over his lap and spank me. Hold me down and thrust his knee between my thighs while I moaned “no” but meant yes. No man I'd been with had ever done that, and I suspected that was why I'd never had an orgasm yet. Plenty of frustrating neargasms, sure. But no Big O.

He cocked his head to the side. “Do you like to take orders?”

Oh God. Could he read my mind? My cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

“You...you want me to take your drink order?” I mumbled.

His laugh was rich and gently mocking. “Sure, we’ll start with that. Go get me another shot of Macallan.” He waved at the bartender, who nodded at him. “He’ll put it on my tab.”

There was an idiot grin on my face as I hurried to get his drink. He’d called me pretty.

He took the drink and tipped me a hundred bucks without a second glance, then strolled away, leaving me feeling disappointed but oddly relieved.

Sure, he was blindingly handsome, but I could feel the menace rolling off him, even then.

He vanished into the crowd for the rest of the evening, until it was close to quitting time and I was cleaning up. Then he walked up to me.

“Tamara,” he said with that easy grin. Like I should be dazzled that he’d taken the time to find out my name.

And I kind of was.

“There’s an all-night speakeasy I’d like to take you to. My limo’s waiting outside.”

“Oh, I can’t. I have friends waiting for me.” My gaze dropped to the floor as I lied.

Why would I turn down an obscenely wealthy man who oozed sex and self-confidence, who might finally let me reach the heights of pleasure that I craved?

I think it was because I knew what he was asking for—one casual fuck, and then I'd be cast aside and forgotten. If he'd wanted to get to know me, he'd have gotten my phone number and asked me out on a proper date. Men like him didn't have relationships with girls like me. They used us like the towel that blotted the wet spot, and cast us aside just as easily.

It would be mind-blowing, no doubt, but it would leave me with an achy and empty feeling. I'd had a couple of brief encounters before, and they'd always left me feeling cruddy the next morning.

And him? If he was anywhere near as hot as I suspected, if he was exactly what I'd been looking for all along, he'd be like a drug, and I'd suffer endless withdrawal.

So I politely bowed out. There was a glint of disappointment in his eyes, but he just nodded and left without a word.

I thought that was the end of it until a week later, when I got a corporate brochure in the mail, with a picture of him tucked into it. And a blank job application. They were looking for temporary clerks over the summer.

I was giddy with excitement. Maybe he was just intrigued because I'd turned him down. But who cared why? He liked me! He really liked me! The fact that he'd taken the time to find out who I was and where I lived was beyond flattering. I went and applied for the job, and a couple of weeks later, I was working there.

But then things got weird.

From the day I set foot in that gorgeous Gilded-Age building on Fifth Avenue, Joshua never acknowledged me. He didn't just ignore me; he completely iced me out. When I was

in the same room with him, I could feel disdain rolling off him like a chilling fog. I didn't understand it. If he wasn't interested, why had he sought me out and invited me to work there?

As the summer dragged on, I had to accept the unflattering truth. Men like him wanted new toys and quickly grew bored with whatever they'd craved yesterday. He'd had a crush on me for a hot minute, and he'd got over it before he'd even bothered to sample the goods.

It stung, though. I kept wondering if it was something I'd done. But what? I hadn't even had the chance to offend him.

I became mildly obsessed. I Google-stalked him, trying to find out everything I could.

What I found was all superficial. Company press releases. News reports on his company's latest acquisitions. He was quite the mystery man. He was photographed at the most exclusive restaurants and nightclubs in New York, but the few interviews he'd given were just canned publicity features.

I only found one mildly helpful tidbit—a reporter on a forum claiming that after he'd written an unflattering piece about Joshua Smith, he'd been abruptly fired from his job.

And when I tried to look up the article that he'd written, apparently it had been erased from the internet.

I'm stubborn, though. I used the Wayback search engine, which archives old internet pages, and found the article. The reporter likened Joshua Smith's company to a swarm of locusts, devouring everything in its path and leaving devastation and heartbreak behind.

He also talked about how Joshua had appeared from nowhere ten years ago, after graduating from a low-level

Midwestern business school that was more a diploma mill than anything else. Joshua was so tight-lipped about his personal life that he didn't even reveal his age. He looked to be late twenties to early thirties, but that was just a guess. Nobody knew anything about Joshua's family, or where he'd grown up. There are 2.8 million people in the United States with the last name of Smith, the reporter mentioned, making it just about impossible to track down his family. The reporter seemed to be hinting that it was a made-up name, chosen deliberately to hide his origins.

Joshua wasn't publicity-shy, though. He was frequently seen around town with various models and socialites, but never more than once with the same woman. In every picture, they were clinging to his arm and gazing up at him adoringly, and he was looking away.

I just couldn't figure him out. And I'm insecure enough that his rejection hurt. I wanted to make him look at me one more time, acknowledge my existence, as if I were a little girl again, invisible, lonely, begging someone to make me real by noticing me.

When I heard that Smith Acquisitions was having a party for some of their bigwig clients, on a whim, I went to human resources and volunteered to waitress. I told them I'd had experience, and was delighted when they said yes.

And now Heather, who knows about my obsession, is trying to force me to make a move. "This is your chance tonight. Whenever you go to work, you're wearing those god-awful pantsuits. But tonight you'll be dressed up all sexy. You have to make a pass at him," Heather informs me.

"Are you insane?" I laugh at her.

“Yes.” She smirks. “But that’s beside the point. You talk about him all the time. *Carpe dickem*, woman. Seize the dick.”

“Why are you so fascinated with Joshua Smith’s dick?” I select a black wraparound dress with a plunging neckline, and set the other dresses aside, draping them over the back of a chair. “Weirdo. Also, it’s supposed to be *carpe diem*. Seize the day. And if you’re so interested in his private parts, you go after him.”

“I’m not the one who’s in lurve,” she croons, drawing the word out.

“And neither am I. I’m merely mildly obsessed. What exactly do you suggest that I do?”

“Just at least go up and introduce yourself. Say ‘Hi, I’m Tamara.’ That’s it. See what he does.” She grins mischievously. “And that dress you’re holding right now is the one. It is the bomb. He won’t be able to stop staring at your tits.”

I glance down critically at the wraparound cocktail dress. “Well, I do have a halfway decent rack. I don’t know, though. He hasn’t shown the slightest flicker of interest in me since the minute I started working there. I think it’ll take more than my magic boobs to catch his eye. There are plenty of girls in the city with boobs.”

“Free bagels for a week,” she sings out. “With salmon and cream cheese. If you just grow a pair of lady-*cojones* and say hi to him.” She works in the bagel shop around the corner to pay the bills, and auditions for parts in commercials and sitcoms. And she’s always pushing me to do crazy things.

I laugh ruefully. “Damn you. You know my weakness.”

Of course, she doesn't know *all* my weaknesses. Nobody does. Why tell people that I'm a little bit crazy?

I wait until she heads off to the bathroom before I start tapping the mirror with my index finger. Always the index finger.

"Five, four, three, nobody will hurt me. Seven, eight, nine, everything will be—"

"Tamara?" Heather calls out. I didn't hear her come back out. I start and stifle a shriek, and my heart accelerates to a million beats a minute. She'd interrupted the chant! Nobody can interrupt the chant! The last time someone interrupted the chant... No. *I won't think about that.*

"What were you doing?" she demands suspiciously, coming into the room.

I can't explain it to her. I can't tell her about the tapping rituals and the chants that keep me safe. First of all, I know her too well. She's loud, funny, sarcastic, one of those people who feels obligated to mock everything. The reason behind the tapping and the chants...it's too painful to share.

And secondly, if I tell anyone, the magic will vanish. I don't know why, but I know it's true.

I need them. They calm me, uncoiling the tension that twists me up and sends panic flooding through me at random, unpredictable moments.

And they work. They saved me when I was seven. When I did the Bad Thing. Because of the chants, nobody ever found out.

"I'm not doing anything," I say, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

“Why were you tapping the mirror like that and talking to yourself?” There’s a ring of disgust to her voice that sends me right back to grade school, when a gang of girls trapped me in the bathroom and made fun of me for my DIY haircut until I cried and threw up. I wasn’t the one who’d cut my hair; my stepfather had sat on me on the floor and hacked hunks of my hair off with dull scissors. Why? Because I hadn’t brought him his beer fast enough. The memory of his erection bulging through his boxer shorts is still enough to curdle my stomach.

“I wasn’t,” I lie, like an idiot.

“Yes you were.” She backs away from me as if I smell bad, her nose wrinkling in disgust. “Why are you acting like such a freak?”

I’m shocked. That’s the nastiest tone she’s ever taken with me.

“Why are you being such a bitch?” The words fly from my mouth before I can stop them. Her features contort with utter hatred, sending shock waves through my body. We’ve been friends for three months now, ever since she moved in across the hall. I’m so busy with my multiple jobs, working from morning to night, that I don’t have time to meet a lot of people, but Heather reached out to me right away. She’s loud and self-confident, which I am not, and she supports everything I do. She makes me feel pretty good about myself.

What has happened to that Heather? I have never seen her like this.

She turns and stomps out.

“Heather, wait!” I call after her. She slams the door so hard that a picture falls off the wall.

I don't understand. Is it because she saw my weird tapping ritual and was disgusted? I should have been more careful. Nobody is supposed to see.

I want to run after her and make things right, somehow, but I don't have time. I can't be late. It's another of my rules for safety. Being late equals bad luck.

I repeat the chant on the mirror, finishing it this time, but since Heather interrupted me, it won't help.

My hopeful mood fizzles and turns sour. I don't want to go anymore.

But I've already committed. I can't just fail to show up and leave the rest of the waitstaff scrambling to cover me. So I stuff down my impending anxiety attack, brush my thick brown hair back into a bun, and shimmy into the dress. I paint on liquid eyeliner and smudge blush on my lips and cheeks.

And with a sense of dull foreboding, I head out the door.

CHAPTER TWO

TAMARA

On my way to the subway, I stop to say hi to Mark, the homeless guy who sleeps in the alleyway on my block. I reach into my purse and pull out the carefully wrapped roast beef sandwich I made for him earlier.

He sits on a stoop huddled in a blanket, despite the damp June heat, and I have to force myself not to wrinkle my nose at the smell of urine that wafts up.

His face is always red and swollen, his eyes bloodshot. I can't tell his age. He could be twenty or forty. I know he used to work in computer security, until the drinking cost him his job. Also his home and his family.

“You're the best,” he mumbles. “Where are you going, all dressed up like that?”

“Hot date with my boss tonight,” I say lightly, as if saying it will make it true.

“He's a lucky man. Be careful—those rich types can be jerks.” Then he looks up at me, his weathered brow creasing with worry. “You all right?”

Oh, great. Just great. The tension twisting my face is so obvious that a homeless man who's fried his brains with alcohol can see it.

“I’ll be fine,” I say. I glance down at him. “Are *you* all right?”

He shrugs and lets out a little mumbling laugh. “What do you think?”

I draw a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” I say to him gently. “If you ever want me to help you find a rehab...”

He waves his hand at me dismissively, his expression gone sullen.

I’ve gone too far.

I walk away quickly. Heather says I need to stop trying to solve everyone else’s problems. I’ve got enough on my plate, being flat broke and juggling part-time jobs so I can eat and pay rent in the same month. I know she’s right. I just remember growing up and wishing I had someone to offer *me* a helping hand. Roaming the motel room lobby, hungry, wearing dirty clothes...that’s why I’ve got my sights set on law school. I’m going to get hired by a non-profit and work with battered women and abused children. Maybe if I can help save someone from going through what I did, it will help ease the pain of those memories.

The feeling of uneasiness is still roiling in my stomach when I arrive at the party. When I go to the changing room, I am lucky. There’s no-one else there, so I quickly do my tapping ritual on the mirror before I stash my stuff in a locker and head out.

I’ve never been in the ballroom before. The room, like the rest of the Smith Acquisitions building, is an aggressive display of wealth and power. It was once owned by a nineteenth-century industrialist, and the Fifth Avenue address is a statement in itself. The original Gilded Age décor is intact,

with elaborately carved Grecian friezes set into the wall panels and bow-legged furniture upholstered in red velvet. Marble statues rest on fluted columns, staring indifferently with their blind, pupil-less eyes.

There are easily a hundred people here—clients, models, and socialites, all snacking on tiny little canapes and swilling expensive liquor from the open bar.

A gossip columnist snaps a picture of Joshua. A skinny blonde Madison Avenue type in a glittery beaded gown sees the camera and hurries over. She flings her arm around Joshua's waist, and he flashes a dazzling smile as the columnist snaps another picture. I feel the faintest twinge of jealousy.

Then he spins away, his back to the blonde, who flounces off in a sulk. I suppress a tiny burst of spite. I know it's silly to feel that way, but I'm kind of relieved that I'm not the only one who feels like that.

I wait a few minutes, then I walk over and try to offer him a glass of champagne from my tray, but he waves me away without even looking at me. Discouraged, I skulk in the bathroom for a while, but I finally come back out. Maybe if I say hi to him, I can go home and tell Heather about it, and she won't be mad at me anymore. I can't stand the thought of her hating me forever. I know my need to be liked is neurotic, but I can't stop myself. When people are upset with me, it burns away at my gut like acid.

I've done a Bad Thing, and I will spend all my life seeking reassurance that I'm not a bad person because of it. Every stroke of bad luck I've had since then seems like punishment for my one terrible sin.

My eyes wander the room until they settle on Joshua. He's standing toward the back of the room, his gaze roving over the crowd. He hasn't noticed me. Well, I'll make him notice me. I've been told I have a pretty smile. I'll smile brightly, and stand right in front of him, and get him to at least look at me.

Boldly, I walk right up to him. He stands angled away from me, holding a glass of seltzer water.

"Hi, I'm Tamara," I say with forced cheer.

And then suddenly I realize he's talking to someone else, a silver-haired man in a suit, and the man looks down his nose at me before stalking off with a sniff of disdain.

I'm the help. The help doesn't talk. The help is furniture whose job is to glide on oiled wheels, anticipating needs, quickly serving those needs, then vanishing into the shadows. My face instantly flames red with humiliation; I'm a terrible blusher. "I'm so sorry," I choke out, and start to back up.

Joshua focuses his gaze on me. The blue of his eyes seems to darken and turn stormy, and I could swear the black flecks are swirling like a cyclone. Something subtle changes, and his expression goes from cold and remote to laser-focused and terrifying. I'm caught in his sights, and I try to back up but my feet stay rooted to the carpet.

He leans in, and I could swear I feel the temperature drop several degrees. "You're fired," he says, his voice low and vicious.

I can't possibly have heard that right.

My heart jackhammers in my chest, and my throat closes in panic.

"Excuse me? I'm sorry?"

But he's already turned away from me and is gesturing at George, one of the security guards. "Escort her from the building."

A wave of panic floods me.

I'm fired? For saying hi? He's acting as if I really did grab his dick, like Heather joked about hours ago.

George barrels through the crowd and is on me in seconds. I'm hyperventilating with panic as his fingers close on my upper arm. He drags me through the crowd, gripping my upper arm painfully tight.

I have my waitress apron on; he doesn't even give me time to take it off. The men in their tailored suits, the women in their updos and silky gowns, stare at me as if from a great height, whispering scornfully among themselves. The way George is acting, they must think I was caught lifting someone's wallet.

Self-loathing and humiliation curl in my stomach. I don't even try to hide the tears streaming down my face.

George rushes me down the stairs, and I struggle not to trip in my heels. "Slow down!" I cry out, but he ignores me, glaring straight ahead.

My arm's going to have a huge bruise on it where his hand is crushing my flesh. Why is he being so rough? It's completely unnecessary; it's not like I'm fighting him. For some reason, I'm starting to get really scared. But he's a security guard—his job is to protect people. He wouldn't hurt me, would he?

When we get to the first floor, I shout, "Let go of me!" I struggle to wrench my arm from his grasp. "I'm leaving

already. I can walk by myself!” My voice echoes down the hallway, magnifying my fear. We’re all alone down here.

His grip tightens. He doesn’t answer. He isn’t even looking at me. Instead of moving me toward the front lobby, he forces me toward the back hallway. The air conditioning vent overhead blasts us with freezing air, and goose pimples pop up on my skin.

“Stop!” I scream. “Help!” My voice bounces back at me mockingly. My heart pounds in my throat, and tears spring to my eyes. I claw at his arm with my free hand, but he doesn’t seem to notice. What does he have planned for me?

He flings open a door and drags me into the break room. When he shoves me up against a wall, I see the hideous lust gleaming in his eyes.

“Get away from me!” I scream at the top of my lungs, but I’m too far away from the party for anyone to hear me.

“Or what?” he sneers. “I don’t think Mr. Smith cares too much about what happens to you.”

He pins my hands above my head. Revulsion floods me as he presses his body against mine, and I feel his erection straining against his polyester pants. He’s wearing a sickly-sweet cologne, and his sour coffee breath curdles my stomach.

This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening... There’s a party full of people only two flights up from me, and I’m trapped in a room with a rapist...

With his free hand, he squeezes my breast so hard that I cry out in pain. *I’m about to be raped. He’s going to force his dick inside me.*

“Help!” I scream at the top of my lungs. The word cuts off abruptly when he slaps my face so hard my ears ring. Then he

shoves his hand between my legs and squeezes my pussy, rubbing it and grinning obscenely. My skin crawls at his touch, and my dinner rises into my throat, almost making me vomit. He's squeezing my wrists so hard I feel my bones creak.

Panic floods my body. There is no help coming. If I don't fight my way out of this, he will rape me right here in the break room.

"Stop!" I cry, making my voice small. "Please stop! I'll do anything you want! Just stop hurting me!"

"Now we're talking." He grins and releases my hands. "On your knees, *bitch*."

This is my only chance.

Summoning up memories from a women's self-defense class, I knee him in the crotch so hard he doubles over. He wheezes and vomits on the floor.

Frantic with fear, I stumble away from him and run out the door and down the hallway.

I stop there and tap the front door five times.

I have to do that before I leave work at the end of the day. *Have to.*

It's insane, stupid for me to take the time to do it, but I can't stop myself.

One of these days, my OCD is literally going to kill me.

I hurry out of the door.

It isn't until I get outside that I remember I've left my purse behind.

I actually have my wallet in my waitress apron, because I'm too paranoid to leave it in the changing room locker. And I

have enough money in tips to pay for a cab ride home. I also have the card key that gains me entrance to the building. There's no chance I'm returning now to get it. Instead, I'll go back tomorrow night, late, when nobody will be there, and get my purse back. I'm sure as hell not going to go back inside and walk past George to head up the stairwell.

When I get home, I'm emotionally wrung out. I shut the door behind me and stand there, swaying.

How could my day have gone so horribly wrong?

I start crying, shoulders heaving, and I just can't stop. I pissed off my only friend, lost my job, and almost got raped. And if that's not enough, my head still hurts from being slapped.

The Bad Thing. That little voice from my past taunts me. *Bad people do bad things. Bad things happen to bad people.*

Should I call the police on George? Would they even believe me, though? God only knows what Joshua would tell them about me—and I know whose side they'd take.

Utterly alone and miserable, I don't even take my dress off. I just kick off my heels, collapse into bed, and cry for hours. I finally fall into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

When I wake up, my heart is pounding with anxiety, but that's how I always wake up. I don't know why. I wake up in a panic every day of my life and spend the next few hours slowly getting myself calmed down. I have learned to live with it. It could be much worse. I'm young, I'm physically healthy; I have nothing to complain about.

After I make myself coffee, I send Heather a text message apologizing to her for being such a bitch the day before. I don't really think the fight was my fault, but I already feel

rotten enough about myself after what had happened. I don't want to lose my only friend in New York.

And then I shuffle miserably to the shower to wash my shame off me. I scrub and scrub, but it clings to me, filthy and poisonous.

After a while, I'm sick of feeling like garbage.

There are two voices that whisper in my head. One of them is nameless and cruel, but it lives in a dark, swirling cloud. It blames every stroke of bad luck on my one terrible sin. It makes me tap on the door and on mirrors over and over again, quietly chanting those silly little rhymes in a desperate attempt to protect myself. Tapping and chanting makes the voice go away for a little while.

But one of them belongs to Sarah, my guidance counselor in high school. She was only my counselor for a few months, before I was moved to another group home in another city, but she was the best. I'd always gotten excellent grades, and never stopped to think about what that could mean for my future. Sarah told me my mind was remarkable. She dragged me out of my funk of self-pity and spun me toward the bright, pretty future she promised was waiting for me.

Sarah would say that none of what happened to me yesterday was my fault.

Okay, maybe I shouldn't have tried to flirt with my boss, but firing me just for saying hi? And having me rushed out of there by a security guard? That was way uncalled for. And Heather completely over-reacted yesterday. I'll try to patch things up with her, but if it doesn't work, then her loss. Well, that's what Sarah would have told me, anyway.

And there's no point in sitting around and wallowing. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's idleness. I'm going to go out and start filling out job applications today. I'm going to find another job before the week is out. I'll talk to Heather and apologize for snapping at her, and hope that she forgives me, but if not, I'll learn to live with it. I've lived with much worse.

Sarah used to call me "Tam with a Plan", because I was always making plans. Plans to pass my classes in high school with a 4.0, plans to use those excellent grades to snag a scholarship, plans to get a summer job, plans to save money from that job, plans to use my savings to move to a big city and get out of my little podunk Midwestern town.

I'm still unsettled, but I'm feeling better as I head to my closet to pick out some interview clothes. Hopeful. Optimistic. When I stride out the door, I'm playing Sarah's words of encouragement through my head like a self-motivation soundtrack, marching toward all the good things the day will offer me.

CHAPTER THREE

TAMARA

I wait until one in the morning to use my keycard to enter Smith Acquisitions. There's a security kiosk with a guard at the front, but I know the layout of the building, and I know how to avoid him. Just in case George is working, I brought a canister of pepper spray with me, tucked safely in my pocket.

I go in the back, march up the stairs as if I own the place, and head straight through the ballroom.

And I walk into a scene from a horror movie.

The room is dark, and at first I try to tell myself that I can't actually be seeing what I think I'm seeing.

A shadowy figure holding a knife in his right hand, looming over the splayed-out body of a man.

It's a practical joke. It's an hallucination.

No. I smell the new-penny scent of blood. It's real.

My heart speeds up, jack-hammering so hard I'm sure it's going to burst out of my chest, *Alien*-style. I'm sick with terror.

The man looks up and sees me, and he moves in a blur. I turn to run, then a blow to the side of my head sends me

sprawling. I scrabble for the pepper spray and drop it, then I see it go flying, kicked out of my reach.

I'm going to die for a dollar store purse. Here in this darkened room. Tonight.

I should have just left the purse behind. I should have followed orders. I should have gone straight home like they told me to, and never come back to this beautiful slaughterhouse. Then I would never have seen what I've seen. I wouldn't be gagging on the coppery reek of blood, cringing at the feet of the man with the knife.

Joshua Smith.

The most beautiful man I've ever seen. But no, that can't be right, because he's going to end me. There's nothing beautiful about that.

The only light in the room comes from a single table lamp with flared, frosted glass shaped like a tulip. And I've stumbled on a nightmare, one that has grabbed me with sharp talons and is dragging me straight to Hell.

The man lying on the floor at Joshua's feet is George, the security guard. He's not dead yet. His eyes are bulging, and he's trying to talk, but all that comes out of his mouth is bubbles of blood and horrible gurgling noises. He's lying in a red lake that's spreading across the parquet floor.

With shaking hands, I reach out to him. I'm going to press my hands against his wounds. I took a first aid class once. I chant the instructions in my head. *Apply pressure to the wound. Slow down the blood flow.*

Why? There's no ambulance coming for him.

But that's what you do. You see someone hurting, you try to help them. Even a pig like George.

I'm going to die very soon, but I'm going to die as myself.
As a person who helps.

"Don't." The steely command slices through the air above me.

Fuck you. Why would I obey the man who's going to kill me?

I don't even look up. I ignore him and press my hands against George's chest.

Suddenly a hand grabs me by the hair and yanks me back, hauling me across the floor.

"I said *don't*."

Instantly my scalp is on fire. I howl in pain and my hands fly up, grabbing at his wrist to take some of the weight off, because I feel like my whole scalp is about to be ripped from my head.

This is it. This is the end.

I slash myself with blame. *I'm an idiot. This is all my fault. I shouldn't have come back for the purse.*

The purse is nothing. It's cracked black plastic, with a fraying red heart set into the front panel. But to me, it's priceless. It was one of the last things my mother ever gave me. She shoplifted it, just like the few other things she gave me over the years. It was the only time she remembered my birthday.

And now it's going to be the end of me.

Joshua drops me, and I lie at his feet, a puddle of weak, mewling terror. I'm staring at the floor, my muscles locked and rigid with fright, too afraid to look at him.

The truly horrifying thing about seeing him stab George was the calm, practiced way that he moved.

I stood by the empty bar, frozen in shock, when I first spotted Joshua crouched over the dying security guard. As he jabbed George in the abdomen, I heard his taunting voice. “Oh, does that hurt? Cheer up, right now you’re in the least pain you’ll ever be in for the rest of your life. I’m very good at this. I can make you last for hours, but they’ll feel like years.”

He was admitting that he’s done this before. And it was clear from his gloating tone that he loved it.

He kills people for fun.

Joshua Smith, billionaire owner and CEO of Smith Acquisitions, the hottest, sexiest, most sought-after bachelor in Manhattan. And add to that list...serial killer.

“Look at me,” he intones.

This part is familiar. Ghosts of my past shiver down my spine. My stepfather’s voice echoes in my ears. *“Look at me when I talk to you, you little bitch.”*

I hunch my shoulders, bracing for a blow, desperately locking my gaze on the floor. I’m the little girl hiding under the blanket so the boogeyman can’t find me. Looking at him will make this real.

My mind is torturing me. Every serial killer movie I’ve ever seen flashes before my eyes. Blood, spilling intestines, gouged-out eyes. Hours of agony worse than anything I could ever imagine, images of knives and saws and icepicks, sounds of screaming, women gone limp with their dead eyes staring at nothing... I know how this ends.

“Please don’t kill me,” I choke out, my voice trembling. I can’t look up. I can’t watch my own death descending.

Sheer terror sizzles down my nerves. I try to move, but I've lost control of my body. I am liquid with fright.

His voice rings out above me, like God speaking from on high, but he's not God. He's the Devil in a gray silk suit. "I'm not going to kill you."

Liar.

"Just let me go. I won't tell anyone!" It's a pitiful lie, but my brain is numb and stupid with panic. I am scrabbling for the magic words that will save my life.

He's silent, so finally I look up at him, tears streaming from my eyes. Joshua looms over me, my terror painting him as a giant. The face looking down at me has graced society magazines and the gossip column of every major paper in the city. The camera loves him—the glossy black hair, the cheekbones you could cut yourself on, those sapphire-blue eyes, the cruel, sensual curve of his upper lip.

He smiles down at me, gently. "Tamara. Of course you would. If I let you go, you'd run right to the police."

"I won't, I swear, I swear!" My cry is whiny and shrill. I loathe myself for it.

His voice frosts over. "Don't keep lying to me, Tamara. It's boring. I *hate* boring."

I stare over at the security guard, whose chest is heaving with every tortured breath. "Why did you stab him?"

"Because he tried to rape you."

I look up at him in horror. "You...you did it for me?" I didn't want that. George was a pig and a vile human being, and I would have been happy to see him jailed, but butchered? On my account? Nausea curdles in my belly.

Joshua's dark brows draw together, and he shakes his head. "No." There's mild remonstrance in his voice. I've disappointed him by not understanding. But what is the right question? The right thing to say? Everything rides on this.

I fail to come up with anything that will save me. He stares down at me expectantly, waiting. It's like this is some kind of cruel game to him. He could end me right now. Why doesn't he? What other option does he have? Because he's right—of course I'd go to the police.

Finally, I choke out the question I don't want to ask but must. "If you're not going to kill me, what are you going to do with me?"

A smile curls his lips, but it doesn't reach his eyes. His smiles never reach his eyes. "I'm going to play with you."

His words hang in the air then explode like bombs, shredding me with terrible possibility. And then I see it in his right hand. A hypodermic needle. That means he's going to take me somewhere else. Somewhere he can take his time with me. My throat closes with panic. He told the man on the floor that he could make it last for hours.

Not that, not that—please just kill me quickly.

Mad with fright, I strangle on a scream. My muscles start working again, and I scabble away from him on all fours, scuttling for the doorway. He jabs me in the ass with the hypodermic, and I cry out in pain. It's like being stabbed with a red-hot knitting needle.

My right butt cheek throbs, and a sensation of great weariness washes over me.

I struggle to form words. My lips feel thick and rubbery. "Pleash, let me go... I have friendsh... I told them where I

wash going tonight...” Saliva drools from my mouth.

“Did you really, now?” His voice is dry and amused. “You’re a very poor liar, Tamara. But we’ll have plenty of time to discuss that later.”

Oh God. Oh no.

“Arrrr you going torshure me?” I don’t know if my words make sense anymore. My cheek is pressing against the floor, and I can’t feel my body.

Joshua kneels next to me and strokes my cheek with his finger. “You don’t get to ask me that. You want to know why?”

No.

“Yeshhhh...” I can’t see anything. I am numb. I pray to stay numb forever, but God has never been that kind to me.

I think he says, “Because I am fate, and you are nothing.” But his voice is coming from so far away.

CHAPTER FOUR

JOSHUA

The first one to die was Remus. He drowned in an icy pond in the dead of winter, under a pale blue sky.

I think Remus was around six. My father made him strip down in the sub-zero weather.

My father stripped down too, dropping his clothing into a pile in the snow. I'd never seen him naked before. He had scars on his body.

I was only a few years old then, but I'd already learned a lot about survival. We all had.

Even before they entered the pond, Remus's lips were blue and his skinny body was shaking, but he didn't say a word or beg for mercy. He knew better. He followed our father and marched right into the frigid water. They swam across the pond, then turned around and headed back. Halfway across, Remus sank. He disappeared, the black waters swallowing him. My father glanced over at him and kept swimming. He didn't miss a stroke.

We were all lined up on the shore, watching. My mother included. She stared straight ahead, her eyes on Remus the whole time, obeying orders.

I would never admit this to anyone, but I still felt fear back then. And I was sick with it. But I also felt anger, and contempt. Why was Remus so weak? Why hadn't he saved himself?

When my father emerged from the lake, he didn't shiver. The man wasn't even human. I was wearing a T-shirt and jeans and sandals—clothing my father had picked out for me on this snowy day—and I was shaking so hard my teeth rattled. Somehow, as he approached, I locked my muscles tight and managed to force myself to stop. My other brothers didn't. My brother Romulus, Remus's twin, shook the hardest of all, and even worse, he had tears in his eyes. My father slapped him so hard he fell to his knees. Romulus lost the hearing in his right ear for the rest of his short life.

My twin brother, Charlemagne, sneaking glances at me, managed to suppress the worst of his shivering. He was quick on the uptake, like me, figuring out the rules of survival early. In the end, it wasn't enough to save him.

My mother stared straight ahead.

Fortunately for me, that day, most of my father's wrath was trained on my mother.

"Weak," my father sneered at her. "They're all weak. Because of you. My genes are strong. Yours are poison. You've ruined my sons."

"I'm sorry, sir," she whispered, the way she'd been taught.

We headed back through the woods, and her head drooped in despair. He would punish her for Remus's failure—after making her watch her son die.

Her screams that night twisted through the air. He made sure we heard them. Our rooms were in a row down the hall

from theirs so that we'd hear everything he did to her. It was always agony for her. That was all we knew of sex. A man's cruel laughter, the dull thud of blows, a woman's wails of pain.

Sometimes she needed time to heal. She'd limp around the house, dragging her body around, whimpering in pain with each step as she cooked our meals and washed our clothes and scrubbed the floors.

When that happened, he'd bring another girl home for a while. Never women, just girls, middle-school age. He kept them in the basement downstairs, until my mother healed and could serve him again the way a wife should serve her husband. My mother had been one of those girls, once. I found that out from her when I was in my teens. She thought she'd been eleven when he took her, but she was no longer sure.

I am nothing like my father.

But I absorbed his hard lessons, learned many things from him. On the day Remus died, I learned not to cry, or shiver. I haven't done either since.

I think about that as I look at the man standing in front of me. He's shivering violently. *Weak.*

Tall, distinguished with dabs of gray at the temple, still wearing his suit, although it's filthy and stained now, after a day spent in my little deep-woods bunker.

Baxter Warburton III. Such a good man. Married to the same woman for thirty years, father of five. Pillar of the community, chairman of a philanthropic board that dispenses money to shelters for homeless women and children. Oh, and in his spare time, he has a fun little hobby he thought nobody knew about. Rapist and murderer of young male prostitutes.

He likes to tie them face down, take them up the ass with a giant dildo until they bleed, then cut their throats. Apparently, he's been impotent for some time now, and this makes him angry.

Years ago, I invented a piece of software that detects patterns of disappearances among those who usually aren't missed—prostitutes, boy whores, runaways, society's cast-offs. Find a cluster of victims, and you'll find a killer. It's one of the methods I use to track down the best prey of all—men who prey on others. Often, such men are worthy opponents.

Unfortunately, Baxter is as far from worthy as a crippled kitten. Apparently, he's not so tough when he's faced with a man rather than a boy. He's weeping and dribbling snot, and he's already wet himself. There's a disgraceful wet spot spreading over his crotch.

Is that why I feel so empty?

I should be feeling fierce joy. This is the part where I toss him a knife and urge him to save himself from me. Where I let him feint and jab at me again and again until I finally disarm him. And then the chase through the woods. The inevitable capture. The slow, ritualistic carving. The screams caressing my ears, then fading to silence.

The feeling of release.

But I'm restless and can't concentrate. Images of Tamara keep forcing themselves into my head.

Mental pictures of her naked. Submissive. Crouched at my feet, the word "Master" falling from her plump pink lips.

Her imagined cries echo in my ears. "Please...don't hurt me... I'll do anything you want..." And the thought of what that "anything" could be sends a rush of blood to my cock.

I've never done anything like this before. Never taken a woman. Frankly, I've never wanted to have to spend that much time with anyone. Prolonged contact with anyone makes my skin prickle and burn as if I've run through a swarm of bees.

But ever since I met Tamara, strange feelings have taken up residence inside me. I don't know how to name those feelings. She woke something up in me, a different kind of appetite than any I've experienced.

The only emotions in my mental lexicon are the darker ones. Contempt. Cruelty. Lust. Greed. Either I was born without the ability to access the softer emotions, like love and tenderness, or they were beaten out of me as a child. Either way, I don't know what they'd feel like.

I've read the dictionary definitions. I've read romance novels and watched romantic movies in an attempt to understand. All I learned is that I have as much in common with those people as I do with a granite outcropping or a supernova. It's hard to believe we're spun from the same basic materials.

I can mimic the appropriate emotions long enough to pass for normal in my day-to-day interactions, but I can't feel them. I'm a computer that hasn't been programmed the same way as everybody else.

When I first laid eyes on Tamara, I found her intriguing and disturbing in equal measure. I couldn't decide what to do with her, so I pushed her away from me and observed her from a distance.

I considered seducing her and experimenting with a "relationship" for the first time ever, but as time went on, I decided against it. She had a weakening effect on me. She was

Delilah to my Samson; she scrambled my thought processes, made me less efficient.

My impulsive decision to kill George last night, and at my place of work? Perfect example. It was the stupidest thing I've ever done. I plan my hunts for months. I never select prey who can be traced back to me. *I am always in control.* And yet, after I checked the security video feed and saw the way he put his hands on Tamara, I was not in control, and I don't understand why. I was consumed by the desire to open him up and empty him out, until I literally couldn't stop myself.

Even firing Tamara was a snap decision on my part. I don't make snap decisions. But when she approached me, I felt a flare of unfamiliar emotion—I think it might have been “need”—and it rattled me, which is another thing that never used to happen to me, so I decided to cut off the source of the disturbance. Problem solved.

But it wasn't. I spent the entire next day obsessing about it. I had my private investigator hack into her cell phone, and saw that she was searching for new places to work. That made me angry, even though I was the one who had fired her.

When Tamara stumbled in on me taking care of the George problem, I had two choices. Kill her or capture her.

I only hesitated briefly before fixing on the proper solution. If I had her under my control, I could study her up close and learn more about human emotions. She was so different from me, so full of sloppy human traits like “kindness” and “mercy”. If I observed her in action, I could learn to mimic those traits and use them when necessary.

And then, let's be honest, there was my purely selfish craving to dominate her and fuck her again and again.

I've got to admit, I'm a little angry at her for having invaded my thoughts for so long. With her in my possession, I've snatched my power back, and I'll punish her for what she's done to my mind...and also, whenever I feel like it, I'll punish her just for fun.

I've called in to my office to let them know I'll be working mostly from home over the next few months. Perks of owning the company. And I can do everything I need from my home office. I've been working on acquiring a media company for some time now, and I've almost got it in the bag. I've scared off all the other possible buyers. Now it's just a matter of getting Phillip Morton to accept the insultingly low price I've offered him. Another man's life work destroyed, and an easy hundred million dollars poured into my greedy, bulging bank account.

Morton Media will be wrapped up in a few weeks. Over the next few months, I'll have all the time in the world to play with my new toy. To learn from her. To figure out what strange hold she has on me, and how to break it.

"I said I can pay you!" Baxter Warburton III screams at me, and I realize I've drifted away into a reverie and I've let him back away from me, gaining about thirty feet of distance. We're deep in the woods on my thousand-acre property, and he has no hope of escaping me, but that's not the point. The point is my laser focus went dim for a minute. *Tamara again. Fucking with my head.* "Anything you want, I'll give it to you!"

The lovely picture of Tamara crawling for me fades, and I look at him with annoyance.

I've got a specific sequence of events I follow after I've captured my prey. Usually my excitement spirals higher and

higher until the glorious release I feel as I watch them die.

But today, I'm having the opposite reaction. I'm growing more irritable by the minute. I want to get back home and play with my new toy. If it weren't for the fact that I had already captured the pathetic, mewling bastard and put him in one of my sound-proofed basement cells the day before Tamara handed herself over to me as a gift, I wouldn't have bothered with him at all.

I planned the taking of him for months, as tension coiled tighter and tighter inside me. This should have been ecstasy. Now it's just a distraction.

I move forward and raise the knife so I can end things quickly. Well, for him it won't feel quick, but I normally make these deaths last hours, and today I'm only going to spare him a few minutes of my very valuable time.

After it's done, after I carve up his body into parts too small to recognize, I hurry to my four-wheeler and climb on. My hunting zone is deeply wooded, and the entire perimeter of the property is ringed with sensors that ensure my privacy during these hunts.

As I'm motoring through the woods, my burner phone rings. It's an unknown number. A whisper of warning prickles under my skin. Only my servant, Elizabeth, has this number. I pull over and stop to check the voicemail, but there's no message.

It could be a wrong number, but I'm not taking any chances. I remove the battery immediately so it can't be traced. When I get home, I'll destroy the phone and use a new one.

I shrug off the faint warning bells ringing in my head. Nothing can harm me; I am Joshua Smith, survivor, destroyer, master of my world.

As I steer along the narrow wooded path, all concern fades away and a smile plays on my lips. I've just enjoyed the termination of Baxter Warburton III, an embarrassment to apex predators everywhere, and I have all kinds of fun planned for my new acquisition.

Life is good.

CHAPTER FIVE

TAMARA

Consciousness comes slowly, and the second I remember what happened, I go stiff with horror.

I've woken up to a nightmare. I don't know what the nature of it is yet, but it will be terrible. I'm lying on a hard, lumpy mattress, and the air smells like wet mildew, so I'm not home, and this is really happening to me.

Something icy-cold circles my ankle. I suspect it's an ankle cuff of some sort, but I don't dare move to test my theory in case anyone's watching. Oh God, I've been restrained. The implications of that are horrible beyond measure. I want to look, to jerk my leg, but I don't dare. Every second I can pretend I'm still unconscious is another second I'm not being tortured.

My life has shrunk down to this. Desperately trying to buy myself a few more pain-free seconds. Sick with terror about what's going to happen to me in the next few minutes.

"I'm going to play with you." I remember his mocking voice.

The man I've been crushing on for months has me chained up in a fucking *dungeon*. What the hell is wrong with me? How could I not have sensed what he really is?

Is there any way I'm getting out of this alive?

I can't possibly think how, and terror and sorrow flood through me. It takes everything I've got not to sob out loud.

I lie there in absolute stillness, with the sound of my breathing thundering in my ears. As the seconds tick by, I realize I don't hear anything at all. I think that, wherever I am, I'm alone. For right now.

I whisper my chant to myself. "One, two, three, four, five, please let me get home alive." And I tap my index finger on the mattress.

I'm afraid it won't work. It's supposed to be done on a mirror or a doorway. This is the rule created by my panicked seven-year-old self. I follow it to this day.

And am I really alone? If anyone is watching me, the magic doesn't work.

There's only one way to know. I have to open my eyes and look around.

I'm terrified. I don't want to die. I'm nineteen years old. I have my whole life ahead of me.

No. My life is over now. No college, no law school, no friends, no lovers, no husband or children... Hot tears spill onto my cheeks, and I bite my lip to keep from sobbing out loud.

The terror of what might be hovering right over me grows stronger and stronger, and I finally can't stand it anymore. I open my eyes...and I don't see anything. I remain perfectly still, listening. The only sound I can hear is the thundering of my own heart. It's so loud it feels as if it's echoing off the walls.

Finally, I sit up and look around. A chain rattles as I move my ankle, a horrifying noise that wrenches a squeak of fright from me. I curse myself and freeze for a long, long moment, until I'm sure I'm really alone.

I'm in a damp, windowless cell, and when I sit up, I see there's one light overhead, but it's dim. I suspect that's deliberate, and the unnecessary cruelty makes me want to weep. I'm chained up in a dungeon and am being deprived of light as well as my freedom. That tells me a lot about how the rest of my short life is going to play out.

Near the light, I notice a winking red eye in the ceiling. A camera, watching me. Is Joshua looking at me right now? I glance up and slowly, deliberately, flip the camera off. It's a weak little slap at the man who will kill me, who's probably sitting in a comfortable chair somewhere laughing at me, but it's the only way I can fight back while chained up in a dark basement.

The mattress is on a solid iron frame which is bolted to the floor, and there's a thin blanket crumpled up on it. My ankle chain is bolted to the floor next to the bed, and it's only a few feet long.

I stand on shaky legs, look around, then pat my body. I'm wearing my cocktail dress from yesterday, and I still have my underpants on, but my feet are bare.

It's a strange thought to have, but my mind is working a mile a minute. What do I do? What *can* I do?

Nothing.

This really is a prison cell. Joshua Smith has a prison cell, and I'm chained up in it. Someone designed this prison cell and built it for him, or he built it himself...which means he

uses it on a regular basis. I swallow the urge to scream. I stumble over to the toilet, lift my dress, squat, and pee.

“Did you get an eyeful there, Joshua?” I yell at the camera.

Then my courage evaporates, and I stumble over to the bed and sit there for what feels like an eternity, growing more and more frightened and miserable. Horrible images of what Joshua might do to me crowd into my mind, no matter how hard I try to push them aside.

I take deep breaths and let them out very slowly. Panicking won't help anything. It never helps. I've been in scary situations before, and I survived by forcing myself to stay calm and think clearly. My stepfather breaking down my door when I tried to lock it... Being followed home from work late at night and having to run for my life... A stocking-masked man coming into the burger joint where I worked at two a.m. with a pistol pointing at my face as I quickly emptied the register and prayed not to die...

Sarah, help me, I cry out in my head. I'm so scared. I'm so lonely. Be with me now. Help me die the right way. I summon up her round, plain, smiling face, the way I always do when I'm feeling low. Not my mother's face—that would be too painful.

I don't think I'm going to survive this, but I want at least to go out on my own terms.

Great, you're making a plan for dying.

I will keep from crying or begging as long as I can.

I will spit in Joshua's face at least once.

I will do my very best to draw blood.

I won't blame myself for anything that he makes me say or do while he's torturing me.

"That's my girl!" Sarah says to me in my head. Imaginary Sarah is beaming at me with approval. The evil voice tries to talk, from the oily black swirl of smoke it inhabits, but Sarah slides in front of it and tells it to get lost, and it does.

Finally, the door swings open, and I stifle a yelp of fear.

A woman walks in. Not Joshua.

She's maybe in her thirties, dishwater-blond hair scraped back in a severe bun. She's wearing slacks, sneakers, and a boxy T-shirt, severe sensible clothes that play down any femininity. There are furrows in her forehead that I think make her look older than she is.

I feel an instant flash of recognition when I look into her eyes. People who've been abused, we can often spot fellow victims. She's got that wary, defensive way of carrying herself. She's suffered horrors. I can see it in the grim set of her jaw. Her brown eyes look hard and pitiless, but maybe she'll take pity on me. One victim to another.

I shrink in on myself, trying to look as small and unthreatening as possible.

"Please help me," I beg her. "Please let me out of here."

She frowns disapprovingly and shakes her head, and I feel fury bubbling up inside me. How could she do this to another woman? How could she help him? But I hide my emotions and make my voice sound timid and weak.

"Please," I beg her. "I just want to go home. I won't tell anyone anything, I swear."

She reaches the bed, and I see she's got handcuffs dangling from her hand, and a cloth hood. Horror pools in my belly.

"How can you do this?" I cry out. "How can you help him keep a woman prisoner?"

She opens her mouth, and I nearly faint from horror and disgust. She's got a mangled stump where her tongue should be.

She grins fiercely at my look of shock. Dear God, what did Joshua do to her? It's clearly driven her mad.

Defeated, I sit there and let her put the hood on me. Swiftly, she cuffs my hands behind my back. Then she releases the ankle cuff and grabs me by the arm. I shudder at her touch but let her lead me out of the room.

I count the steps, in case it helps. Fifty stumbling steps down the hall. Then, on the left, a flight of stairs, twenty of them. Then through a doorway.

I've moved into another world, like climbing up from the depths of Hell. It was musty and damp down there. Up here, it smells crisp and clean, with a faint, sweet floral aroma in the air. We go left. I'm walked down another hallway. Forty-five steps. I'm steered to the right. Through a doorway. She tugs impatiently at my arm, and I stumble over the carpet edge and almost fall.

"Slow down, Elizabeth." Joshua's voice cracks through the air, and I feel the temperature plummet, making me shiver. Elizabeth, the bitch who has her hands on me, freezes instantly, and then very slowly, carefully, guides me over the carpet and another twenty-two steps.

Then she stops.

"You may leave now, Elizabeth."

I hear her footsteps thudding dutifully away, and then they fade and she's gone.

Elizabeth must be terrified of him. That's why she won't help me. Aside from hacking half her tongue off, what else must this monster have done to her?

And yet I don't feel sorry for her. If ever there comes a day when he kidnaps another woman, I won't help keep her prisoner. I'd rather die.

As I stand there, I hear wooden floorboards creak, then the hood is snatched from my head. Bright light floods my vision, and I stand there, my eyes watering, blinking in the bright light. Joshua towers over me, close enough that I can smell a faint whiff of cologne.

I'm painfully aware my hands are still cuffed behind my back.

"Hello, Tamara."

I tip my head back, reluctantly meeting his eyes. His smile is like a tub of ice water dumped on my head, making me shudder. How could I ever have fantasized about this man? Now I know what he is, I can see all the signs I missed before. His cold, calculating gaze, the falseness of his smile, the hard cruelty in his eyes.

He's wearing a white Oxford shirt but no tie. Black slacks. Shiny black loafers.

A long moment stretches out between us as his gaze roves over me. My heart beats so wildly that I half expect it to make my body vibrate in tune.

He kidnapped me. He murdered a man, then drugged and kidnapped me.

Unexpectedly, he reaches out and strokes my cheek with the back of his hand. It's slow and sensual and calls up unwelcome feelings, a warmth that forces its way through my body. Startled by the strength of my arousal, I gasp and jerk away, stumbling back a step.

He's watching me with a curious look on his face, examining me, judging me.

“So that's how you're going to play it.” He takes another step forward and strokes my face again, and this time his hand drifts down south, caressing my throat, then gently skimming my left breast, making his point. He'll touch me where and how he wants to. And if I resist, he'll just do what he was going to do anyway—and more.

As he caresses my breast, my nipples swell, and heat pools in my lower belly.

It means nothing. It's a physical response to stimulus. I stand rigid, muscles locked, staring at the wall behind him. There's no point in trying to get away from him. Even if I weren't handcuffed, I'm hopelessly outmatched. He's almost a foot taller than me, and lethal as a cobra. There's no escaping this, so I just endure it, hating the warmth that flows from his hand and heats my skin. He gently squeezes my swollen nipple between two fingers, making it clear that my physical arousal hasn't escaped his notice.

Finally, he drops his hand to his side, but the gleam of triumph in his eyes makes me burn with shame.

“Why?” I demand bitterly. “You never even liked me. You never even looked at me. I disgusted you so much that you fired me for talking to you.”

At that, anger flares in his eyes. It's so intense that I can feel it prickling in the air, sharp and thorny. I tense, bracing myself for a blow.

"Don't ever tell me how I feel."

"Duly noted," I snap. And in that brief moment, I'm incredibly proud of myself. I just sassed back to a serial killer. I'm keeping the promise I made in my cell. Going down swinging.

But when he smiles gently at me, my pride evaporates like morning mist, and it's replaced by fear.

He spins me around and does something to my handcuffs, then they fall off me and my hands are free.

I shake my arms and rub my wrists as I look around.

We're in an enormous dining room, with a bright chandelier overhead and a rich, plush carpet in tones of light blue, dark blue, and black running down the center of the room. A table with a lace runner down the center sits under a sparkling chandelier, and impressionist paintings in thick gilded frames adorn the walls. The windows, which take up an entire wall across the room from us, are covered with pale ivory blinds, which completely swallow any light, and there are thick blue velvet curtains that sweep the floor.

The table is set with silver platters. There's prime rib, tiny red potatoes, Brussels sprouts, salad, bowls and gravy boats filled with various dressings and dips. Two places have been set, one at the head of the table and one to the right. The china is decorated with gold leaf.

The surroundings are incongruously, startlingly beautiful. I feel a surge of anger. This room is a lie, just like Joshua's beautiful face. Joshua doesn't deserve to live in such lush,

elegant surroundings. Everything here should be as dank and ugly as my prison cell—as Joshua’s black, black heart.

He points at my chair. “Sit down. Now.”

I sink down into my seat and my heart hammers in my chest as I look over what may be my last meal.

CHAPTER SIX

TAMARA

I rub my wrists as he takes his seat and spears a slice of prime rib from the silver tray.

“What are you going to do—?”

“You’re being rude,” he says coldly, gesturing at the dinner. “Eat.”

I bark a disbelieving laugh. “I’m being rude?” I say. “Kidnapping me was *rude*. And insane. I have the right to—”

He sets his fork down and looks at me, and the words dry up in my mouth. I’ve never seen anything like the expression on his face. I can’t believe how fast he went from gently stroking my face to...feral, I guess, is the only way I could describe it.

I fall silent and stare down at my plate.

“*Eat,*” he repeats, in a tone that says that if he has to ask me one more time, I will be very, very sorry.

I know that look. My stepfather used to give me that look.

It was a wise person who said, “Choose your battles.” There’s no point in refusing this meal. The food looks delicious, and I realize that I’m so hungry I’m lightheaded.

I reach out, grab the silver tongs and lay a slice of prime rib on the plate in front of me. There's a carving knife and fork there, and I wish I had the courage to grab them and stab him.

Instead, I take a little food from each platter and eat until I'm full.

He keeps eating for a little while longer, and I sit there in silence, waiting to learn my fate.

Finally, he sets his knife and fork down and takes a sip of red wine from the glass next to his plate. I didn't get any wine. I am afraid that means he doesn't want to let me dull my senses; he wants me to feel everything he's going to do to me.

"I'm in a generous mood. Since this is your first day here with me, I will give you a gift. You may ask me five questions. But don't get used to this, Tamara. I'm not a nice man."

Games. He loves to play games. I file that information away in my head, along with how many steps I took, in case it's useful somehow.

Mentally keeping count, I start with the most important one. Important to me, that is. It means nothing to him. "Are you going to kill me?"

"No. And you just wasted a question."

Scorn glitters in his eyes, and I'm furious with him. My fear is a casual joke to him. This is my *life*.

"You asked me that last night. Of course, there's the possibility that I'm lying to you. Now, I can tell you that I will never lie, and you'll find that out over time, but if I were a liar, asking me again would not make me change my answer." He looks disappointed, and ridiculously, I feel ashamed of myself for disappointing him. "Now, if you ever were to try to harm Elizabeth, or myself, I might have to kill you." He flicks a

glance at the carving knife, as if to tell me that he knew what I was thinking.

“Are you going to cut my tongue out like you did hers?” I demand bitterly.

He gives me an odd look. “I didn’t cut her tongue out.”

“Oh, I suppose she just came like that.” I snorted.

“Are you calling me a liar?” he inquires politely. I recognize the threat lacing his words, but I don’t care, because he’s going to hurt me anyway, so I might as well get a few last shots in.

“If the shoe fits.” I’m being insane, taunting a sadistic killer, but a surge of miserable pride wells up inside me at my bravery. I mentally pat myself on the back. Atta girl, Tamara.

“That’s going to cost you, sweetheart. And she did it to herself.” He takes a sip of ice water.

I stare at him in shock. What the hell? For some reason, I think he’s telling the truth. I can’t imagine how agonizing it would be to cut your own tongue out.

“Why did she do that?” I demand.

“You’d have to ask her.” Oh, that’s hilarious. I can’t ask her. *Because she can’t speak.* The cruel amusement glinting in his eyes makes me want to murder him. I can’t believe he let me have a steak knife.

No that’s not true, I can believe it quite easily. It’s part of his taunting game.

“Are you going to let me go some day?”

“Never.”

I utter a strangled cry before I can stop myself. His perfect lips have just shaped my death sentence.

Even if he doesn't kill me, I've been sentenced to life imprisonment, which is the same as death. Every dream I've ever had has been snuffed out by that one word.

I knew this from the moment I woke up, knew I was never walking out of here, wherever "here" is, but having it thrown in my face hurts so much I think my heart will tear in two.

Tears run down my face and splash on the table. My shoulders shake, and sorrow washes over me. He's telling me my life as I knew it is over.

"School starts in two weeks." My voice is husky with misery. "I've been working toward this for years. This is my whole life. I have a scholarship."

He looks at me calmly. "I don't care."

I hate him so much.

I suck in a breath and try to stop crying. What he just said was so painful that I push it aside. I can't think about it or acknowledge it, or I might die of sorrow.

"Are you going to rape me?" I've always been terrified of rape. The thought of having someone enter my body like that, the ultimate violation... My stomach curdles in fear, waiting for his answer.

A smile curls his mouth, and I can't stop staring at him, wondering how I never noticed how strange his smile is, the way it doesn't affect the rest of his face at all.

"I won't have to."

I rear back in my chair and stare at him in confusion. He locks his gaze with mine, and I desperately wish I could slap

the smug look off his beautiful face. Does he think I'll come crawling to him and beg for it, because he's so pretty? Is he really that irrational?

Probably. He's a serial killer who gets off on killing men and kidnapping women. God knows what goes on in that head of his. I won't give him the satisfaction of asking what the hell he meant, though.

"If you're not going to rape me, then what are you going to do with me?"

"I said five questions."

"Wait, no, that can't be right!" I protest.

"Believe me, Tamara, I can count to five." He pushes his plate away and stands up.

It didn't feel like five.

Frantically, I recount in my head. I recite my questions back. "Four!" I protest pleadingly. I have millions of questions crowding in my head, screaming for answers. And even more important than the right to ask one more question, I need to believe he'll keep his word to me. He's setting the rules; I have to know that he'll follow them. It's a kind of safety, a tiny bit of control in my new, dread-filled, out-of-control world.

He shakes his head. "You asked me what happened to Elizabeth's tongue. Five."

"No!" I cry, clenching my fists so hard my knuckles turn white. "I didn't ask. You volunteered that information."

He assesses me with a long, cool look. I wonder if my defiance is going to cost me, and in what manner he'll exact his retribution.

Finally, he nods, with a glint of what I think is reluctant admiration in his eyes. “Very good, Tamara. You may have one more question. You want to know what I’m going to do with you?”

I think quickly. That question is pointless. He’s already claimed he won’t rape me or kill me. He loves to play games, and if I ask him what he’s going to do with me, he’ll give me some bullshit answer like “Whatever I feel like,” and I will have wasted a question.

So I come up with a new question. “Do you only kill bad people?”

“I wouldn’t describe it like that. I only kill predators,” he says coolly.

“So you’re like that guy Dexter on the TV show.” I’m grasping for a lifeline, anything that will make him human, someone with a moral code, someone who might, despite what he just said, someday take pity on me and let me go.

“No, I kill predators because they’re the only ones who pose a real challenge. What kind of pathetic weakling would kill a woman or a child or an old man? Or some weak little office drone?” He pushes his chair back from the table.

And now all my questions are answered, and I’ve just lost the only power I had over him. Weakness floods my body and loosens my muscles. I wish I had more questions left. They stalled the inevitable.

He stands abruptly, reaches down, and grabs me by my hair, pulling me to my feet.

“You didn’t have to do that! You could have just asked me to stand up!” I cry out.

He nods. “I know.”

The deliberate, pointless cruelty of his statement drags dull dread through my body, and my food churns in my stomach. I feel sick and sad and so very frightened.

Fingers still twisted in my hair, he marches me out of the room and down the hall, in the opposite direction of the door that leads down to my basement cell. The terror of the unknown makes me whimper, and suddenly the basement doesn't seem so bad after all. I swallow my pleas, knowing that they'll do nothing more than amuse him.

He pushes me into a room, releases me, and slams the door shut behind us.

I suck in a breath, struggling for words. It's... I don't know how to describe it. A torture room? A pleasure palace?

"Welcome to my playroom," he says, as if reading my mind.

The room is easily a thousand square feet. The walls are white, not glaring, but a soft ivory. Recessed lights run along the ceiling. There are at least half a dozen... I'd have to call them restraint stations... placed throughout the room, with chains dangling from them. There's an X-shaped cross with cuffs on it, chains dangling from the ceiling, chains on the wall, and a bed on a platform with more chains hanging off the frame.

It's the racks of whips on display on the wall that capture my attention. I had no idea how many different shapes and sizes whips came in. There are curled-up bullwhips, whips that look like black swords, braided whips that end in frayed leather, and an entire rack of what look like black leather fly swatters. There's another rack with paddles of different shapes. One of them is shaped like a hand. *A sadist with a fucking sense of humor.*

Instruments that frighten me because I don't recognize them.

Something that looks like a pommel horse is positioned ostentatiously, and nearby is an ob-gyn chair with stirrups; a table full of dildos; rolling carts with terrifying metal tools on them. There's also a sink, and a cart next to it with a neatly folded stack of towels.

He points at a section of the wall with a bar of wood screwed into it easily a foot above my head. There is a big metal ring set into the wood, and two chains dangle down from it, with black leather cuffs on the end of each chain. It looks as if it's designed so that a person can be spun around in any direction, and there are also chains on the floor with cuffs at the ends.

Panic explodes through my body, making me jerk with fright. "No!" I cry out, and back away. He's on me in a flash. He grabs my wrist, bends my arm up behind my back until I scream, and walks me over to the wall.

He spins me around and pushes me so I'm backed up right under that bar of wood, forced to face him.

He's almost right on top of me, and I have to tip my head back to glare up at him.

"I was nice to you at dinner. No more."

I just keep looking up at him, trying to murder him with my eyes. *You call that nice?*

"Yes, that was me being nice." His shark smile shows too many teeth. I flinch, startled. Did I unknowingly say it out loud, or is he just frighteningly good at reading what I'm thinking?

“Time to learn the rules, Tamara. The faster you learn, the less pain you’ll be in. You are not allowed to fight me. You’re not allowed to disobey me. You’re not allowed to speak to me disrespectfully.”

He thinks I’ll show respect to a serial killer?

I spit in his face.

He smiles, slowly wiping it off with the palm of his hand, then wiping his hand on his pants. “Did you think that was a freebie? Because I’m already going to punish you? It wasn’t. You’ll receive additional punishment for that.”

“What the hell does it matter?” I say bitterly. “Your word means nothing. You’ll hurt me no matter what. I already know you’re a liar. You’re a rapist,” I say, looking around the room, my mind reeling in horror at the thought of how many women he must have tortured to death in here.

He laughs. “Don’t be ridiculous. I would never stoop so low as to force a woman to be with me. I’m a sadist. I get off on hurting people. That includes sex. I use an anonymous account to pay money to escorts. I bring them here and do whatever I want to them. They wear a hood the whole time. They never have any idea who they’re with.”

He reaches up, and I flinch, but he just strokes a lock of hair out of my face. “Men who rape aren’t even worthy of the name. They’re lower than dogs. A real man doesn’t need to force a woman to want him. Women are drawn to real men, and they’ll do anything for them, not because they have to, but because they want to.”

A little bit of my fear retreats. I pray he’s telling the truth. If he’s lying—if he’s brought women here and raped and tortured them—then there’s no hope for me. So I have to

believe him, for my own sanity's sake. And it makes an odd kind of sense. He's so damn arrogant, I suspect he wouldn't condescend to force himself on a woman in that way. At least that's what I tell myself, frantic for any scrap of comfort.

I open my mouth to speak, but he shakes his head.

“You will always address me as Master. You will only speak when spoken to. Speaking is a privilege. For that matter, breathing is a privilege. And you may find that out very soon.”

A chill runs through me, but I refuse to let my fright show on my face. I shape my features into an emotionless mask and stare at him.

He carries on. “The time will come, and it will come very soon, when you'll beg to call me Master. You'll beg me to fuck you. You'll beg to sleep at the foot of my bed.”

“Are you out of your damn mind?” I shout at him. “I will never do any of those things.”

His eyes glow with vicious happiness. He flashes his brilliant smile again, and the light gleams off his perfect white teeth. “Remember those words.”

Then he grabs my arm and spins me around so I'm facing the wall. I thrash and struggle, but he chains up first one wrist and then the other until I'm pinned there, helpless, face pressed against the cold white paneling.

Oh God, oh God...what the hell is he going to do to me now? This is going to hurt so much. I blink frantically. Don't cry, don't cry. He doesn't deserve your tears.

He adjusts the length of the chains so my arms are stretched over my head with just a little bit of play—I can move them maybe an inch or two. He walks away, and I yank pointlessly on my chains a few times before I finally give up.

He takes his time, which is a punishment in itself.

When he comes back, I spin around so I can see what's coming. And then I'm sorry I did. I can't help myself. My muscles jerk as I scream with terror and thrash against my chains. Because he's holding up a sharp, shiny silver knife.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TAMARA

“Hold still.”

I can't stop myself from struggling, so he holds the flat side of the knife against my throat, and I freeze immediately. Tears fill my eyes and roll down my cheeks, and I'm furious with myself. So much for not crying.

The knife slides down, and he seizes the neckline of my dress in one hand and slashes it down to my navel. I jerk a little, and there's a tiny pinprick of pain on my stomach.

He smiles apologetically. “I did warn you to hold still.”

Then he kneels and kisses the area that he nicked, on my belly right above my navel. It's so unexpected that I don't have time to brace myself against the shocking pleasure it brings me. His lips are soft and sensuous, and a wave of desire burns through my body before I can stop it.

No, no, no. I force myself to think of George lying there in a pool of blood. The smells and the sounds. My desire evaporates. I suck my stomach in, pulling my flesh away from Joshua's lips. I can't escape him, but at least I'm sending him a message that I'm not submitting to him willingly.

He stands up, his expression calm and kind as he slices my dress and the bra underneath it to ribbons. Pieces fall off me

and drift to the floor. Finally, I'm horribly exposed, stripped down to my panties. Cool air wafts across my breasts, and goose flesh pebbles my body.

He kneels once again to cut my panties from me. Tears continue to flow as he slashes one side of them and then the other and the front of them falls forward. I feel horribly exposed. He can see everything, and I can't stop him.

I press my legs together, trapping the scrap of fabric between my thighs, but he gently tugs it out, then kisses the area right above my pubic bone. Again, that sickening arousal burns through me, and I go rigid, frantically trying to banish it from my treacherous flesh. I fail. My nipples are swollen nubs of desire, announcing my body's wanton surrender.

He drops the knife on the floor.

Then he stands up, and I see a fierce hunger in his gaze that terrifies me.

"How long will it take you to admit how much you want me, I wonder?" And he slides his fingers between my legs, stroking my pussy lips. I'm mortified to realize that they're slick with the juices of my arousal. I jerk wildly, trying to dislodge his hand.

"You said you wouldn't rape me!"

"I'm not raping you," he says, slowly rubbing his fingers between my legs. "I'm just touching you. And you love it. You're wet for me."

My body reacts instinctively, writhing in a desperate attempt to escape. The memories he's calling up are too familiar. "Don't touch me there!" I sob. "Please. My stepfather used to..."

He freezes instantly, withdrawing his hand, and my panic recedes. The relief that floods me makes me want to weep with ridiculous, pathetic gratitude.

“He raped you?” And there’s harsh anger in his voice, but it’s not at me. He’s angry with my stepfather. I know that somehow.

I gulp in deep breaths, my chest heaving in distress. I don’t want to talk about this, but as long as I’m talking, Joshua is listening to me and not moving on to whatever he has planned next. “No. I was seven. He touched me between my legs a few times when he was drunk and my mom was passed out in their bedroom. I used to press my legs together really tight and squirm away from him, and he’d stop.” My stomach clenches, and I press back against the wall, as if I can shrink away from the memories.

I don’t like the way Joshua is staring at me, intently, blue eyes probing the tender, painful recesses of my mind. “What happened to him?”

I choke on the words. “He left.”

He nods solemnly, kneeling again, and kisses my stomach, his lips featherlight. I gasp in arousal.

“He’s gone forever. When I’m touching you, you only think of me. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

He kisses my navel. “Do you like that? Don’t lie to me, Tamara. I’ll know.”

No, you won’t. Because I just lied to you right now about my stepfather leaving.

Because I did a Bad Thing.

But my lips open and I hear myself saying, “Yes.”

I want to believe I’m just saying that because as long as he’s kissing me, he’s not hurting me. He threatened punishment, and I’m sure it’s still coming. But the truth is, he’s forcing my own body to betray me, and the pleasure flooding through me is like nothing I’ve ever felt before.

He slowly kisses his way down, lips caressing my flesh, and then his mouth is on the seam of my heated sex, and his tongue probes gently. I gasp in arousal and part my legs. It’s like my body belongs to someone else. My mind is screaming in protest and my body is a slut in heat.

“Do you like that?” He pauses, waiting.

“Yes.” I grind the word out, hating myself for saying it.

Only then does he move. My acknowledgment guides him downward. He spreads me open with his fingers, and before I know it, I’ve arched my back and moved my hips forward to meet him.

His mouth closes over my clit, sucking on the sensitive little nub, and a whimper escapes my lips. When he pulls away, the loss of sensation is almost painful, and I bite my lip hard so I don’t whimper again.

“How about that?” He waits for my answer. I could say no, and I believe he’d stop.

I close my eyes and grab at what’s left of my self-control. “I don’t want to be here. I want you to set me free. I hate you and I want you to die.”

“I know all that,” he says patiently. “But that’s not what I asked you. Do you like what I’m doing to you right now?”

“Yes,” I whisper, as if saying it very, very quietly will make it untrue.

He buries his face between my legs, stroking me with his tongue several times, and my muscles start to relax as I abandon myself to the delicious sensation for a few moments. Then the reality of what I’m doing crashes down on me, and I jerk my body violently, moving my hips a few inches to the left and dislodging him. But only because he lets me. Apparently he told the truth. He won’t force himself on me sexually.

He stands up, then runs his finger along his lips and slides it into his mouth, sucking off my juices. It’s incredibly sensual, and I start to relax, slumping back against the wall, but the moment is gone all too soon.

The dreamy look vanishes, and his face settles into a hard, merciless mask. “Now it’s time to address your behavior earlier.”

He walks away again, and I go stiff with fear. Was this because I moved away from him? Should I have let him continue? What would be worse—the pain he’s going to inflict on me, or the sickening humiliation of letting my kidnapper nudge me toward orgasm?

And why is he taking so long? I stare straight ahead, not wanting to see what he’s doing. I hear him walking slowly, the sound of his footsteps bouncing off the walls and smacking my ears. I think he must have designed the room so that footsteps would echo. It’s part of the whole effect, everything in here designed to build fear and anticipation.

I try to comfort myself, fortify my mind against what’s coming.

My stepfather used to beat my bare behind with a belt. I've experienced pain before. I can take it. I'll just grit my teeth and bear it. I didn't even cry out for my stepfather, not after the first few times. I didn't give him the satisfaction. I'm strong. I can survive this. I can.

He's coming back.

And he's holding a long, tan wooden stick with a leather-wrapped handle.

“As you've seen, I am a collector of implements of flagellation. Over time, I'm going to use many of them on you. Sometimes I'll use them to punish you. Sometimes I'm going to do it just for fun. Because inflicting pain turns me on. So the last thing you want to do is give me an excuse.”

The horror of my new life explodes over me like a bomb, and I feel all my bravery washing away. I can't stop staring at him, misery and fear painting my face.

He holds the stick up, turning it in his hands. “This is a cane. A barbaric method of chastisement. It's still used in corporal punishment in many countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia. Do you know why?”

I drag back a little bit of my courage and say something I know I'll regret very soon. “No, but since you love the sound of your own voice, I'm sure you're going to tell me.” I have to. I'm getting more and more frightened, and I'm afraid that soon I won't have any more courage left, so I'll use it while I still can.

He laughs, as if I've just said something terribly witty. “It's used because it hurts like a bitch. The first few blows aren't that bad, but then the skin starts to soften and it's agony. I've trained in every kind of whip and cane. There's a technique to

it. You have to strike the areas where there's fat and muscle, and avoid the bony areas to prevent permanent nerve damage. And the cane can decide how hard to strike. It's the movement of the wrist, not the arm, that's important, by the way." He turns the cane over in his hand, admiring it. "This is one of the thicker canes. I prefer them to the thinner models. Thicker canes are less likely to break the skin, and they leave deeper bruising, which will give you something to think about for the next week or two." He slaps it on his palm, and the sound makes me jump.

He laughs again, a warm, rich sound. *The bastard laughs.*

Fear is funny to him.

I hate him so much that I can't believe the sheer force of my rage hasn't killed him. My hate is a storm inside me, emptying me out and hollowing me with fury.

He moves forward, and I don't resist as he spins me around to face the wall. When he tries to cuff my ankles, though, I kick him in the face as hard as I can. It's like kicking a building. My foot bounces off, but his head doesn't move at all.

"Five strokes for talking back to me at dinner. Five for spitting in my face. Five for kicking me." And he captures and cuffs each ankle, leaving me secured, hand and foot.

I go rigid, bracing myself, but he waits so long that finally my muscles tire and I slump in my chains.

That's when I hear something whistling through the air, and I don't even have time to tense up again before I feel a crack across the top of my left butt cheek.

"One," he says.

A split-second passes, and it's the last moment of my life when I am ignorant of what real pain is. Then a slash of red-hot agony claws into my flesh. I thought it hurt when my stepfather whipped me with his belt. That was a gentle caress compared to this.

Joshua said the first few strokes weren't that bad. *Oh God, will it get even worse?* This is a line of pure fire running across my skin. I buck and gulp in air. Before I even get the chance to scream, he strikes again. Another slash of fire is painted across my buttocks, crisscrossing the first. "Two."

"Nooo!" I scream.

"Three." He strikes the right cheek. I feel every blow as a lightning strike that never ends, burning and burning with eternal agony. I buck and howl, my legs jerking violently at the chains.

"Stop!" I shriek at the top of my lungs. It's not the conscious part of my mind saying that; it's the survival instinct of my maddened animal brain. I can't throw my hands out to block the blows. I can't run away. All I have is my weak, useless words.

Another crack across the right cheek. "Four." Wildfire burns across my flesh.

"Stop, stop, stop!" My voice rises higher and higher until it's nothing but a helpless squeak, with no force behind it.

There's a long, long pause, and I'm sobbing, gulping for air. It's agony waiting for the blow. When he hits me again, the strangled noise I make isn't a word.

"That was the first five. For talking back to me."

Oh God, ten more.

I can't survive this.

“Please, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, I'm really, really sorry!” I want to vomit as soon as I spit out the words. *Why am I so weak?*

“Irrelevant.” His vile voice rings out behind me.

And he resumes, this time with a rapid flurry of blows across each butt cheek, moving from top to bottom. He barks the numbers in staccato fashion. “Six, seven, eight, nine, ten!” As he finishes the last blow, I feel a wildfire roaring over my skin.

All I can do is howl wordlessly in agony now. It burns and burns without end. My entire ass feels as if someone drenched it in gasoline and set it aflame. My muscles clench and spasm, and I shake my ass from side to side in a frantic attempt to relieve some of the pain. I'm desperate to rub my burning flesh, but the brutal cuffs won't let me.

He's not hitting me anymore. We must be done. I have to believe that. He took mercy on me—he'll spare me the final five. If I don't believe that, I'm going to die. My body shakes with sobs, and I'm gasping so much that I feel lightheaded. I don't know how much time goes by before he slides the cane along the wall, in front of my face.

“We'll move on to your tits next. I like a riding crop for the tits. Kiss the cane and tell me thank you for punishing you.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind, you asshole?” I scream at him before I can stop myself.

He grins, and a cruel glee lights his eyes. “You are a glutton for punishment, aren't you? Five more.”

“No!”

“You haven’t called me Master yet. You might want to rethink that.” The light teasing tone in his voice is that of a joking lover. But he’s anything but. I hear the cane whistling through the air, the most horrible sound in the world, and it splashes bloody, agonizing fire across the back of my thigh, and my whole body convulses. He reaches out and squeezes my left butt cheek, torturing my seared flesh with his brutal grip, and I let out another screech of pain.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! *Master!* I’m sorry!” I scream. *I’m weak. I’m disgusting. I hate myself so much.*

He lifts my cheek and smacks the cane across the crease where my butt cheek joins my thigh. “Four more.”

I make a gargling sound of pure despair.

He repeats the motion on the other side, lifting my cheek to expose tender flesh before he strikes it. Then he moves down to the backs of my thighs, and my legs jerk like an electrocuted frog with each blow. My skin is soaked in flames. My throat is raw from screaming.

Finally, he finishes and shoves the cane in front of my face. Frantically, I press my lips against it. “Thank you for punishing me, Master,” I sob.

He uncuffs my ankles and spins me around to face him. My legs are too weak to hold me up, and I sag, my weight pulling on my wrists, and sob uncontrollably. The agony pulses with every beat of my heart.

He walks away and sets the cane down on a bench, then pulls a whip from the wall.

Five more.

“Master, no! Please! I’m sorry! Master!” Every time I say that horrible word, I hate myself more. It sticks in my throat,

sending shudders of revulsion through my body. But I'll say anything right now to get the pain to stop.

He stalks over, smiling as he holds out his new torture tool for my inspection. "Riding crop. It's got quite a vicious little bite."

All I can do is moan in despair. Begging won't help. Nothing will help. What happened to the man who kissed his way down my stomach, the man who vowed to drive all memory of my stepfather from my mind, who made me feel almost safe, minutes ago? *I want him back. Please come back.*

He raises his arm and smacks my breast, and I learn the difference between a cane and a crop. This is a crisp, sharp razor's edge of agony slicing across the delicate flesh. He slashes me three times on the right breast and twice on the left breast. I scream, my throat raw, my mouth open in an endless howl.

Then he holds it up for me to kiss, and I do, pressing my lips against the hateful braided leather handle. I'm sobbing so hard that I can barely speak.

"Thank you for punishing me, Master." I choke out the words.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TAMARA

When he uncuffs my wrists, I sink to my knees. He towers over me like a vengeful god.

“Did you learn your lesson?”

“Yes, Master.” I sob out the words, hanging my head in despair, too ashamed of my weakness to look at him. I thought I’d be so much stronger than this.

He scoops me up, and I jerk in pain as he carries me across the room. Everywhere my whipped flesh presses against his arm, the agony is multiplied.

“Please, it hurts,” I whimper, and he starts to squeeze me hard. I arch my back as pain sears my body. “Master!” I scream. “Please, no more, Master!”

He relaxes his grip, and when we reach a padded table, he sits me down on it. “Lie down,” he says.

I groan as I obey him, lying face down and pressing my cheek into the cool leather. A minute later, I feel something cold on my butt, and at first I tense up, but then I relax as the pain fades a little bit. He’s massaging something into the whip marks that must be medicated, because the burn cools significantly. His gentle hands sweep over my skin, stroking

numbing, soothing comfort into my flesh. I moan with gratitude.

He moves over every throbbing inch, and the feeling of his palms on my skin is the most delicious sensation I've ever experienced. His hands are broad and strong and talented; he knows just how much pressure to apply. I force myself to go silent, to stifle my whimpers of appreciation, because that's just rewarding him for hurting me earlier. I just lie there, eyes clenched tightly, my face sticky with my shed tears, as his hands slowly move up and down my butt and thighs.

“Stand up.”

I slowly, carefully slide off the bed, my arms instinctively moving to hide my crotch and breasts. He frowns at me, shaking his head, and I drop them to my sides.

He begins massaging the medicated cream into my breasts, and the agonized stripes of fire fade to a dull heat. His thumbs stroke over my nipples, which are swollen with hateful arousal. Were they swollen when he was whipping me? How did this happen? He watches me, and as I bite my lip and fight not to pant with pleasure, I can see him drinking in my struggle with a faint smile.

My knees tremble, and I'm afraid I'm going to fall. I'm still in enormous pain, but I no longer feel as if my skin will split with the tiniest movement.

He walks away, going to the sink to wash his hands. When he returns, he holds out a glass of water to me, and two white pills. “Extra-strength painkiller and a mild sedative. You're still going to be in pain for days, of course, but this will take the edge off. You may thank me.”

“Thank you, Master,” I mutter, staring at the floor again so he won’t see the hatred flaring in my eyes. *Fuck yourself up the ass, Joshua Smith. You’ll never be my master.* Thinking that makes me instantly feel better about myself. I revise the earlier list of rules that I made for myself.

That list was based on believing he’d torture me to death. Now, if he’s telling me the truth, I’m facing a different, equally sinister plan. He wants to break me down mentally and force me to be something I’m not. A crawling slave with no will or wants of her own. A slow, humiliating death of the mind, rather than a quick, agonizing death of the body.

New rules. *Lie to him all the time and pretend you’re going along with his twisted plans. Remember that you’re a free woman, and no human can ever truly own another. Constantly watch out for any opportunity to escape.*

My hands tremble as I stuff the pills in my mouth. I wash them down with the water, suddenly incredibly thirsty.

He walks over to the wall and uses the intercom to call Elizabeth, and I jerk in horror. “My clothing! Please give me something to wear! Master!”

“You haven’t earned it. You’re doing a shit job of remembering to address me properly, and your behavior today was completely unacceptable.” He smiles at me sympathetically. “Let’s hope you do better tomorrow, hmm?”

I glare at the ground again. “Yes, Master.” *I hope you choke and die, Joshua Smith.*

The next thing I know, he’s cuffing my hands behind my back. Elizabeth walks in, ignoring me as the hood goes back over my head.

The cuffs and the hood are unnecessary at this point; I'm in too much pain to move quickly, much less fight her off, and I'm positive there's no easy way for me to break out of this house, wherever it is. They're just being used as a tool to break me down psychologically, to reinforce the difference between upstairs and down. Heaven and Hell. Freedom and misery.

But the tactic doesn't work, because I recognize it for what it is, which pleases me. I have to figure Joshua out if I'm to have any hope of escape, and any insight that I can glean into his twisted mind will be helpful.

Elizabeth chains me to the floor again before she removes the hood and handcuffs. She's carrying a bottle of water and a cup with two more pills in it, which she sets down on the floor.

As she leaves, I call after her. "I'm sorry for whatever he did to you, but it's really *fucked up* that you're helping him keep me prisoner. He has no right to do this to me. It's monstrous, pure evil, and you're just as evil as he is to help him get away with it."

She twists around to glare at me, and shakes her head. What? She's saying it's not fucked up?

Whatever. *Bitch*. If I ever get the chance to take Joshua out, I'll take her out too. I turn my back on her, dismissing her from my existence.

My back aches, and I lie face down on the bed. My breasts hurt too, but they're the least painful, and also in this position, I'm hiding my face from the camera and snatching back just the tiniest bit of privacy for myself. The overhead light winks out, plunging me into darkness. I feel woozy from whatever was in the pills he gave me, but the pain's keeping me awake.

Alone like this, with nothing to distract me, the full horror of my situation comes crashing back down. *I'm locked in a serial killer's basement.*

No. No. Don't do that to yourself, Tamara.

I try to think comforting thoughts so I don't spiral into hysteria.

Heather will notice the mail piling up on my doorstep and report me missing. If she doesn't, if she's so mad at me because of what I said a couple of days ago that she'd let me vanish and not even try to help, then the landlord will. He lives down the hall from me, so he'll notice the mail too. And my rent is due in a few days. I'm always compulsively on time with the rent.

Heather wouldn't be *that* petty, though, would she? I don't know if I'm being paranoid because of my wretched situation. Still, there was something about the way that she flipped out on me out of nowhere. It was so extreme. It made me realize that I didn't know her anywhere near as well as I thought I did. The funny, loud-mouthed party girl can also be a mean bitch.

Never mind. My landlord will report me missing. And they'll notice at the shelter when I miss my volunteer day, but that's not for another few days yet.

Where will the police look for me, though? How can they go up against an influential, obscenely wealthy businessman like Joshua Smith? Would they even dare question him? And if they do, will they be able to see past his lies? He can be sickeningly charming when he chooses to be.

I push those thoughts aside. I have to think that I'll be able to escape somehow. I don't know how, but I must tell myself

that this isn't my life, that someday, some miracle will set me free.

The thought of the homeless shelter makes my throat swell with sorrow. I loved working there so much. I really felt like I was making a difference in people's lives. Even just talking to women, lending them a sympathetic ear, letting them know that it wasn't their fault, it was never their fault. I was making friends there, and I'm afraid they'll think I've walked out on them. I can't believe I may never set foot in there again.

I can't even let the thought of school enter my head without wanting to scream. I worked so hard, for so long, to get that scholarship. Even if I were to escape, would I ever have such a wonderful opportunity again?

"Eat ground glass and die, Joshua Smith, and your little bitch Elizabeth, too," I mouth into the mattress.

I start to do the tapping ritual on the mattress, and then I start laughing hysterically and crying at the same time, great hiccupping sobs rolling out of me. The tapping won't work; it was for protection. It's much too late for that.

I'm growing woozier and woozier, and I drift off despite the pain. When I wake up, at God knows what time of the night, my ass and thighs and boobs are throbbing. It feels like someone branded me by wrapping red-hot barbed wire around me. I feel around for the pills and wash them down with the bottle of ~~the~~ water. A little while later, I'm asleep again.

I wake up to someone yanking on my wrist. It takes me almost an entire second to remember where I am, which somehow makes it a million times worse. There's that brief, glorious moment of confusion, and then I'm back in hell.

The dim light is back on in my cell, and I sit up too fast and cry out in pain. Elizabeth is standing there, hatred and contempt stamped on her face, which I decide is the ugliest thing I've ever seen.

It's not bad enough that I'm here; I also wake up to the clenching of my usual first-thing-in-the-morning anxiety attack. Now, though, there's a reason for that panic.

What fresh torture does Joshua have planned for me today? Tears prick my eyes, and I blink hard. I pray he won't whip me again. My flesh is so tender, I'm terrified it would split and gush blood if he struck me on my bruised spots.

I stumble painfully to my feet and submit to the ritual of handcuffs being clicked onto my wrists, and then the hood being pulled over my head. I hate the fact that I'm naked. I feel raw and vulnerable as she marches me upstairs. Pain from yesterday's beating flares with every single step, and I bite back my whimpers because I don't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing that she's hurting me.

This time, instead of being led to the dining room, I'm taken in the opposite direction, down the hall into a room with a cool tile floor.

Elizabeth jerks the hood off my head. I'm in an enormous, beautiful bathroom with a raised tub the size of a Jacuzzi. There are steps leading up to the tub. The room is like a grotto, with flowing carved walls, sconces shaped like torches, and big fernlike plants in wooden planters.

Joshua is wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist. His body is stunning—shoulders broad, stomach gorgeously sculpted. There's a light dusting of dark hair across his chest. Scars are scattered across his torso. Slashes and round marks that look like burns.

He was abused once upon a time. Figures. And it doesn't excuse him in the least.

Elizabeth stands there, and Joshua flashes her a look of impatience. "You may leave, Elizabeth."

She nods respectfully, but I see the resentment in her gaze as she hunches her shoulders and walks out. Is she jealous? Of me? She can't be. I'm a prisoner who's covered in bruises. She's walking around free.

Joshua uncuffs me and sets the key down on the marble sink counter.

"You will not speak to Elizabeth again the way you did last night. She works for me, and therefore you will show her respect."

"Yes, Master," I mutter.

"Time for me to bathe you," he says. I look at the tub and see that there are cuffs affixed to the wall that surrounds the tub, on both ends. I'll be splayed out, legs spread wide, obscenely vulnerable.

"I...I can bathe myself...Master." I force myself to choke out that last word. I feel sticky and vile, and I do want a bath, but I don't want him touching me. I don't like that he can make my body feel pleasure. It gives him power over me that he doesn't deserve.

He snorts in contempt. "God, I'd certainly hope so. But I didn't ask if you could bathe yourself." He points at the tub. "Get in and raise your hands over your head so I can cuff you."

His hands glide between my legs, sending waves of pleasure through my body. I want to scream, "Hell, no!" But I

also don't want to bleed on the floor of his torture room.
"Please, Master, I prefer to bathe myself."

He smiles gently at me. "All right then."

Really? My eyes widen in astonishment.

My relief is short-lived. He spins me around and cuffs my hands behind me again. He puts the hood back over my head and calls Elizabeth back.

Her hand is unnecessarily tight on my arm as she leads me, still naked, down the hallway. My heart sinks.

She leads me down to the room, snatches off the hood, and chains me back to the floor before releasing my wrists. Her lips are set in a grim line, but I see a twinkle of malice in her eyes. She officially hates my guts.

I sit there and wait. The overhead light is left on, still dim. The minutes tick by. I'm hungry and thirsty.

The minutes stretch into hours. My mouth is sticking to itself, my stomach rumbling. I feel as if there's a sticky film of filth coating my body.

Finally, I look at the camera on the ceiling and cry out, "I'm sorry, Master!"

The minutes tick by. Nothing happens.

"Please, I'm really thirsty! Master! I'm sorry, Master!"

I flop face down on the bed. Somehow, I know I won't be getting an answer anytime soon.

With nothing else to do, I tap on the mattress.

I should have been more consistent, should have followed the rules that I set for myself. I need my chanting rituals.

They're my little touchstones, giving me a sense of security that I need and crave.

I have to do the tapping ritual in the morning, at night before I go to bed, and before I go to any important meetings or job interviews. It's better if I have a mirror, but it also works if I close my eyes while tapping and chanting.

Or it used to.

I sit there and tap and chant over and over again, whispering low so Joshua can't hear the magic words. I repeat the chant again, and again, and again. It doesn't help. I'm still here.

I'm going mad with boredom and hunger and thirst. And worse, this is only my second day here.

Or is it the third day?

I'm already losing track of time. And although I can go days without food—I did all the time as a child—I've never had to go without water before. I've always taken it for granted that I could just turn on the tap and water would come out.

I lie down on the bed and desperately try to think of anything but how thirsty I am, but it's almost impossible. I'm utterly miserable.

A few times, I croak piteously at the security camera, begging for forgiveness. None comes. I didn't really expect it to, but I had to try.

A million years drag by, and the light winks out, probably signifying nighttime. I wish I had more of those pills, because the bruises from my caning are throbbing, and I'm in too much pain to sleep.

But nobody comes. I start to cry.

Dear God, he's going to leave me down here to die of thirst. What a horrible way to die.

I lie awake most of the night in a daze of misery and burning thirst. I'm not sure if I sleep at all. When the door finally opens, I'm ready to weep with gratitude, but I'm too dehydrated for tears.

I'm too weak and thirsty to be bothered by the look of hate that contorts Elizabeth's face as she puts the hood on me and cuffs me. She leads me upstairs again, and the dull ache of my bruises throbs through my body. With every single step, all I can think is, *Water, water, water.*

Joshua is standing there, looking as cool and fresh as ever, with a white towel wrapped around his waist again. I cringe in shame. My breath stinks and my hair is matted and I have BO. I try to cover my body with my hands, but he grabs them and forces them to my sides.

"You're disgusting, you know that? You make me want to vomit. You look like crap, and you smell like you bathed in pig shit." His lip curls in scorn. I want to sink into the floor, to escape the contempt radiating from him. I hate being dirty. He's sent me right back to grade school, walking through the door in filthy, stained clothes, with matted hair, as the teacher stares at me in horror and the children laugh and whisper behind their hands, their eyes shining with malicious glee.

"Eww. It's that gross Tamara girl again. I hope she doesn't sit next to me. She smells so bad."

"She smells like doody. Look at her shoes—you can see her toes sticking out!"

I nod miserably.

“Please give me water,” I croak desperately, and he arches an eyebrow.

“Master!” I cry out desperately. “Please give me water, Master!” I am shaking so hard I’m ready to pass out. I dry-heave sobs. I’m so afraid he’ll send me back to the basement for forgetting to address him the way he demands. I can’t survive another day.

His gaze is merciless. “Get in the tub.”

I scramble to obey. I feel a flood of gratitude that he’s giving me orders I can follow.

That’s sick. Messed up. I can’t feel grateful for anything he does.

But I’m too exhausted and thirsty and weak to fight right now, even in my mind.

I throw my arms back over my head and let him fix my hands to the rubbery cuffs dangling from the bolts in the tile. I let him spread my legs open wide and affix each of them to the ankle cuffs.

He turns on the water and pours in a capful of sweet, heavenly smelling liquid from a bottle of amber fluid that was nestled into a little shelf in the wall. Instantly, flowery-scented bubbles start churning in the warm water. I start to croak out another plea, but he freezes me with a look.

“You haven’t earned the right to speak.”

When will he let me drink? I shake with dry sobs as he walks away, then I stiffen in terror as I see him bring back a silver razor. Then he sets down a can of shaving cream, and I relax and sag in the bathtub.

The water is lukewarm, just the right temperature, and even though my skin stings, it feels wonderful to soak my filthy self.

He walks away again, and when he comes back, he's holding a bottle of water in his hands.

He unscrews the top slowly, deliberately. He kneels next to me, and my gaze is fixated on it. My entire universe has shrunk down to that water bottle. I want it more than a pile of gold coins or an Upper-East-Side mansion. Cool, sweet water.

He holds it out to me and presses it up against my lips, but he doesn't tip it up so I can drink.

"You may apologize now."

"I'm sorry, Master." My lip splits and bleeds as I speak.

"For what?"

"I'm sorry I didn't let you give me a bath. Master," I add quickly.

He tips the bottle and lets me have a few precious sips.

Then he pulls it away.

"I could have forced you, but that isn't the point," he says as my eyes desperately fix on the water bottle. "The point is, you obey me instantly, without question. And this bath will be part of our daily routine, every morning. I despise filth, and I require your cleanliness. The next time you refuse to let me bathe you, you'll be in that room for two days. And if you do it again, three. I won't kill you, but if we get to four or five days, you'll probably die, and I will consider you as having killed yourself. But I don't think we'll get to that point. Will we?"

"No, Master," I croak out.

He presses the water bottle against my lips, tipping it up, and I greedily gulp it all down. He walks away, sets it down on a counter, and returns with a small pot of salve, which he massages into my dry, cracked lips with gentle fingers.

Then he sheds his towel. I can't help but glance at his long, thick cock, jutting upward. Then I look away.

He climbs into the bath with me, straddling me, settling into the sweet, fragrant water. I feel his balls gently rubbing against my stomach. His cock is rock hard, pointing straight at the ceiling. *Once upon a time, I dreamed of him being inside me...*

First, he washes off my face with a soft cloth. Then he takes a blue sponge and drips liquid soap onto it and begins massaging the filth off me. He swirls it around my breasts, and the whip marks sting, causing me to suck in my breath with pain. But as he washes me, my nipples swell under his touch.

He moves slowly and gently, watching me the whole time. My lips part and my breath quickens. I don't want to be aroused, but I'm helpless under the slow, firm pressure of his hands.

He drips shampoo into my hair and lathers it up. His fingers expertly massage my scalp, pressing firmly, and I close my eyes and surrender to the delicious sensation. My hair smells like honeysuckle now, and he runs his fingers through the strands when he rinses it, then repeats the process with conditioner. He takes his time, his attentions shockingly tender.

When he slides a soapy cloth between my legs, I flinch, but force myself to relax. I feel warm pleasure flowing through my body with each stroke of the cloth. He slides it through the folds, caressing me with it, and my breathing speeds up.

It feels so good that for a moment I forget why I resisted yesterday. Then I close my eyes again and firmly force myself to remember that he is the enemy, and every submission he forces on me strips away some of my power. But it's hard to concentrate on that when my whole body is melting and my legs are spreading of their own accord, welcoming the firm rubbing motion across my slit.

Waves of pleasure flow through my body with each stroke. They start gathering in my lower belly, tightening, growing urgent. I'm humming wordlessly, almost on the brink of orgasm when he stops. And I'm sure he knows it. He drains the tub and sets to work shaving me. He squirts shaving soap between my legs, from front to back. The razor glides delicately across my flesh, plowing through the creamy soap, and afterward he rinses it off, massaging me with the washcloth. Stoking those hot flames of arousal between my legs. When he stops, I glance down at myself. I'm bare, pink and smooth. He strokes me once, then pinches my clit between his thumb and forefinger. A little too hard to be sensual.

I jerk, and I can't help the pained whimper that escapes from my lips. He meets my gaze. A lazy smile curls his lips. Tears shimmer in my eyes, and I look away quickly.

He slides back in the tub and leans in close to look. "Beautiful," he breathes, his warm breath fanning my splayed-open sex.

Dear God. Even here, now, in this horrible situation, after everything he's done to me, he's got me so turned on that I want to scream with frustration. I remember the feeling of his tongue lapping at me, and I yearn for him to do it again.

But instead he pulls away and uncuffs me. I'm so weak and shaky, he has to help me climb out, and he holds me

firmly but gently. Like a lover helping his sweetheart.

He marches me over to a full-length mirror. “Look,” he intones.

I wince at my reflection. There are long red welts across my breasts, and when he turns me so I can see my butt, I gasp in horror. There are thick raised lines of vicious red crisscrossing it, with mottled bruises spreading out around them.

He traces his fingers over the welts on my breasts, applying pressure, and I flinch, because it stings. Then he picks my hand up and puts it on my breasts.

“Touch them,” he says. “Remember.” So I run my fingers along the welts the way he did, my breath hissing out in pain. After a moment, I try to drop my hand, but he pushes it back. “Not yet.”

Streaks of fire follow my fingertips. He watches attentively as I keep stroking the agonized flesh, nearly in tears from the humiliation as much as the pain. As my fingers move over my breasts, my nipples swell again, and I curse my treacherous body. I hate how obvious my body’s excitement is, and I loathe the look of triumph in his eyes as his gaze roves over my breasts.

After what feels like forever, he finally pulls my hands away.

“On your knees,” he tells me.

I obey instantly. *Choose your battles.* I don’t want to be dragged back to the playroom or abandoned in the cell again.

He grabs my hair and tips my head back. “You’re going to take me in your mouth. If I feel even the slightest attempt to bite me, I’ll whip your tits off. Also, I like to be deep-throated.

You're going to learn to relax your throat and let me slide all the way in. It may be hard for you to breathe that way. Too bad. You'd do well to start practicing breath control. Build up how long you can go without breathing."

I quail in terror at that, but I don't fight him when he slides a finger into my mouth and forces my lower lip down.

His fingers tangle in my hair, and then his cock slides in, and I taste the salty precum. The head of his cock hits the back of my mouth, and I gag and jerk my head a little, but he holds me firmly in place. I suck in air through my nose, struggling not to panic. I have to force myself to let him slide it down even further.

Desperate to do this quickly so I can breathe through my mouth again, I reach up and grasp the thick base of his cock and move my hand in rhythm as he brutally fucks my mouth. I gulp sips of air in between thrusts and struggle to let his cock go further and further down my throat so he won't have a reason to hurt me again.

Finally, it's all the way in.

I can't breathe, I can't breathe...

It takes everything I have not to bite down in panic. His fingers are twisted so tightly in my hair that I can't move.

He pulls out halfway, then resumes pumping his cock in and out.

Soon he's groaning in pleasure. I pray for him to come fast, but he keeps pausing, drawing it out. He pulls himself out of my mouth completely for a few seconds, and I gulp for air, then he slides back in and I gag and struggle. His fingers tighten, and he forces himself back down my throat. The rhythm resumes.

Air. Air. Please. Not enough air through the nostrils. I need to breathe.

“Very nice, Tamara. Oh, that’s good. Good girl. Keep sucking, baby...”

Right this minute, he’s happy with me. He won’t hurt me if he’s happy. I force myself to relax. I’m finally able to do something to his body, rather than the other way around. I control what he’s feeling right now.

When he finally comes, spilling warm, salty semen down my throat, I feel a shocking, fierce joy. *I did that. He came for me.* He slides slowly out of my mouth, stroking my hair with his fingers. I gulp in air, my shoulders shaking. I want to drag this moment out forever. No pain. No fear. Just the warmth of his approval and the soft caress of his hands.

He fetches me a soft, cream-colored pair of yoga pants, a sports bra, and a T-shirt, and they don’t hurt too badly when I slide them over my bruised flesh.

Then he gets pain-killers out of a locked cabinet that he opens by using his thumbprint. He gives me a cup of water so I can wash them down.

“Thank you, Master,” I say, forcing the words out.

He doesn’t reply. He just takes my hand in his and leads me out of the bathroom and down the hall into the dining room, his big hand still folded around mine the whole way, as if he’s my boyfriend and he just can’t get enough of me. When we reach the table, I sink down into my seat with a whimper of pain. The bruises still hurt every time I put pressure on them.

He’s sending me a very clear message. Disobey, and the consequences will be agonizing. Obey, and there may still be

pain, but much less of it, and there will also be exquisite pleasure.

I don't care. I'm still free, even if it's just inside my mind. He can tell me whatever he wants, but I'll twist it around and use it for my own purposes. Pretend to do what he wants for now, until the time comes when I can strike out for freedom. Or die trying.

CHAPTER NINE

TAMARA

“Eat,” he orders me. “Drink.” So I pour myself coffee and load up my plate with fluffy eggs and thick strips of bacon. My stomach growls, and I shrink in on myself with embarrassment. The food is delicious, and I shovel in big bites to fill my hollowed-out belly.

I glance up at him, about to ask him to please pass the milk for the coffee, but he shakes his head.

“You are not equal to me. The only rights you have are the ones that I grant you. You speak when spoken to,” he says coolly. “And you acknowledge when I give you an order, with a *Yes, Master*. Unless you fancy another session with the cane.”

“Yes, Master.” I look down at my plate. *Fuck yourself up the ass with a ski pole, Joshua Smith*. Thinking that in my head almost makes me smile, but I keep my lips pressed firmly together. This is a secret just for me. He’s controlling everything else. What I wear, where I sleep, when I eat and drink, how I’m allowed to speak. I can’t even bathe myself. At least my mind is still my own.

As I start to get full, I eat more slowly, drawing it out because whatever he’s planned for me next, I’m sure I won’t like it.

He finishes before me and says, “Stand up.”

So I set my fork down and murmur, “Yes, Master.”

You’re not my fucking master.

I wait as he walks over to a buffet hutch and opens a drawer. He pulls out a thick black collar with a silver ring on the front and a pair of cuffs attached to a chain. He’s all casual, like that’s a normal thing to keep in your china cabinet.

First, he affixes the cuffs to each ankle, and anger fills me when I see how short the chain is between them. I’ll be hobbling with every step I take.

When he wraps the collar around my neck, I can’t stifle a gasp of dismay. He quickly buckles it shut. It’s tight, and so thick I can’t look down. *He’s collared me like a dog.* I am rigid with fury and humiliation.

Looking down at me, his beautiful blue eyes holding mine prisoner, he slides his finger through the collar ring and tugs at it.

“Who do you belong to?”

Tears burn my eyes, and I shiver, even though the room is warm.

“You, Master.” I choke the words out. They taste like bile on my tongue.

“That’s right. And this collar will remind you of it, every second of every minute of the day. You’re my property. My little toy. If you attempt to take it off, I’ll do things to you that you couldn’t dream up in your worst nightmares. Understood?”

The tears spill from my eyes and trickle down my cheeks. Every cell in my body is screaming in protest. I want to

scream and curse at him, claw at his face, but my body is still aching and throbbing from my last pointless attempts at rebellion. I can't face another beating. "Yes, Master."

"I am going to do some work in my office," he says. "You may walk around the house. You will be summoned for lunch. After lunch, you will be taken to the gym, where you will exercise for one hour. Then you will join me for dinner."

"Yes, Master." I shudder as I say it.

He smiles. His finger is still hooked through the collar.

"You hate submitting, don't you?"

I glare at him. "Yes, Master."

He bends down and gently kisses my lips, softly caressing my mouth with his. "I know," he murmurs as he pulls away. "That makes it so much sweeter."

Fuck yourself up the ass with a rusty chainsaw, Joshua Smith.

He reaches out and strokes my face, sliding a finger between my lips. I do what's expected of me. I suck on it, and I don't understand why a hot wave of arousal rushes through me, or why I picture his cock on my tongue. He makes an "mmm" sound of appreciation, then very slowly slides his finger back out.

"Since you behaved well this morning, you may ask one question."

Pathetic, ridiculous excitement flares through me, and I hate myself for it. My abuser's got me so beaten down that I'm thrilled to be allowed to ask a single question.

I want to ask how to get the hell out of here, but then what if he just says there's no way out, and I've wasted my one

question for the day?

What should I ask? *Is* this my only question for the day, the only time I'm allowed to speak? Should I ask if he's ever going to take the collar and the ankle hobbles off?

He shakes his head and starts to walk away.

"Wait, please, wait! Master!" I scream.

He turns back and arches an eyebrow at me.

"Are you saying that I'm allowed to go anywhere in the house? What if I tried to escape? Master?"

He throws back his head and laughs.

"That's two questions. But as a reward for good behavior this morning, I'll answer them both... for a kiss."

My cheeks flare red. "Yes, Master."

He strolls back and looks down at me, staring into my face as if drinking in the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. It's so unexpectedly sweet and tender that I want to weep. When he leans in and captures my chin in his hand, I part my lips to accept the most sensual kiss in my life. It's as if he's flipped a switch that's wired straight to my pussy. As his tongue slowly swirls around mine, he firmly holds my chin in place and probes the inner recesses of my mouth. He swallows my moan of pleasure, then pulls away, very slowly. When he looks down at me, it's with what appears to be genuine affection.

Something in his face shifts, and as his eyes tenderly caress my face, I feel the air around us warming, and my heart squeezes in my chest.

Please care about me.

But his next words shatter the illusion.

“You’re still thinking of escape, but there is none. Ever. The sooner you accept it, the easier it will be for you. My willingness to keep you here is the only reason you’re alive. You should understand and appreciate that.”

The sensual daze evaporates, replaced by deep sorrow. He looks at me expectantly, so I murmur, “Yes, Master,” with a sullen undertone I can’t conceal.

“Here are the answers to your questions. I have closed off certain areas of the house where I don’t want you to go. If you can open a door to a room, you’re allowed in. Are the doors that lead out of this house locked? I’m not going to tell you. Just keep this in mind: Do whatever the fuck you want, go wherever you want, but if you attempt to escape, or harm me or Elizabeth, you will fail, and I will punish you accordingly.” Then he reaches out and strokes my face, but after his cruel words, it gives me no pleasure. “I know you’re going to try. My dear little slave. I do love a challenge.”

I stare at him frostily. *I’m not your slave. I’ll never be your slave.*

“That’s what you think,” he says, and he laughs as my eyes fly wide with alarm.

He keeps doing that. Answering me when I haven’t said anything. *Can* he read my mind?

No, of course not. He’s just really, really good at reading people’s expressions. I’ll have to control the look on my face whenever he’s watching me.

“Stand there for just a minute,” he says. I do, staring straight ahead; the thick collar prevents me from looking down.

He returns in a brief moment, with a leash. I stare at it in horror as he clips it to the ring on my collar.

“Follow me,” he says.

He turns and walks away, tugging the leash, and I shuffle as fast as I can, taking frantic little steps in a desperate attempt to keep up with him. I’m so bruised that every step I take is painful. I stumble several times, and I’m crying quietly with frustration.

He leads me down a hallway and points at a large door. There’s no visible lock on it. All I see is a doorknob, and a decorative plaque that looks like a lion’s head.

“That’s the front door,” he says. Then he reaches out and runs a thumb along my cheek, dragging it through the tracks of my tears. He brings his thumb to his mouth and sucks it slowly.

The kind, sensual Joshua who surfaced a few minutes ago has vanished, replaced by the abusive monster who thinks he’s my master.

“Question?” he asks with a smile. “I’m in an exceptionally generous mood this morning.”

I glance at the door in misery. “Why would you show me the front door when you just know it will hurt me, Master?”

He leans in and kisses my cheek. “I’m a sadist, Tamara. I enjoy the pain of others. More than enjoy it—I need it. It nourishes me. It’s so important for you to remember that. Looking at this door will help you to remember that, so you’ll know better than to challenge me and give me an excuse for real punishment. This is me helping you. You may thank me.”

His twisted logic makes me queasy. “Thank you, Master.” My face flushes with anger as I say it, and I don’t try to hide

the hatred blazing in my eyes. His smile is cold and evil as he unclips the leash and walks away.

I'm trembling with humiliation and rage, and I hug myself, standing perfectly still until he disappears around a corner. I hear his footsteps going down a hall, then a door closes.

I'll find a way to fucking get out of here, or die trying.

I start exploring the house, hobbling resentfully down the hallway.

The collar is a maddening, constant presence on my throat. I reach up and move it around, trying to adjust it, but nothing makes it comfortable. My strides are cut in half by the chain, and I almost trip numerous times as I limp down the hallway. My bruises still throb with every step.

Miserable, I try to tell myself at least to be grateful that I'm not locked in my cell all day.

First, I open a bunch of doorways until I find the kitchen. I walk around casually, sneaking glances at drawers and trying to figure out where the knives might be.

Knives and fire. Those could be useful tools. I'd just have to figure out how to get hold of them without anybody noticing, and I'm sure that will be damn near impossible.

I hear footsteps thudding into the room. Elizabeth comes and stands in the kitchen and glares at me, her eyes black with hatred. Did Joshua send her to watch me? Seems like cheating on his part. That's disappointing.

I walk over to the sink and pour myself another glass of water and drink it, waiting for her to leave.

She's still staring straight at me.

When I shuffle toward the door, she stands there, blocking me, her mad eyes boring into me.

“I guess Joshua lied when he said I was allowed to go anywhere.”

Her eyes snap with rage, but she moves out of the way instantly, letting me pass. When I walk past her through the doorway, she bumps into me, hard.

I walk down the hall, and she follows very close behind. I can feel her hot breath on my back. Annoyed, I stop suddenly, and she stumbles into me. She lets out an animal-like growl of rage, then steps back.

I keep walking. She keeps following.

I'm angry. Despite the horrible collar and ankle hobbles, I'd been looking forward to exploring the house, but having Elizabeth crowding me with her mean-girl schoolyard bully crap is ruining what little pleasure I'll ever have again in my life.

And I'm somehow disappointed in Joshua.

I thought I was starting to understand the rules here. Now it looks like I was wrong.

Apparently, he's into playing extremely childish games. And worse, he's stooping to letting Elizabeth do his dirty work. He's thrown a curveball at my head, and I don't know how to work with this new reality.

I feel glum as I walk into a big library with wall-to-ceiling shelves. Elizabeth follows me in and stares at me challengingly.

The collar and the chains and Elizabeth's angry presence are incredibly distracting. The room is beautiful, all dark wood

and Renaissance paintings, but I'm too physically uncomfortable to want to look around and explore. I head to a bookshelf. I grab the first book I see; it's a hardback collection of mystery stories.

I twist around to glance at Elizabeth, who's moved into the middle of the doorway.

I'm not going to be able to concentrate on reading with her there.

"I'm going back to my prison cell, if you'll excuse me," I snap at her. I walk right up to her. She stands still, spreading her arms wide so I can't pass.

The malicious glee in her eyes is really pissing me off. I'm enduring enough already; I don't need to put up with this schoolyard bullshit.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you're jealous of me," I say scornfully.

Rage twists her face. She makes a horrible growling sound again and slaps me so hard my eyes water, and I cry out in pain.

I stagger back, clapping my hand to my face, and her eyes snap with challenge. She clenches her fist, a fierce joy twisting her face.

She wants me to fight her, because she knows Joshua will punish me horribly if I do.

I stand there, breathing hard, my hands trembling with the desperate desire to slap the shit out of her. My heart pounds painfully in my chest, but I will not cry, because of the awful smile twisting her lips.

Then I hear footsteps pounding down the hallway toward us, and Elizabeth goes pale with fear.

By the time Joshua rounds the corner, she's sunk to her knees.

She's scrabbling wildly as he grabs her by the hair, pulls her to her feet, and hurls her against the wall. Her body makes a sickening thud. She slides down and lands on her ass and gives him a miserable, pleading look. I see it in her eyes. Desperate, agonized yearning. She isn't obeying him out of fear—it's out of love. And I can understand why, on some sick level. Hell, I crushed on the guy for months until I got to know him.

"You dumb bitch," he snaps at her, biting each word out precisely. "I was in the middle of a very important business call when you started playing your stupid games, or I'd have been out here sooner. You think you're being useful to me right now?"

She crawls over to him, clutching at his leg. He shakes her off violently. When she crawls back, he kicks her in the stomach like she's a dog, wrenching a grunt of pain from her.

Despite how furious I am with her, the blow makes me queasy, and I find myself tensing in sympathy. I hate Elizabeth, but I also hate seeing men hit women.

"Stay here," he orders me. He reaches down, grabs her by the wrist, and stalks away, dragging her behind him. She scrabbles along, trying to climb to her feet, making grotesque wailing noises.

So she wasn't supposed to bully me or hit me. Joshua *is* following the rules that he's set. Shameful relief flows through me.

Perhaps I should feel pity, but I can't summon up any at all. Am I a horrible person? She's clearly a victim of Stockholm Syndrome, in love with her captor and jealous of her new, young replacement, but she's also keeping me prisoner when I'm sure she could free me. That makes her my jailer just as much as Joshua, and I hate her for it.

I still don't want him to beat her up, though. I just want her to lie down and die quietly.

He's gone for about ten minutes. When he comes back, he's perfectly calm, not a hair out of place.

"She won't bother you again."

Shock jolts me. What the hell does that mean? Is she dead? Did he just butcher yet another person, so casually? A woman who genuinely loves him?

I give him a questioning look, but he just replies with a cold, challenging stare. I haven't earned the right to speak.

I can't ask what he did to her. I'm so frustrated I want to scream.

And then he leaves me, strolling off with a jaunty stride. I watch him go. He looks as stunning from behind as he does from the front. Those broad shoulders, that amazing, perfect round ass that looks as if it was carved by a Grecian sculptor, those long muscular legs.

As he disappears around the corner, all the things I thought I wanted him to do to me, ever since the first night I met him back at Heaven, parade through my mind. And here I am. I'm in the home of Manhattan's sexiest, most eligible bachelor, and he's kissing me. He wants to go down on me. He's bathing me in his magazine-worthy bathroom, setting out a sumptuous

feast in front of me, and telling me that all I have to do if I want him to fuck me is...ask.

I just never anticipated the part where he'd make me his sex slave, force me to sleep chained up in a dungeon cell, and beat me until I screamed in agony for the most minor of offenses.

Be careful what you wish for.

I hook my fingers under the collar and try to make it more comfortable as I start exploring the house. I enter a room that I guess I'd call a parlor or sitting room, with a suite of antique furniture in dark wood, elaborately carved and upholstered in pale blue silk. There are embroidered pillows on the settee and chairs, which are grouped around a coffee table with bowed legs that are sculpted to look like a lion's paws. More classical paintings on the walls, showing hunting scenes. It occurs to me that's a theme here; most of his artwork features some kind of hunting scene, and a chill washes over me.

No. Focus. Look for a way out.

I stroll slowly around the room before I work my way around to one of the windows, which has a padded bench seat. The windows all have blackout shades that I don't dare lift, even though I'm dying to see what's beyond them. I sit on the windowsill and lean back. Then I slide my hands behind me, secretly trying to open it.

It doesn't budge. Of course it's locked. And what would I have done if I could open it? Make a run for it, hobbled by my ankle chains, barely able to move my head? My shoulders slump in defeat.

That front door... The sheer, gleeful sadism of his pointing it out to me, taunting me with it... How can the man who

kissed me like he loved me be the same man who grinds salt into my emotional wounds? Tears spring to my eyes, and I stumble over to the couch. A wave of despair washes over me. This house will be locked up tighter than a drum.

No. I can't give up. I'm Tam with a Plan.

How does one escape from a brilliant, wealthy psychopath's lair? He doesn't take any half-measures. He's designed it to hold prisoners and prevent escape. He's faster than me, stronger than me. Smarter than me.

I can't give up. Giving up is death.

If this were a movie, I'd find some clever way to overpower him. Bash him over the head with a vase, tie a string across the stairs so he fell and broke his neck, grind up a bunch of sleeping pills and put them in his drink, squirt shampoo on a tiled floor so he slipped and cracked his head... But this is real life. My life. My horrible, horrible life. I'm not a badass fictional ninja like Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill*. I could possibly take on Elizabeth, or any other woman who's my size, or an average guy like George the security guard.

But Joshua? He's lethal. He's fast death with a smile on its face. I wouldn't have a chance against him. And he's hinted that if I do try to physically assault him, I'll face brutal retaliation.

There are cameras everywhere, all the time. When Elizabeth hit me, he was on her terrifyingly fast.

Think, Tamara. Plan, plan, plan.

The best that I can come up with is waiting him out. Nobody can be perfectly vigilant forever. In the news stories I've seen where women escaped from abduction, it happened

after the victim had been held prisoner for a long time and the kidnapper got sloppy.

Odds are I'll be here for months, at the very least. Maybe years. I have lost my scholarship, the one I worked so hard for. All those nights when I nodded off over my books, every penny I scrimped and saved for school supplies...wasted. I may never go to college at all.

And can I even be sure that Joshua will get sloppy someday? It's hard for me to imagine, as obsessive and precise as he is, but it's my only hope. Over time, if I can lull him into a false sense of security, I might be able to disable him some day. And if I did that...would I be able to bring myself to kill him? I hope so.

And then, once I'd disabled him, and Elizabeth, if he hasn't just murdered her for hitting me...how would I get out? How would I call for help? Where are we, for that matter? This house is huge, so we must be far from the city. Would I emerge into a thickly wooded area, hundreds of miles from the next house?

It doesn't matter. *He will slip up someday, somehow*, I promise myself. Nobody can be vigilant forever. That is what I must believe if I'm going to have the strength to take another step, to live another day.

For this to work, I'll have to make it look believable. If I appear to give up too easily, he'll suspect I'm trying to lull him into lowering his guard. So I'm going to have to continue to resist, but just the right amount. A believable amount. Not so much that he kills me.

That means I'll have to accept more punishment. More pain.

I shudder at the thought of more beatings. It still hurts to sit, to stand, to walk. But all the pain in the world will be worth it if it means someday I'll be free.

CHAPTER TEN

JOSHUA

“Come into my parlor,” said the spider to the fly. I smile at the sight of Tamara on the video camera, scanning the room, desperately seeking out avenues for escape but pretending not to. I watch her body language, learning her little tells, drinking in all the secrets she’s trying to hide from me.

What is the “bad thing” she moans about in her sleep? Why does she cry out to her mother that she’s sorry? What nightmares torment her...other than me, of course? I’ll find out soon enough.

Conquering her body is the easy part. I’ve already done that. Her soft little moans, the way she squirms helplessly as I tease her with my tongue, the way she pants with desire when I massage the numbing cream into her throbbing flesh... It’s delicious, watching her twisted up with agonized, unsatisfied lust for me. She’s strong, my girl, moving through her days in a haze of fear and sexual hunger, forcing herself to deny what she wants so badly. But she’s fighting a war that she’s already lost. The first time she whimpered for me, I knew I had her.

And what a prize she is.

I can’t fully understand what it is that makes her so different from any other woman I’ve been with. She’s pretty, but I’ve buried my cock in so many beautiful women that their

faces all blur into one. Is it her inner steel underneath that sweet, spicy exterior? Is it the song of the brave wounded bird that sings to me? Or the push and pull of her desire fighting with her need to hate me? She saw what I did to George, she knows that I kill humans for sport, and she despises me for it. But she wants me. And it's tearing her apart.

In the end, it doesn't really matter why she's the one for me. All that matters is that I'll make her fully mine.

I'll invade the dark corners of her mind and steal every last part of her. I'll slay the demons of her past and be her hero and her destruction all in one.

It won't be easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is.

Poor girl. So strong, so brave, so doomed. She never stood a chance against me.

I see the way her eyes wander to the window, while she keeps her head perfectly still. What she doesn't realize is that it's her stillness that gives her away. Most of her body goes rigid when she's doing something or thinking something that she doesn't want me to be aware of. I watch for that, and then I look even closer, seeing the movements that she can't quite conceal. For instance, when her gaze slides to the window that she so desperately wants to pry open, her shoulders rise just the tiniest amount, in perfect rhythm with her gaze.

She's announcing her intentions without saying a word.

She thinks she's being clever, but she has no idea what she's up against. I've been studying human behavior in all its forms since I was in diapers.

It started with my father; I used my powers of observation to learn how to survive him.

Then, after I escaped and found myself in a big, bright, strange world, I was forced to embark on an entirely new field of study: how to be a wolf and yet blend in with sheep. It was hard for me to fit in anywhere at first; there was a glaring spotlight of “otherness” shining on me. The expressions on my face were wrong. My reactions to everyday situations were off. Despite my physical attractiveness, people found me repellant. The things I said frightened or repulsed them.

I didn't let it discourage me in the least. It was just another game, and I would learn the rules. I excel at winning. That's why I was the only member of my family to walk away from my father's house of horrors deep in the woods, with a broken little girl limping along behind me.

I started obsessively watching television and reading books, so I could see how people behaved. I read books about charm and charisma, and meticulously applied the lessons. I mimicked ordinary humans. I read fiction and biographies and took notes on the appropriate ways to react to everyday situations.

I was a quick learner. It didn't take me long to develop the charm and charisma needed to make people do whatever I wanted them to.

I experimented for a while, pushing it to see how far I could make people go. It turned out there were no limits. I could drive people to suicide, to madness. I could make girls fall obsessively in love with me and carve my name on their faces. I could make people kill for me, give me all their money, break up marriages without a second thought.

Passing for human doesn't come naturally to me, though. It's a constant effort not to give myself away as “other”. Monstrous. Terrifying. Yes, it's important that people be afraid

of me, but they have to be the right amount of afraid. If they want to run away screaming, then I cannot trick them into doing things for me, nor can I lure them into a false sense of security. I need them to trust me long enough to sign contracts that will ruin their lives and make me even richer. And I can't ever become a suspect in the various disappearances that I'm responsible for.

So I am always learning, always studying, always forcing myself to pay attention to how I am interacting with people.

Right now, as I study Tamara, I am learning about myself as well.

Apparently I am capable of a wider range of feelings than I ever knew. I still can't name these emotions, though. This is puzzling. My IQ is genius level. I'm not used to unanswered questions.

I don't believe that what I'm experiencing is the emotion known as "love". The way I behave toward Tamara does not seem to fit any description of "love" that I've come across. After all, if I loved her, would I enjoy hurting her so much?

But I also enjoyed hurting the gorgeous escorts I used to bring back to my house. My feelings for Tamara are something different. Once the escorts are no longer useful to me, once they've made me come, and I've shown my mastery over their flesh by forcing screaming orgasms on them, I feel an absolutely urgent need to get them away from me. If I were forced to spend too much time with them, I'd probably kill them.

I don't want Tamara to go away. I want her to stay with me forever—so, of course, I'll keep her forever, because I always get what I want. I wonder if my strange urge to keep her near

me is a good thing. Does this mean I'm becoming more "human", and if so, is that a desirable outcome?

I frown at the screen, concentrating, as if staring more intensely will somehow reveal the answers to this mystery, but nothing comes.

The way I feel when anybody but me hurts Tamara is new too. When I kill rapists and serial killers, it's not because I care about the fact that they're hurting people. I'm focused on the predators, not their victims.

But for some reason, seeing anyone other than myself harm Tamara affects my ability to control myself. When I saw that guard try to rape Tamara, he signed his own death warrant, and my only regret is that I didn't get to spend more time with him. When I saw Elizabeth bullying Tamara, I felt an emotion inside me that I believe people call "rage". I get angry, sometimes, sure, but "rage" is an out-of-control kind of anger. And when she slapped Tamara...well, the only reason Elizabeth is still alive is that I made certain specific promises to her a long time ago.

As I was slowly, calmly beating Elizabeth bloody, I let her know what a terrible mistake it would be to ever hurt my Tamara again. I told her that if she ever laid another finger on her or hurt her for any reason other than self-defense, I'd drop her off in the middle of New York City and she'd never see me again.

That's probably not true. I don't take foolish chances, and abandoning Elizabeth would be too risky. If she failed me, I'd have to kill her. However, the best way to get people to do what you want is to threaten them with what they fear most. Elizabeth is terrified of leaving this house, and of being away

from me. She'd literally rather die. So it's an effective threat, and I believe she will comply.

I would prefer not to have to kill Elizabeth, because of her absolute loyalty to me, but it wouldn't disturb me very deeply.

I turn my attention back to Tamara. Her fingers keep drifting back to that collar, which forcefully thrusts her chin up and wraps around her neck like a pair of choking hands. It was a good choice on my part, because she'll come to loathe it more and more in the days to come. Its removal will be a desperately desired privilege, which she'll have to earn.

The expression on her face right now is pure misery. Lips quivering, glazed eyes staring straight ahead, facial muscles slack and hopeless. She doesn't understand or appreciate it yet, but I was telling her the truth when I said that her imprisonment is the only thing keeping her alive.

I am supremely selfish. That's not a put-down, it's just a fact. My needs must come first, always, and I need to keep her away from the police, or I'd end up either in prison or on the run. Neither outcome is acceptable to me. Like all psychopaths, I'm self-serving and hedonistic and addicted to being in control. A jail cell just wouldn't work for me.

So bringing her here was my way of protecting her.

She also doesn't yet understand my absolute need to dominate. It's the driving force of my existence. With every situation I find myself in, every challenge I face, every person who spends any amount of time with me, I have to establish my superior position. It isn't a decision I make when I meet someone; it's just a part of what I am. Even if I'm just saying hello to a stranger, I need to see that "cornered prey" response, that little spark of fear and submission in their eyes, the look and the body language that tells me that they acknowledge

who's the alpha. If I didn't see it, I'd keep pressing until I got what I want. It never takes long.

I can't just keep her prisoner and let her be herself, because "herself" would be defiant and disrespectful, and it is not in my nature to accept that. It's a logical progression. If I'm to let her live, I must keep her here with me. If I keep her here with me, I must take away her free will and independence.

If I were able to explain it to her—not that she deserves to know anything—I'd explain that in order to survive, she must surrender to me completely. A equals B equals C. She'll figure it out soon enough. Making her bow to me and call me Master isn't nearly enough. I need every last part of her. Her mind, her desires, her every waking thought. I will own them all.

I turn to my computer, using a software program I designed to hack into the computer system of the NYPD.

I see that just this morning, two people reported Tamara missing. Her landlord, and the director of the battered women's shelter where she volunteers. Tamara failed to pay her rent, and there was also a pile of mail on her doorstep. And the director of the battered women's shelter called Tamara and never received a return call, which according to her statement was completely unlike Tamara, so she called her three more times, then went to the police station to fill out a report.

I would have preferred if it had taken longer for her to be reported missing, but it's not going to be a problem. Tamara has no living family. I've checked. Nobody to go looking for her. In New York City, the disappearance of a girl like her—poor and with no close relatives to push the issue—will barely make a ripple. It hasn't made the news yet, and it probably never will. More than thirteen thousand people are reported missing every year in New York City, and the disappearance of

anyone over the age eighteen, when there are no signs of foul play, will not get a lot of attention.

It's interesting, though, that her neighbor across the hall, Heather, hasn't reported her missing. When Tamara started working for my company, I had a very discreet private investigator on my payroll follow Tamara for a bit, due to her strange effect on me. I learned that she had no boyfriend, that she worked all the time, and that she packed food in her purse so she could give it away to homeless people even though she could barely afford to feed herself.

And I know she was good friends with her neighbor. Or at least, it appeared they were friends, as I understand such things. When Tamara had free time, which was not often, she spent it with Heather.

I make a quick call to the investigator, using an encrypted, untraceable line, and ask him to check up on this Heather person. Heather works at a bagel shop, and she wants to be an actress. There are various ways to start conversations with her to find out why she didn't bother to report Tamara missing. Maybe she's just a selfish bitch; I know I wouldn't have reported Tamara missing if I'd been in Heather's shoes. I mean, how would it benefit me?

However, the way she is acting is not the way that normal people act, so it should be checked up on.

I glance at Tamara again, then deliberately turn the screen away from me. She's occupying a lot of mental real estate these days; perhaps too much.

I force my attention back to more pressing projects and mentally review my tasks for the rest of the day. I expect Philip Morton from Morton Media to give me an answer tomorrow after he meets with his board of directors. I'm not

interested in his newspapers; I'm interested in the valuable real estate that his various newspaper offices occupy, and I've also been promised a healthy fee by his competitors, who want me to shut down his printing presses for good.

I'll be making calls to various interested parties who want to buy the Morton real estate, setting them up against each other, creating a bidding frenzy. I mean, Mr. Morton hasn't said yes yet, but he will. I've never failed to acquire a company once I've committed to taking it.

I've also got people on the inside. Mr. Morton was desperate to cut costs, so when that new janitorial service approached him, offering him a forty percent saving over his old provider, it must have seemed like a dream come true. Unfortunately for him, I own the janitorial service—a shell company that can't be traced back to me. And they're planting listening devices in his office, reporting back to me regularly.

I also need to make a decision about my latest hunting project. Should I do it soon? Should I wait a few months, now that I've got Tamara to keep me entertained?

Killing Baxter quickly didn't fulfill my needs. It's not just the killing that answers that raw, primal call howling up from the depths of my soul. It's the rituals. Drawing it out. They need to run, they need to fight. I must crush them slowly. When I hurried with him, it left me unsatisfied.

My favorite prospect is a judge who takes bribes to let abusive men keep custody of their children. I'm also interested in one of the people who's slipping him payments. A man named Steven Hamilton, a wealthy child molester who will be granted full custody of his two little girls in a few weeks, at his next court date. Up until now, Steven's only been allowed weekly phone calls to his children, but thanks to a million-

dollar donation to a Swiss bank account, the judge has decided that Steven is successfully reformed and his ex-wife is being unfairly hostile to the father of her children. What's wrong with a little incest, as long as you keep it all in the family?

I am debating whether I should kill the judge or Mr. Hamilton. Both are in good physical shape. Judge Gatwood takes boxing lessons and plays racquetball, and Steven Hamilton studies Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. Steven is younger and appears to be more physically fit, though.

Maybe I should force sweet little Tamara to make the decision. The idea brings a smile to my face.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TAMARA

At lunchtime, he walks into the room and snaps his fingers at me. Like I'm a dog. I scowl at the floor as I stand up. He doesn't say a word, so I don't either.

He leads me down the hallway to a beautifully set-up exercise room and removes my collar and my ankle chains. I twist my head from side to side, rubbing my neck in blessed relief. He fetches a shirt and shorts and sneakers and socks from a row of cubicles on the wall, and hands them to me. I look around for a place to change.

“Really, Tamara?” Cruel amusement laces his voice. “I own every inch of your skin. Don't ever try to hide it from me. If you aren't naked in thirty seconds, I will brand my name on your ass to help you remember that.”

Brand me? Images of sizzling flesh sear my mind as I drop the exercise gear and rip off my clothing and drop it to the floor in a panic. He watches, a smile quirking his lips. He likes my fear.

Fucking bastard.

“Turn around, slowly.”

I do a pirouette for his approval. He nods, and cups my breast, and my nipple instantly swells in arousal.

“What is this, Tamara?” he asks, giving it a rough squeeze that nearly wrenches a moan of raw need from me.

“My...my breast, Master?” I’m confused.

His face doesn’t change expression as he slaps my breast so hard that it stings, and I yelp in pain.

“Try again?” He squeezes once more, much harder.

“Your breast, Master?” I pray that’s the right answer, as my eyes fill with tears of pain and humiliation. I can’t go a few hours without crying here. Will he ever tire of making me cry?

He stops squeezing and drops his hand. “Much better.”

He slides his hand between my legs, and I jump, but force myself to stand still as he slowly strokes me. Unwelcome heat floods my body and moisture oozes from me, soaking his fingers. How can I be filled with such hate and lust at the same time?

“And what is this, Tamara?” he says, his fingers still moving.

“Your pussy, Master.” I look down, and tears drip onto the floor.

“It’s wet for me, isn’t it, Tamara?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Who is allowed to give pleasure to your pussy?”

“You are, Master.”

He seizes a sensitive fold between two fingers and squeezes hard, sending a jolt of pain through my body.

“Who else?”

“Only you!” I cry out, writhing in protest at the cruel grip of his fingers.

His fingers relax. “Very good. You may not touch yourself without my permission. You may not masturbate. Only I can make you come, and that is a privilege that you will have to earn. Are we clear?”

“Y-yes, Master,” I gasp as he removes his hand. My body is pulsing with desire, and I grit my teeth against it, trying to will away the ache between my legs. Anger sizzles inside me. I’m not sure if I would have tried to get myself off on my own, knowing cameras are watching me everywhere, but the complete control he demands of me chokes me with helpless rage.

“What will I do to you if I catch you touching yourself without my permission?”

I grit the words out. “You’ll punish me, Master.”

He’s watching my face with that amused look, as if he can read every tormented thought that’s marching through my head. “Very good. Now get your exercise clothing on.”

He changes into a T-shirt and shorts, stripping naked in front of me without hesitation. I’m ashamed that I keep sneaking looks at his naked body, at that broad chest narrowing down in a V-shape to his perfect hips, at his thick, glorious cock. He doesn’t seem to notice.

We climb onto side-by-side treadmills. He sets mine at a pace that slowly increases from two to five miles an hour. My bruised ass and thighs ache dully. I’m gasping for breath when he waves me off twenty minutes later. He’s at a dead run and has barely broken a sweat.

“Go to the free weight area. There’s a list of exercises on the wall next to the mirror. Do all of them,” he says, and I hurry to obey him.

He’s just climbing off the treadmill when I finish with the weights.

He makes me put the T-shirt and yoga pants on, then he fastens the collar around my neck and the chains on my ankles. “Get out,” he says coldly, and heads over to the free weights as I shuffle off miserably.

It hurts that he’s dismissed me so abruptly. I just did everything he asked without arguing, I’m submitting to him at a level that makes me sick with disgust at myself, and it’s still not enough for him?

I shouldn’t want his approval, but it’s hard for me to be around someone when they act as if they hate me. Even my kidnapper.

I’m already wretched enough. My whole life has been stripped away from me. When he smiles at me, when he’s gentle with me, it actually makes me feel good for a few minutes, and I crave that. It’s like being warmed by the rays of the sun. But it comes and goes without apparent reason. His attitude toward me is so inconsistent that I find myself thrown off balance, not knowing how to earn even moderately decent treatment from my jailer.

Early that evening, when I am sitting in the living room trying to find a comfortable way to read a book with that vile collar on my neck, Elizabeth comes to get me. She’s limping painfully, sucking in gasps of pain with each step. It looks like there’s a purple plum swelling where her right eye should be. Her nose is swollen, with a cut running vertically across it, and

her lip is split. She holds up a chalkboard which has the words *“I’m very sorry. It will never happen again”* written on it.

“So what?” I snap at her.

I am sure this is humiliating for her, being forced to apologize to her hated rival and having to display her battered body to me. Well, sucks for her. She could set me free, she could alert the authorities to my presence here, and instead she’s crawling for the favor of a man who beats her bloody.

She glares at me with utter hatred through her good eye and gestures at the door.

Right. Dinner time.

I stand up awkwardly and hobble off to the dining room. I’m praying that he’ll take the collar off, but he doesn’t, and if I ask, I’m sure he’ll whip me. I can’t look down. We’re eating tapas, and I practically have to feel around on the plate for them. Food keeps falling off my fork onto the table.

When I set my fork down, though, he snaps, “You’re not done until I say you’re done.” So I say, “Yes, Master,” and keep eating until he says I can stop.

Then he holds out a napkin to me. “Clean up your mess,” he says scornfully.

I can’t believe this. He’s putting me down for being a messy eater when I can’t even see my food.

“Yes, Master,” I mutter. I have to bend at the waist so I can see where the dropped food is.

Elizabeth limps in after dinner, holding handcuffs and the hood. He cuffs my hand behind my back and puts the hood on, then finally removes the collar.

There will always be some kind of shackles on me. I can't feel free for a single minute of my life.

As I awkwardly make my way through the hallway, I try to imagine him giving her those orders.

“And after dinner, you'll take Tamara down to her dungeon cell, chain her to the floor, and remove her leg cuffs and collar.”

Seriously. That has to be the kind of thing he tells her. And she *does it*. She scurries to obey, like the pathetic little mouse she is. How messed up is that? How messed up is my life?

I remember to do my tapping rituals right before I fall asleep, but they don't bring me the comfort they used to.

I toss and turn that night, struggling to get comfortable, and finally fall into a dreamless sleep. I wake up with my heart racing, struggling in the clutches of anxiety.

My morning panic attacks seem like an especially cruel trick of life now that I'm here. As if waking up to this nightmare isn't horrible enough? I breathe in and out slowly and do everything I can to calm myself down as much as possible under the circumstances.

A little while later, Elizabeth comes in, her bruises still livid and her gaze still full of hate, and she puts the hood on me. Then she leads me upstairs.

Joshua seems calmer and less hostile. It's a new day. Perhaps it's also a new chance to figure out how to earn his favor.

I instantly climb into the bathtub at his command, and I lie back with my eyes closed and let him bathe me without protest.

I still ache from the beating, but not as badly as I did before.

“Look at me,” he says as he slides the washcloth between my legs, and I open my eyes. His ocean blue eyes hold me prisoner as he massages me gently, thumb sliding down between the folds of my flesh. “Think of me when I touch you like this. Only me.”

“Yes, Master.”

With every stroke of that cloth, he’s washing away the memories of my past. Here, with him touching me, he’s pushing my stepfather aside. For once, I don’t mind him invading my mind. Having him in there is so much better than the alternative.

Pleasure flows through me and heat pools in my belly. My muscles loosen, and I glory in the warmth of the water and the sensation of his hands rubbing back and forth, back and forth.

My eyes half closed, I open my mouth to tell him that it feels good. I want to ingratiate myself with him, make him think that bit by bit he’s winning me over. He freezes me with a challenging look. He cocks his head to the side.

I drop my gaze, furious at the level of submission he demands from me.

After he bathes me, he opens up the bath drain, then bends down and kisses my stomach. He moves down, lower, lower...

“May I kiss your pussy?” he asks, startling me.

I suck in my breath. I desperately want him to. But he has enough power over me already. The pleasure that he can give me is sick, and it’s wrong. And I don’t want him to be the source of any pleasure at all. My hatred for him fuels me, gives me strength.

Maybe if he'd let me talk a little earlier, my decision would have been different. But I'm glad he's being such an asshole; it makes it easier for me to resist the ultimate surrender. I'm thankful he's too damn arrogant to force himself on me. It'll be a cold day in hell before I beg for it the way he said I would.

"No, Master," I say. *And you're not my fucking master*, I add in my head. I've promised myself that every time I call him Master out loud, I'll respond with what I'm really thinking—in my head, alone.

But he's looking at me, as if he knows what I'm thinking. I quickly drop my gaze.

He doesn't say a word about my refusing him. I climb out of the tub, then dress in the pants, bra, and shirt he hands me.

We eat breakfast in perfect silence. I've always been the chatty type. The effort that it's taking me not to talk makes me want to scream. It's not that I want to talk to *him*, but he's all I've got.

After breakfast, he puts the thick collar and the hobbling chains on me again. Is this going to happen every day for the rest of my life? The thought horrifies me. Weakness ripples over me, and I sway slightly, just barely catching myself.

I wait for him to leave, but he just stands there, staring at me silently. Then he strokes his finger over my lips. "What do you dream about at night, Tamara?"

I stare at him in confusion. "Nothing. I mean, I don't think I do. I never remember any dreams, Master."

He's staring at me intently as I say that, as if searching for something. He considers my answer, then just nods. I wonder why he asked me that.

He drops his hand. “Here’s your schedule for today. Eleven a.m., exercise. Noon, lunch. Two p.m., you will meet me in the playroom, where I will punish you for trying to escape. Six p.m., dinner.”

My jaw drops in shock.

“You tried to open a window in the parlor,” he says mildly. “I told you what would happen.”

What the hell? “But that was yesterday, Master.”

I see the snap of anger in his eyes, and flinch.

“Did I give you permission to speak?” he asks.

I dare an answer that won’t make him happy. “You said that I could only speak when spoken to, Master.” *And you’re not my fucking master.*

This may cost me an extra beating, but it’s also part of my plan. Respectful, but showing that I still have my own mind, that I’m still willing to fight for myself. It’s too soon for me to pretend that I’ve completely given up. That’s probably weeks away.

He cups my chin in his hand. “Very nice, Tamara. New rule. You only speak if I ask you a question or explicitly give you permission. If I give you an order, you respond with ‘Yes, Master.’ Is that clear enough for you?”

I nod. “Yes, Master.” *And you’re not my fucking master.*

“Aren’t I, though?” he says. I stare at him, startled. What is it with these answers to things I haven’t said?

The morning and afternoon drag by in utter misery—exactly as he’s planned, I’m sure. He’s forcing me to anticipate what he’s going to do to me. At lunch, knowing what’s coming, I have no appetite at all, and the thick collar doesn’t

help. My stomach curdles in fear of the inevitable pain he'll inflict on me, but he sits there and glares at me until I eat half of a melted brie sandwich on thick crusty bread.

We go through the same exercise routine, this time with me stripping for him as fast as I can as soon as he hands me my workout clothes. He doesn't talk to me, just points at the treadmill, and when it turns off, he points at the free weights.

Afterward, he puts my collar and ankle chains back on and leaves me without a word. I shuffle to the parlor and sit down on a couch, and I watch the clock on the wall as minute by minute ticks by.

Finally, it's time to go. I'm cursing him every hobbling step of the way as I make my way to the playroom. Even here, even walking to what will surely be a session of torture, I'm compulsively on time.

The fact that I have to deliver myself to be punished is an extra helping of humiliation heaped onto me.

When we come in, he removes the collar and ankle cuffs, but I don't feel any relief whatsoever. Only fear.

"Strip," he says coldly, and, dreading what's coming, I slowly slide my shirt off and remove my bra.

"Too slow." He walks over to the rack of whips, and I stifle a cry of protest and frantically shuck my pants and underwear.

He returns with a vicious little riding crop.

"Hands behind your back."

I obey, grabbing my wrist, and stand there, bracing myself.

"This is for being too slow."

He slashes at my breasts, crossing over the half-healed whip marks. I stifle a scream of pain. He whips me two times on each breast, and I manage to swallow my cries, whimpering instead with each vicious bite of the whip.

Then he holds the whip up to my lips, and I glare down at the floor as I kiss it. “Thank you for punishing me, Master.”

Choke and die, Joshua Smith. You’re the master of nothing.

His eyes flare wide with anger, and he grabs me by the arm and starts twisting my wrist. I scream in pain and surprise.

“What were you thinking just now?” he demands.

I start to cry. “Please, you’ll break my arm—please, Master!”

“What were you thinking?” he roars, bending my arm up, and I don’t dare lie. It’s terrifyingly clear that he already knows the answer.

“I was thinking you’re not my master,” I sob.

He releases my arm. “I know,” he says, his icy blue eyes freezing my soul. “Because I study human nature, Tamara. I study people’s expressions, their body language, the way they breathe. The tiny muscles in your face, the movements you make even when you think you’re holding perfectly still... they’re like screams, Tamara. Nasty, disrespectful screams of defiance. Every single time you’ve disobeyed me in your mind, I’ve known. And it stops now.”

The horror flooding me feels as if it will drown me. I’m sucking in panicked breaths, gulping for air. The pain in my breasts fades, washed away by an agony that sears my very soul.

He can see inside my head. There's no escape from him. None. Ever.

He grabs my chin with his hand and squeezes so hard that tears spring to my eyes. "I'll break you down and make you into what I want. You will acknowledge me as your master, and not just in words. You are not allowed to disagree with me in your thoughts anymore. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, M-M-Master." My voice wavers. And I don't dare to defy him in my head right after he says that, because he's staring right into my eyes, and he'll know. Some minute muscle twitch, an involuntary blink, and I'll give myself away.

Bluebirds, sunshine, rainbows...picture a rainbow, think of anything else, because the words want to come into my mind, but I can't let them...

He releases my chin. I gulp down sobs, shaking all over.

I'm not even safe inside my head.

He turns and walks away, heading across the room. "You said you wouldn't kill me, Master!" I cry out. "If you break me down and make me into something else, then I won't be me anymore! That's the same as killing me, Master!"

He gives me a kind, gentle smile as he walks back to me.

"Semantics," he says. "Now, how much do you think that defiant little speech is going to cost you?"

He's heaping on punishment after punishment. My face goes white. "I don't know, Master."

"I think four hard smacks on the ass with a paddle should do it. What do you think?"

I can barely concentrate on his words. My mind is fracturing with panic, splintering. Mocking him in my head

was the only thing that kept me sane, the only way I could still be me.

I'm going to die. Tamara is going to die, and she'll be something else. Something weak and horrible and pathetic. A crawling, mewling beast like Elizabeth.

He's looking at me, waiting for an answer, so I mumble, "Whatever you decide, Master."

He spins me around. "Stand there and wait."

He's back in a minute, and he strikes my right butt cheek without warning. I scream and jump as the flesh of my butt cheek catches fire. The next smack burns a square of agony right above the first blow. Then he strikes the flesh of my other butt cheek twice. I dance and howl, frantically rubbing my seared flesh for a minute, until he grabs me by the hair and drags me over to a metal square in the middle of the room.

"This is for trying to escape," he intones, and the gleam of anticipation in his eyes makes me weak with fear.

As I'm standing on the metal square, he forces me to hold my hands over my head and hooks them up to cuffs that are dangling from a beam on the ceiling. He leaves, then returns a minute later with nipple clamps, each of which has a little round weight dangling from it.

I whimper when he clamps them on my nipples, and I don't even try to stem my tears as he walks away. I'm bracing myself for the slash of a whip...when the floor catches on fire. I shriek and jerk my legs up, dangling from the chain, and the nipple clamps jolt agonizingly.

The floor underneath me is electrified.

I swing back and forth, bending my legs, but soon my arms begin to burn and tire, and I can't hold myself up anymore.

My feet hit the metal plate, and agony convulses me. I dance and scream. The nipple clamps with the weights pinch cruelly and as my body thrashes. I go through it again and again, until finally when my feet hit the floor, it doesn't burn me. I hang from my chains, sobbing in relief. And then a minute later, the floor catches on fire again.

I howl and pull my feet up again. I don't see Joshua anywhere. He must be standing behind me, watching, but I can't twist around to look.

"I'm sorry, Master! I can't take any more!" My voice is weak, and I'm desperate to make it louder so he can hear me. "I'll never do it again! Please, Master, please!" I'm furious with myself for trying to escape. *Why was I so stupid—why, why, why?*

The minutes stretch on, and the metal zaps my feet again and again, and my arms feel as if they'll pull from their sockets. My nipples are on fire. I'm terrified that this will never stop.

"Please, Master!" I scream. "I'm sorry, Master! Please, please, please!"

More time drags on. Seconds or minutes or hours; I can't tell, because there is nothing in the world but pain and panic. I'm sobbing hysterically, my feet slamming onto the plate more and more frequently. Pure agony burns my arms.

I'm dizzy, on the verge of passing out, when he calls out, "All done."

And I know that he waited until I was at the point of fainting.

My feet hit the metal, and it's warm but not burning me. I hang there, gasping and sobbing.

“Please take the nipple clamps off, Master,” I beg as he walks over to me.

“Did I say you could speak?” he asks.

Oh God. My nipples will fall off. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts... “No, Master.” I choke on the words.

“That’s right, I didn’t.” He slaps my tortured breasts, and the little weights on them bounce, making me shriek. He smacks them again and again, and I howl and jerk on my chains.

He grabs my chin and makes me stare at him. My eyes are swollen from crying, and I’m gulping for air. My body’s shaking as if I’m suffering a seizure. “Who’s your master?” he demands.

“You are, Sir!” I wail.

“Who owns you?”

“You do, Sir!” I’m sobbing.

“Say, thank you for punishing me, Master.”

“Thank you for punishing me, Master!”

“Say, I’m sorry I spoke without permission, Master.”

Oh God, just take them off, take them off!

“I’m sorry I spoke without permission, Master!”

He unchains my hands. I’m desperate to claw the nipple clamps off, but I know he’ll punish me again.

“Now kiss my feet.”

I bend down, frantic. If I’m too slow, he’ll punish me more. I kiss each of his shoes.

“Stand up.”

I scramble to my feet, staggering.

He removes each nipple clamp. “Thank you, Master, thank you,” I sob. Then my nipples start burning as if they’re on fire. “Oh God!” I scream, rubbing at them.

“That’s the worst part of nipple clamps,” he says gently. “The blood flow returning.”

He leads me over to a cabinet with a bowl of ice cubes sitting on top, and begins rubbing a couple of cubes over my nipples. My tortured flesh numbs, and the pain fades.

As he rubs, he growls, “Look into my eyes. Right into my eyes. I am your world, Tamara. I am your everything. Say I love you, Master.”

“I love you, Master.”

He keeps asking me. Making me say it, again and again.

He drops the ice, and now he’s just massaging my nipples with his fingers, so gently, and I don’t ever want him to stop. There’s a strange and terrible intimacy in staring straight into his eyes like that. The entire world vanishes, and only he exists.

“I love you, Master. I love you, Master. I love you, Master.” I say it until my voice is hoarse, and I don’t dare once think the thing that he forbade me to think.

He makes me say it more. Again and again. Hundreds of times, until my throat is raw.

And by the time he lets me stop saying it, I almost believe it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JOSHUA

I'm sitting in my office, grasping my cock in my hands. God, I can't wait to plunge it into her pussy. Her mouth is sweet, but I want more. I want to bury myself in her tight, wet heat and fuck her so hard that my bed slams into the wall. I want her screams to sing a song of ecstasy and agony in equal measure.

But not yet.

I stroke myself, and dark images flash through my mind, the way they always do.

The images are terrible, and they pollute my sexual encounters, forcing me back in time. They sicken me, and I can't help myself.

Skinny girls chained to the wall, with hollow eyes and tattered dresses. Dad wouldn't let us touch them, but we had to jerk off to them.

Thor was beaten to death because he couldn't come that way. Our father screamed that no son of his was going to be a pussy. So they went outside into the ring of stones where we had all our blood battles, and my mother watched her husband beat her thirteen-year-old son to death in less than sixty seconds.

Watching my father with those girls sickened me. I don't know if that shows that there's a glimmer of normal in me, buried down deep.

But we had to show our father that we were real men. All those times I watched him ramming himself into them, choking them with his cock, while I was forced to pleasure myself... By the time I was in my teens, I couldn't think of sex any other way. If a woman wasn't twisting and screaming, I couldn't get hard.

Watching him with those girls...that was when I finally began to question him. All that bullshit talk of being the ultimate apex predator. Taking those girls wasn't the action of a predator. It was the action of an inadequate man who feared confronting a real challenge. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I had never seen my father take on an opponent who was a match for him in size or strength. He beat his wife, he beat his children, he beat up little girls he stole from their homes. Where was the honor in defeating such an opponent?

A faint uneasiness stirs inside of me when I think of Tamara. My bringing her here is different, I remind myself. Not just because she's a woman rather than a girl. I took Tamara for her own good, so I wouldn't have to kill her. My father, though, he took those girls because of the weakness in him.

The images of the crying girls swim behind my closed eyes as my hand moves up and down, gripping my cock. Usually, I replace the images with the picture of some random whore. Today I replace them with Tamara, imagining her bent over a bench and moaning, "Yes, Master," and it's surprising how good it makes me feel.

Thinking about her, I come in less than a minute.

I'm smiling as I clean myself off with tissues.

She's a fighter, that one. She pretends to surrender, but she's always plotting and planning. That makes the challenge even more thrilling.

I wonder how long it will take until she's fully, completely mine. Until she truly loves me, craves me, would die without me.

Until she doesn't have a single thought in her head other than how to please me.

As I toss the tissue in the trash, a flicker of worry creeps through me. Will I still want her when she's nothing but a mindless puppet?

I've met so many weak women over the years. Women who are instinctively drawn to my brutality. Women who would chew their own tits off for me if they could. It revolts me. God help me, it reminds me of my mother, who was too weak until the very end, and then it was too little, too late.

Now my elation starts to fade.

Is it selfish of me to steal a human being and use her to self-medicate? To give myself the endorphin rush that my brain craves?

Of course it is. Who fucking cares? Where did that question even come from? I never think like that. Sometimes I think Tamara's weakening essential parts of me. All the more reason to hurry up and reshape her into exactly what I need. That will have to break the hold she has on me, won't it?

But what will she be if I crush her completely?

Will she still be able to please me? Isn't this fight, this defiance, what I need from her?

And when it's gone, when she's a mindless, broken toy, what will I do if I get bored with her? I promised I wouldn't kill her. Will I still desire her if she's a shambling zombie who craves me and never questions me?

I lean back in my chair, lacing my fingers together. I've never experienced a situation like this. In the past, if I wanted sexual satisfaction, I hired whores I could whip, fuck, and then throw out with a handful of money clenched in their greedy little fists.

The worry won't go away. It's chewing at the edges of my consciousness. I can't see any way out of this situation, though. I don't know how to spend time with anyone without feeling the overwhelming urge to crush and conquer them. That's one reason I picked the business I did. I buy companies and strip them of their assets, or cut them down to size and resell them when they're profitable. I move on. No permanency, no interpersonal contact. It's why I've always held every single human being in my life at arm's length.

Except for Elizabeth, but that's a different story.

I made promises to her a long time ago, and I will do my best to keep them.

My father used to make promises all the time, and he'd laugh and laugh as he broke them. He'd promise a girl he was going to let her go, and then when she'd run a few hundred feet, he'd start chasing her.

He'd promise my mother he was done hitting her, and then the beatings would resume.

I try very, very hard to avoid lies. And I don't make promises I can't keep.

Not lying makes it a little harder to manipulate people, but that's all right. Handicapping myself isn't a bad thing. It makes life more challenging.

My new burner phone vibrates and beeps on the table, and I look at it, narrow-eyed. Only Elizabeth has the burner phone numbers, and that's just so she can call me in case of true, life-or-death emergency. Right now, I am watching Tamara on the monitor, so I know she's secured, and my perimeter alarms haven't been tripped, so nobody's on my property—so what the hell is going on?

When I pick up the phone, ice water washes through my blood.

Have you been a bad boy? the text message says.

I sit bolt upright.

Holy fuck.

Adrenaline pumps through me. I consider answering but decide that acknowledgment would be a bad idea.

Quickly, I log on to my computer and check the video feed that shows me a man in a large, padded cell. He's drawing on a piece of paper with a crayon. Hmm. I wonder if that's a good idea. Knowing him, he could find a way to make a deadly weapon out of those. Then again, he's monitored all the time. I check the time and date scrolling across the screen at the top of the feed; it's current.

To be extra sure, I make a phone call, using a special phone that I keep just for this purpose.

The head of the Blackthorne Psychiatric Institute answers instantly. As he fucking well better if he wants the money to keep flowing and his family to keep breathing. I have not yet ever killed a child, but if he fucks me over on this, he will leave me no choice, and he knows it.

“Is he there?” I demand of him.

“Of course.” Dr. Barnard doesn’t need to ask who I’m talking about. “You can check the feed.”

“I just did. All right, then. He’s not giving you any problems?”

“No more than usual.”

Cursing, I hang up. I almost wish he’d escaped. Almost. If he escapes, it will be my personal Hell on Earth, but at least it would make sense. I have no fucking idea who could be texting me and how much they know about me, and this is making me angry.

I use a special software program of my own design to run a trace on the phone, but I’m not surprised when it doesn’t lead me anywhere. The phone call is pinging all over the place.

For a brief moment, it occurs to me that Tamara is a complication. If somebody is starting to pry around into my business, I should get rid of her.

I push that thought aside. This house, bought by a shell company and completely untraceable, is deep, deep in the country. Nobody knows I’m here. Do they?

Does the person who’s taunting me on the burner phone know where I live? I don’t see how, but then again, I bought these burner phones with cash, at two different stores, yet somebody has very likely gotten the number twice. That phone

call that went to voice mail...it can't be a coincidence. It's got to be the same person.

It is absolutely impossible for anyone even to come near the house without me being alerted. If the police came here, I'd know, and I'd deal with it then.

When my regular phone rings, I'm relieved to see it's the president of Morton Media calling me.

Mr. Morton pleads for more time to consider my offer.

I laugh. "Now you've pissed me off, so I'm dropping my offer by ten percent. You have forty-eight hours to respond with a signed acceptance letter, or my offer drops by thirty percent." And given that I've scared off all his other potential buyers, I'm all he's got.

His sad blubbing, his ridiculous attempts to plead for the jobs of hundreds of employees, amuse me. I know the scoop. I've been listening in on his increasingly desperate attempts to find a better buyer. He's got nothing.

But my elation fades as soon as I hang up, and I set about trying to figure out who the hell could be sending those texts. I'll have to go over all my security measures, find the holes, and plug them.

In the end, though, my very healthy self-confidence and ego save the day. Whatever the threat is, I'll defeat it. Of course I will. I always do. I haven't had a truly worthy opponent in a long, long time. There was an MMA fighter who beat his wife to death in front of their toddler and skated on the charges—that came close. But that was a year ago.

This will be good for me. First, fate rewarded me with Tamara, and now this.

Life is good. I always get what I deserve.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TAMARA

Dinner is a silent affair. It's lobster and risotto, utterly delicious as always, but these days it's hard for me to appreciate the endless series of gourmet meals. I'm using all my mental energy to keep my mind as blank as possible. I start to play Top 40 hits in my head, but that just makes me start to cry, because I realize I may never hear another new song, and I love music. My tears drip onto the plate, but Master doesn't say a word.

When he sets his fork and knife down, I follow suit, my aching muscles tensing up. Now what?

But he just looks at me, his eyes gone glacial.

"You're going to make a decision for me," he says. And he proceeds to describe two horrible men—a judge who takes money to betray children, and an evil man who's sexually attracted to little girls and who will get full custody of his children very soon. He wants to know which one he should kill.

"Both of them, Master," I say, surprised he'd even ask.

He looks thoughtful. "Why?"

"Child molesters have an extremely high recidivism rate, so even if this pervert doesn't get custody of his children, he'll

molest someone else. And the judge will keep on giving custody to abusive men, and the children and their mothers will suffer, Master.”

“And you have no moral qualms about the killing whatsoever?” He looks interested, not angry. Good. This is a good thing.

“These men are monsters who prey on innocent victims and ruin lives. So no, Master,” I say with complete conviction. “I believe in the death penalty under some circumstances, and both these men fit the criteria for those who I think deserve it.”

Master frowns, tenting his fingers. “It’s a toss-up, but I believe that Mr. Hamilton ultimately makes the better choice. He’s in better physical condition than the judge.”

I look at him in confusion.

“I’m not killing because of the victims, Tamara. Remember that. You’re supposed to help me pick the man who will provide the most entertaining experience for me.”

I struggle to keep the disgust from my expression and voice. “I’m sorry, Master. I am trying to be helpful. It is not possible for me to think the same way that you do, so I would not be able to select the appropriate person. I believe it would be best to kill them both. From what you tell me about them, they should both fight each other to the death, Master.”

He nods. “Never done that before. Might be entertaining. All right, Tamara, you will return to your room now.”

He means my cell.

After I’m chained to the floor, I slump on my mattress and try to think of ways to build a wall around my thoughts. To distract myself, I start doing the tapping routine, although I

don't bother with the words anymore. They've lost their meaning.

I lie down on the mattress with my back to the video camera, snatching the tiniest bit of privacy for myself. So, Tam, what do you do next? I can't surrender to the level that he wants me to. I don't think it's even possible. He wants me to give up all hope of escape and live only to serve him, but of course I can't do that. This isn't George Orwell's *1984*, where you can make someone think things that just aren't true.

Or can you?

For hours after he made me say I loved him, I was in a strange daze of longing and gratitude. Yes, I was grateful to him for turning off the electricity. Thankful to him for rubbing ice on my tortured nipples, for the gentleness of his hands, for the way he looked at me when he eased my pain, as if I was magical and beautiful and treasured.

I know it's insane. How could I be grateful to the man who tortured me, just because he stopped torturing me?

But there's a part of me that just wants to give in. Fighting him is so exhausting. If I did everything he wanted, if I gave up all hope of escape, would he treat me differently? Would he be kind to me more often? Would he let me talk to him, and would he answer me?

The way he touches me when he's being gentle, the way he drives all thoughts of my stepfather from my mind with his sensual bathing rituals... He didn't have to do that for me. He could have forced himself on me. He didn't have to let me have control over such a private area of my body. He doesn't have to devote so much time to my pleasure when he's bathing me.

No. This is all part of his plan to break me down. This bastard is trying to turn me into some kind of pathetic robot. He's trying to make me into Elizabeth. Putting a collar on me and leading me like a dog, mocking me, forcing me to be silent all day long. I can't even have a conversation with him. I can't do this. I can't, I won't.

Come on. Think! I took an acting class once in high school. I cast my mind back to those techniques. *Method acting. Live the part you're playing.*

When he asks me what I've been thinking, I need to be ready for it. If he surprises me with a question, I don't think I'll be able to fool him, but if I'm prepared, I might be able to carry it off. I start thinking about all the questions he could ask me, and rehearsing answers to them. When I finally drop off into an exhausted, dreamless sleep, I can't say I feel good, but at least I've stoked that tiny, flickering flame of hope before it died out completely.

In the morning, after Elizabeth takes me upstairs, he bathes me again. And again, he asks me if he can kiss my pussy.

I politely say, "No, Master." I'm more desperate than ever now to hold on to what little power I have left. And this is the only way I can think of playing my game, pretending I'm still resisting just the right amount.

Does that mean that sooner or later I'll have to give in?

God, I hope not. My self-respect has already taken such a horrible beating, I can't stand the thought of sinking much lower.

After the bath, he again makes me kneel and take him in my mouth. I've been practicing my breathing, holding my breath and timing myself. I'm getting a little better with each

day. I hate to admit it to myself, but I love sucking him off. There's so little chance for me to feel good about myself here that this little achievement every morning feels great. I love how much pleasure it gives him. I try to draw it out as long as I can, caressing his balls, grasping the root of his cock, moving my head fast and then stopping. The loud groans of pleasure when he comes, the tender way he caresses my head...it sickens me how much I've come to look forward to that each morning.

When I wake up each day with my heart pounding, I calm myself down by thinking about that short time in the bathroom when I can control the way he treats me. Do a good job sucking him off, and he will be kind to me.

But the second it's over, the collar and ankle cuffs go on.

The next few days drag by miserably. It's the same thing every single day. The two bright spots in my day are when he bathes me and when I exercise. That's the only time when I'm out of my dark, lonely cell, and also allowed to be without the collar and ankle cuffs. I can walk around the house the rest of the time, but there's no pleasure with the collar on. It's driving me mad. I'm forced to stare straight ahead all day long. I want to read to alleviate my boredom, but it's too physically uncomfortable.

I dread our meals, the sloppy way I'm forced to eat, the scorn in his voice as he orders me to clean up my disgusting messes.

Three or four days later—who even knows anymore—he looks up after we finish lunch and says, “Look at me, Tamara. How many times today did you think that I wasn't your master?”

I stare at him. It's the moment of truth. Or lies, which I plan on telling him.

"Two, Master," I tell him. The truth is five.

And it works.

He nods.

I've even practiced my response to my confession. I manufacture a flash of fear and sorrow, rather than the true triumph I feel. It's a tiny victory, but I'll take anything I can get at this point.

"Then that's how many times I'm going to whip each of your tits," he says. He fetches the leash to lead me to the playroom.

And I'm pathetically relieved at the break in my dull daily routine. After the pain, he'll comfort me. I know he will.

He leads me to the wall, removes my collar, then tells me to take my shirt off. Then he goes to fetch a riding crop with a small black rectangle at the end. "Keep your back against the wall. Raise your hands over your head. If you lower your hands or move off that spot, I start all over again, from one," he informs me. "And after every strike, you will say, 'Thank you, Master.'"

I stand perfectly still, arms raised over my head, braced for the first slash. He brings his arm down in a vicious diagonal swipe. After the horrible initial sting, it feels like someone drew a red-hot knife through my flesh. "Thank you, Master!" I scream.

Then he does it again. And again. I jump and cry out in pain each time, then quickly cry out, "Thank you, Master!"

By the fourth one, I can't stop myself. My hands involuntarily fly out, trying to block him.

He lowers his arm and just looks at me. Waiting. Smiling faintly.

"No, please, Master," I cry out. "I'm sorry, Master!"

It doesn't do any good. I wail helplessly as I raise my hands again, and it takes everything I have not to lower my arms this time. Lines of fire crisscross on my breasts.

I am howling by the time he finishes.

"Oh God, oh God," I sob as he leads me over to the table. He makes me lie down on my back.

We go through the routine with the numbing cream, his strong hands massaging pure relief into my tortured flesh. I don't want it to end, ever. I'm desperate for this intimate connection.

I no longer try to stifle my moans of pleasure. I let my body do what it wants. I arch my back a little, thrusting my breasts up at him, and I make little noises as he strokes me with those amazing hands. Those hands that can cut and kill and also delight.

My moans, my submission, seem to encourage him, because he massages me for a long time. His thumbs glide over my nipples, and I go "mmm," and he tweaks them gently, pulling them up until they're stiff little peaks of desire.

When it comes to inflicting pain, he leaves me no choice at all. But when it comes to pleasure, he gives me complete control of what's done to my body, taking my verbal cues and my facial expressions as orders.

Finally, he stops, and I want to cry out from the loss of his warm, strong hands on me.

The collar and the ankle cuffs go back on. I am not allowed to wear a shirt or bra for the rest of the day. With every step I take, with every bounce of my breasts, pain ripples through the whip marks and brings me to tears. The whip marks are slashes of shame across my flesh.

The next day, I think “You are not my master” five times, and I lie that evening when he asks me about it, and tell him none. And he buys it.

I don’t feel as excited about my small victory as I thought I would, though. I’m so bored, so lonely, so desperate for any contact at all. All I can think about is how much I hate that collar on my neck and the short, mincing steps I take all day long. I spend most of my time leaning back in a chair or lying flat on my back on a couch in the library.

Each morning, my resistance wanes. I have always craved social interaction, even the simple exchange of buying a cup of coffee in the morning. I used to rush out of my apartment in the morning, eager for everything the day could fling at me. Now my world has become so dull, so gray. I am starving for a break in the monotony.

One morning, he asks me if he can kiss my pussy, and I hear myself say, “Yes, Master.” I didn’t plan it. I thought I’d never do it. It’s like a different Tamara is speaking.

I’m just so desperate for any change, anything new. And if he’s going down on me, that’s that much more time without the collar.

But he doesn’t do it. He smiles at me and massages me gently between my legs until I’m throbbing and aching with

need, but he doesn't kiss my pussy.

The next morning, he asks me again. This time, I beg him. "Yes, Master, *please* kiss my pussy. Please, Master." And his smile is broader and warmer than yesterday's as he reaches out to take my hand.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TAMARA

He's wearing a towel wrapped around his waist, and I'm still naked. He leads me down the hall and opens a door that's usually locked. I'm not wearing the collar or the ankle cuffs. We go to the end of another hall and into an enormous bedroom of breathtaking beauty.

It's all rich mahogany and lush fabrics. The windows are blocked off, which sends a surge of frustration through me. I haven't seen the sun in so long. The sky, the clouds, trees... What's out there? It must be so beautiful.

I glance longingly at the windows, then look back him. I did what he wanted. I begged. Can't I just have this one little thing?

"No," Joshua says, shaking his head.

I nod in submission.

Instead, I feast my eyes on the gorgeous oil paintings on the wall, the enormous hand-carved four-poster bed, the beautiful red-and-cream rug. Just being able to see something new makes me want to weep with gratitude.

Still holding my hand, he walks me over to his bed. "Climb on," he says. "Hands and knees."

I scramble to obey. He climbs onto the bed behind me, spreads my cheeks, and begins to lap at me from behind.

“Ahh,” I moan.

“You taste like honey, baby.” His voice is a low, sexy croon.

He caresses me with stroke after stroke of his tongue, and it's slow, sweet torture. I need to come. Pleasure blooms between my legs, a gathering heat like nothing I've ever experienced. I clench at the silky bedspread and moan with pleasure, squirming just a little. He seizes my hips with his hands and holds me in place so he can keep suckling at me. I'm helpless, I can't move, and it magnifies my pleasure a thousand-fold.

When my moaning increases in pitch, he pulls away, and I squeak in protest.

It hurts. I want to come so badly, it's agony.

“Lie flat on your back, knees up,” he commands me. In a trance, I obey.

He moves so he's between my thighs, and gently parts my pink, smooth lips. His tongue caresses me, back to front, then presses at my opening. I groan as it slides in, and he fucks me with his tongue while moving his thumb up to stroke my swollen, aching clit. I've never felt pleasure like this before. I'm floating on a wave of pure ecstasy that's lifting me higher and higher.

My hands drift down and tangle in his hair. Is that allowed? In the moment, dazed with pleasure, I don't care. I'll take the beating if I have to. This sweet intimacy, it's to die for. I could lie here all day like this.

The way he's sucking at me, so hungrily, makes me feel delicious, like a sexy goddess. I love that he can't seem to get enough of me. The heat builds until I'm just seconds away from release.

Again, he drags me to the edge of ecstasy and stops. He moves back, waiting, his fingers gently stroking my inner thighs. My whole body pulses with need. I want him inside me now. I picture his huge, thick cock thrusting into me, slamming again and again. The final explosion of pleasure that I've been craving for so long.

"Master, please," I whimper.

"Please what, baby?" he whispers, and the heat of his breath warms my tingling sex.

And I remember him saying that soon, I'd beg him to fuck me.

No.

"Please, it feels good. I love it," I mumble.

"I know." He sits up, smiling lazily at me. "I'm very good. Lots of practice."

A lance of jealousy stabs at me, and I flinch. What is wrong with me?

He trails his fingers along the seam of my inner thigh. "Jealous, baby? None of them tasted as good as you." Making sure I know that he can peer inside my head and see everything. *Or so he thinks.*

He runs his tongue along his upper lip.

"Thank you, Master," I whisper.

“And now, I want you on your knees.” He shifts position, kneeling.

I groan as I realize that he’s really going to leave me like this, with my sex swollen and achy for him, because I refused to beg him to fuck me.

I scramble to get into position to take him in my mouth, and stifle a whimper of frustration. My deep-throat technique is getting better, though. I can hold my breath for almost two minutes. I know this pleases him, which is a good thing. Anything I do that pleases him means less pain for me.

He holds my head in place as he thrusts his cock all the way down my throat. I gag and tense, but force myself to relax, and he strokes my head as a reward.

“Very nice,” he groans as I start bobbing my head up and down. “You’re getting so good at this, baby. Oh. Yeah. Like that.”

He breathes faster and faster, his body going rigid right before he comes, pouring a river of thick, salty cum down my throat.

Then he withdraws ever so slowly and stands there stroking my hair with infinite tenderness. After a minute or two, he heaves a contented sigh. “Wait here, baby.”

Baby. He called me baby. Yes. Tears spring to my eyes.

And then he returns, with a smaller, narrower collar. He’s holding ankle cuffs, but the chain between them is twice as long.

Emotion floods me, and I start crying as he buckles the slender black strip of leather around my neck. I sob and sob and can’t stop. “Thank you, Master. Thank you, Master.”

Horribly, humiliatingly, I sink to his feet and kiss them without even being asked.

Then I freeze. Will I be punished for my presumption?

No. Apparently he likes it when I act submissive. “I like that. Do it again,” he says calmly.

I kiss his feet over and over, and my hot tears splash on them. I press my lips over every inch of the tops of his feet, tasting the salt of my tears, sobbing and kissing and sobbing.

He stands there, accepting my utter degradation. Finally he says, “You may stand up.”

Oh God, I’ll never say no to him kissing my pussy again. I’m so grateful. So relieved. There’s an evil ache between my legs, but the freedom to move my head up and down, and take complete strides when I walk, overwhelms me. It’s afternoon before I realize that I didn’t even think to mentally deny that he was my master for hours after I left his bedroom.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TAMARA

I spend the morning in the library, reading, eagerly devouring a science fiction adventure that lets me fly to the heavens, escaping my terrible earth-bound prison.

I eat lunch alone. But at dinner time, he joins me, and he actually smiles at me as I'm eating. There's a twinkle in his eyes that I haven't seen in a long time, an approval that warms my whole body.

"I loved eating your pussy this morning," he says to me. The look he's giving me is like a soft caress. How does he do that, seduce with just his eyes?

My face floods with heat, and my hands tremble so hard that food falls off my fork.

"Thank you, Master, I loved it too."

"You can ask me one question," he says.

I get the not-too-subtle message here. How could I not? He's practically screaming the terms of my existence at me. This morning, I gave him something that he wanted. And today I wear a much smaller collar and longer chains, and tonight he's interacting with me.

Punishment and reward. Treats for when I'm good. He's training me like a pet.

But still...this is a win for me too, isn't it? It was a decision I made that earned me these privileges, so doesn't that mean I have some power over him?

Or is it all just an illusion? He's got me so confused that I can't think straight these days.

I consider what I should ask him. I settle on a question that I hope will please him. "What can I do so I won't be punished, Master?"

His smile is gentle. "Nothing. I told you, I'm a sexual sadist. But the punishments will be much less painful once you give in completely. Often, they'll be very pleasurable. Being whipped can be a truly erotic experience. Would you like me to show you right now?"

I flinch before I can stop myself, and he reaches out and strokes my hand with his thumb.

"I promise that you'll love it. Trust me, Tamara."

"Yes, Master," I murmur. "Please show me." I don't trust him at all. What am I, crazy? But I don't want to do anything to disappoint him. I don't want to lose the kind, protective Joshua. I don't want that horrible collar and the short chains to come back.

He places his hand on the small of my back as we walk down the hall, his fingers caressing me. Little thrills of pleasure radiate out from his fingertips. The sexual hold this man has on me is insane. I have no doubt that he could coax multiple orgasms from my aching flesh...if only I'd beg him for it.

And I fear that it's only a matter of time before I do.

We go to the playroom, and he leads me to a restraint station. He has me strip off my shirt and bra, then fastens me

hand and foot to a rack and leaves me for a minute.

When he returns, he says, “Ready, sweetheart?” When he calls me sweetheart, I want to melt. I want to cry with wrenching sorrow and overwhelming happiness.

“Yes, Master.” But I can’t stop my body from trembling.

“You’re afraid, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Master.” It’s a shamed whisper. I don’t want to make him angry.

“But you’re doing it anyway, for me. Just to please me. I love that.” I know what he’s doing, there, manipulating me shamelessly, and yet his words of praise bring tears to my eyes.

I start when I feel the whip on my back, but in surprise rather than in pain. It’s a gentle caress.

I hear the whistle through the air, and I don’t know how he’s doing it, but there’s nothing but a light sting, and he’s right—it’s highly erotic. As the tendrils snap against my back, again and again, my skin slowly warms and softens, and I moan in pleasure. The spray of leather moves up and down my back, and I’m drifting away to a place that’s pure, raw sensation.

I squirm with pleasure at each stroke. I think I could orgasm from this alone, although maybe that’s because Joshua’s daily ritual of teasing me to the edge of madness has left me in a constant state of achy arousal.

Finally, he stops and sets the whip down.

“You see, Tamara?” His voice strokes me like a lover’s caress as he frees me from my cuffs. I drop my arms and shake

them, rubbing my wrists. My back is ablaze with a pleasurable achy sensation.

“Yes, Master. Thank you, Master.”

He spins me around to face him, and with his thumb, gently tilts my face up to look at him.

“Now I’m going to ask you a question. When you do the rituals, you aren’t talking anymore, just tapping. Why the change?”

It’s like a bucket of freezing water dumped on my head. The abrupt change in direction startles me, and I stammer, stalling for time. “Wh-what, Master?”

This is a private part of my life. I hate when he pries into my mind like this. I’ve come to love the morning bath, every last bit of it, even the parts that felt invasive when he first did it, but this is a different kind of invasion, and it makes me queasy.

“You heard me perfectly well, Tamara.” Disappointment frosts his gaze.

My stomach curdles, and I hesitate—too long.

“Oh, sweetheart. Oh, baby. You were doing so well today,” he says reproachfully. “Now I have to hurt you. Do I need to ask you again? Do you want me to punish you twice?”

Tears of anger and frustration burn in my eyes. Why? Why can’t I just have one good day? Even one good evening? “No, Master. I stopped doing the rituals because they don’t work anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re supposed to protect me from harm. They failed. They didn’t protect me from you, Master.” I can’t keep the

bitterness from my tone, and I flinch, but he doesn't react.

"No, they didn't," he agrees mildly. "Which should tell you what they are. Comforting lies. You need to be able to protect yourself, Tamara, not use made-up rituals that will always let you down. Why did you start using them in the first place?"

I answer, even though I'm furious at this invasion. He said he wouldn't rape me? I'd rather he held me down and shoved his dick in me. This prying is almost as bad as when my stepfather slid his fingers between my legs.

It's only my fear of the pain that he'll inflict that forces me to open up this most secret part of myself. "Because of my stepfather." I glare up at him, tears of humiliation burning my eyes. "He was a mean drunk. He used to whip me with a belt. One day, he was doing it, and I was so terrified that I just started chanting in my mind. I don't even know where it came from. It was like I was going crazy, and he tripped and fell over backward and hit his head. I ran out of the house and slept in the bushes. Master."

He nods, his brows drawing together.

"So I did it again, one night when he was coming in the door, and my mother came home early from work that night and interrupted him." I frown. "But he beat her up. Was that lucky? She suffered instead of me. It was selfish and rotten of me to feel relieved that he was hurting my mother."

"No, it wasn't. It was selfish and rotten of her to stay with a man like that, to sacrifice your needs for hers."

Anger flares in me, even though I know it's true. She was drunk most of the time, in a dreamy haze, barely able to take care of herself, much less me, but she was *my mother*.

Sometimes she told me she loved me and I was a good girl, and that was everything.

“What happened to him?”

My whole body tenses up. No. God, no, I can't do this.

“You're about to lie to me, so I'm going to give you a free gift.” He takes my hand in his and looks me in the eye. “Don't, and I won't double your punishment tonight.”

Tears flood my eyes. “I can't. I can't. I can't. Please, Master. I can't talk about these things...Master. It's...it's private. It's mine.”

He bends down and kisses the top of my head, squeezing my hand gently. “Haven't you learned yet, Tamara? Nothing is yours. Your thoughts are mine. I own every last little part of you.”

“No, Master, no!” I scream. “Punish me till I pass out! I can't, I can't!”

He cups my chin in his hand, and an odd kind of strength flows from him to me. “You can. You will. You're stronger than you know, Tamara. Fight for yourself. You're worth it.”

I feel as if my mind is splitting in two. My vision swims, and I think I see two Joshuas standing in front of me, and then they merge again.

He's telling me to fight to save myself *from him*.

He's telling me I'm strong and worthwhile.

Nobody has ever told me that before. Ever.

“If you don't tell me,” he continues, “I'm going to have to hurt you really, really badly. What I have in mind? You'll pass out, I can promise you that, and then I'll wake you up, and

you'll pass out again." He sounds very concerned for me. "I'll keep doing it for days and days. I have defibrillators. I have medical training. I can restart your heart if I have to. And you'll still end up telling me. Shouldn't you spare yourself that pain?"

Restart my heart? A wave of terror threatens to sweep me away and drown me. "You're the one who can spare me, Master," I plead. "You don't have to hurt me."

"Oh, but I do." His voice is so soft. "It's the core of my nature, Tamara. The need to cause pain, of one kind or another."

This is the only person I'll be with for the rest of my life.

All strength leaves my body. I fall to the ground and curl up in a ball, sobbing convulsively. He kneels next to me and strokes my back, his fingers trailing over the sensitive, punished flesh. After a minute, he grabs my arm, gently, and tugs me into a sitting position. I look at him pleadingly.

"Please, I'll do anything for you, anything but this..."

He reaches out and wraps his hand around mine. "Come on, sweetheart. Baby. You can do it. I'm going to count now. Don't let me get to zero. Five, four, three..."

It's like there are two Joshuas. One of them is kind and sweet and supportive. And the other one... I don't want the other one to come out to play. I can't survive it.

"I killed him," I whisper, cringing in on myself.

He nods with satisfaction, as if he knew it all along.

"How?" Joshua prods.

I twist my head away from him, closing my eyes as hard as I can. Joshua grabs my chin and forces me to turn my head to

face him.

“Look at me.”

“He was drunk. I pushed him down the stairs, and he broke his neck.” I realize I’ve forgotten to say Master yet again, but he doesn’t call me out on it. He’s too intent on prying open the hard, closed oyster shell that I’ve clamped around my innermost secrets, and devouring the succulent flesh inside.

“What else? There’s more, I can tell.”

At that, I go rigid.

I curse myself for my cowardice.

He squeezes my hand supportively, and I close my eyes. I pretend I’m sitting there with a close friend, with somebody who cares about me. Somebody who wants to lift this heavy burden from my soul. Susan. I’m talking to Susan. Telling her the secrets that I’ve never told anyone.

“My mother always drank a lot before that, but when he died, it was like a light went out in her. She started drinking so much she lost her job, and our power got turned off, and the neighbors reported us...” My body is shaking with sobs. I must be crying. “...so I got taken away and sent to a group home.” I feel a flood of wetness on my cheeks. Deep, overwhelming sorrow sweeps over me and clings, like a suffocating fog. “She never tried to get me back. She never came to visit me. Why didn’t she come visit me? Why?”

His hand tightens around mine again. “Her problem was with herself, not you, Tamara.”

“I always wondered if she knew what I’d done, on some level. And she was dead from liver failure within the year. It’s my fault. I killed her too.”

The words spill out before I can stop them. Horror floods my body. Saying it out loud makes it real. *I murdered my own mother.*

I start clawing at my arms, trying to tear my flesh. “I killed her, Master, I killed her!”

He grabs my wrists and holds me still. “No, you didn’t. You had absolutely nothing to do with her death.”

I’m shaking like I’m having a seizure. Red spots swim in front of my vision. I said the words out loud. I talked about the Bad Thing. Am I going to die now?

He strokes the back of my hand with his thumb. “Those were choices she made, Tamara. They were terrible choices. It was never your fault. Any of it. You were the child, and you had no power at all. It was her job to keep you safe, and she failed at her job and left you with this miserable burden that you never should have had to carry. You do understand that, don’t you?”

“No, no, no...” I gulp for air. I’m getting dizzy.

“You will. It will get better and better, until it hardly hurts at all, until you rarely think of it,” he says calmly, and somehow, the panic starts to recede, because I believe him. I’ve told myself this a million times, but hearing it from him is different. The way he says things, with such utter conviction. His words have the power to make things true.

Telling him my terrible secret is like lancing a festering wound. I feel a violent wave of nausea sweep over me, and I vomit onto the floor.

“Come.” His voice drifts on a cloud over my head. “Let’s get you cleaned up.” He’s not angry with me for making a mess. He’s sweet, he’s kind, he’s understanding.

Master is comforting me. Master is gentle. All I have to do is obey him. I have to make sacrifices for him, give him pieces of myself. It's worth it, isn't it, to have him treat me so lovingly?

I'm crying wordlessly, sobs racking my body. He takes me to the sink and washes my face. Gently and lovingly. He has me rinse out my mouth with mouthwash. "You did so well tonight, baby. I love it when you let me in."

So sweet. So kind.

He used the word "love". I want him to love me. What would my life be like if he loved me?

"Now it's time for your punishment," he says, but I'm in a dream state as he leads me to the middle of the room.

I'm a million miles away. He's smashed my mind like a mirror, and the shards are flying everywhere, flying and flying. I'll never be whole again.

He scatters grains of rice on the floor and forces me to kneel on them. Then he pulls up a chair, and just sits there and watches me. It doesn't hurt much at first, but over time, the pain grows until it feels like I'm kneeling on hundreds of tiny, sharp pieces of gravel.

From somewhere outside my body, I cry and cry. I don't think it's because of the pain. It's because I'm saying goodbye to my mother, for real. The pain is welcome, it's cathartic, it's cleansing. It's what I deserve. I rock into the rice, trying to drive it into my flesh.

When he's done hurting me, he picks me up, brushes the rice from my knees, and cradles me tenderly in his arms as he carries me down to my cell. He kisses my head again and again and tells me how brave and good I am.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JOSHUA

I'm in my office, watching my new favorite TV series, *The Tamara Bennett Show*, played out on the bank of monitors on the wall to the right of my desk. Right now, she's sitting in the library, a western novel resting on her lap, staring into space.

It's fascinating watching her evolve along the path I've chosen for her. She's almost where I need her to be. I've punched another hole in the wall she built to keep me out of her most secret places. Soon the wall will be rubble, and she will be all mine. I'll mind-fuck her until I've penetrated every part of her.

She seems stunned, dazed after I dragged her secrets into the light. I let her be for a few days. Let her slowly put herself back together. I don't ask to kiss her pussy. I don't make her suck me off. I let her wear the thin collar and the longer chains. I make light conversation with her at meals, talking about the dishes that Elizabeth prepares for her. Where the name "pasta puttanesca" comes from. That one drew a faint smile from her.

And something else: Tamara doesn't have bad dreams anymore. She's not crying out in her sleep, torturing herself with nightmares too terrible to remember.

She used to wake up in the morning gulping in panic. She doesn't do that anymore.

I've made life better for her. I note with interest that I feel a strange glow of pride at that. That's something new. I've never cared in the slightest about anyone else's needs; if anyone benefitted from my actions, it was pure accident.

I notice on some dim level that Elizabeth isn't communicating as much with me. She never wanted to learn sign language, but after serving me for so many years, we have developed our own communication system.

She's sulking, withdrawn, because of Tamara. That's not my problem. I didn't ask her to live her life for me.

When we were in our teens, I tried to send her away. She refused to go. I tried everything I could think of. I told her the truth—that I didn't love her, that I would never love her. When she still could speak, she told me that it didn't matter, that she loved me and didn't care if I loved her back; all she wanted to do was stay with me and exist only for me.

So I lied and told her that she couldn't stay with me because I was afraid that she would tell all my secrets. That was when she cut her own tongue out. She nearly died from blood loss; she was in the hospital, as a Jane Doe, for weeks.

So I went back and fetched her from there and let her stay with me.

The reason I've been able to tolerate Elizabeth's presence for so long is because she's barely there. She's like a ghost, hovering in the background. She serves me and then vanishes. She never tries to communicate with me beyond what's necessary to serve my needs.

She's been different ever since I brought Tamara here. She's losing weight. Last week I ordered her to eat more, but since then, she looks even thinner. Is it possible she's disobeying me? I cannot imagine such a thing—it goes against her very nature—and yet her clothes are getting looser.

I'll talk to her about it later.

My main focus these days is Tamara, my struggling, squirming little captive.

It's deliciously frightening how much pleasure I draw from punishing her. It's the giddiness of a skier on the top of Mount Everest, looking down, down, down.

Feeling floods back into me again.

Food tastes delicious.

Little porn movies featuring me and Tamara flash through my mind throughout the day, as I fantasize about what I'll do to her once she begs me to fuck her.

There are flies in the ointment, however. There's the mysterious text message. I haven't heard anything else from the texter, but I don't believe for a second that whoever texted me is done with me. I haven't been able to find any security breaches at my company, and I am still at a loss as to who could be behind this.

It's making me more watchful all the time, but that's probably a good thing. A whiff of danger keeps the senses sharp. I can never be complacent.

I debated getting rid of this new burner phone, then decided not to. If I bought yet another burner, and he or she found out that number and texted me on that phone, it would hand over a win, a sensation of victory, that he or she didn't deserve.

And there's the Morton Media issue.

I haven't heard from Morton Media. The deadline has passed, and not a peep. No more pleading, no more attempts at negotiating. Not only that, but all my surveillance devices have gone dead, and the janitorial company was abruptly fired two days ago.

These events can't be a coincidence.

I ponder whether this could somehow be connected with the text message. There's no logical reason to think so, but these are two anomalies that are happening at the same time. My Spidey-sense is tingling.

Tapping my fingers on my desk, I start thinking about anything else that's been happening recently that's an anomaly. The only thing that I can think of is the oddness of Heather, Tamara's neighbor, not reporting her missing.

I quickly hack into the police department to check up on Tamara's case, and I'm annoyed to see that Jessica Brown, the director of the homeless shelter, has filed a complaint saying that they're not taking the disappearance seriously enough.

Should I kill Ms. Brown? I'd have to find a way to make it look as if she died of natural causes—a little challenging, because she's only forty. Or I could make it appear to be a mugging gone bad. She's prominent in the local community; her death would attract a lot more attention than Tamara's disappearance.

I'll have to start checking the police reports daily.

I call up my private investigator. He's not allowed to leave me messages, and I haven't checked in with him for too long. That isn't like me.

His report unsettles me. Heather, Tamara's neighbor, has deliberately dropped off the grid. She quit the bagel shop job, she paid her landlord in advance through the end of her lease and told him she wouldn't be renewing, and she hasn't been seen since. The PI broke into her house and found nothing but furniture. The closet is empty, the fridge is empty, the bathroom cabinets are empty. There's no laptop or phone or chargers.

Where did she get the money to pay off several months of rent? Why did she fail to report her friend missing, then promptly vanish? Why did she disappear, and where did she go? I'm going to have to dig into everything. Her bank account, looking for any suspicious deposits, her past known associates, whether she's used her cell phone or bank cards recently so I can get a clue as to where she is now.

I'm about to ask my PI more questions about this strange new development when three of my perimeter alarms go off. Three of them—from different sides of the property. But when I look at the video monitors, they show nothing but dense green forest.

I hang up on him as he's speaking to me. Ice-cold calm descends on me, the way it always does during emergencies. I quickly open my top drawer by pressing my fingerprint on the lock, and pull out my Glock, tucking it into my waistband.

Tamara is in the library. Elizabeth is in the kitchen. I run down the hall and tell her to return Tamara to her cell and chain her up immediately.

Then I run to the front door and press the right eye of the lion head plaque that adorns it. It slides up to reveal the retina scanner, which scans my eye. I press a code into the keypad beneath the scanner. Then the door unlocks. That's the

disadvantage of living in such a secure home. I can't get in and out quickly.

I rush out the front door and into the small fail-safe room, what I call my "airlock room", and repeat the procedure on the door that leads outside.

It's close to noon. A white-hot sun burns overhead, and for some reason, in the midst of this crisis, I flash back to Tamara and how wistfully she glanced at the windows, longing to see the sun. The cruel way I refused to open the window to let her get even a glimpse of outside.

Sometimes I'm an asshole just for the sheer joy of it. That time though, it didn't give me pleasure the way it should have. I felt something odd and unpleasant inside me. I hope it isn't what people refer to as "guilt", because I've always thought guilt must be the most useless of all emotions. I don't think it could be, though, any more than I think I could grow wings.

As these thoughts run through my mind, I'm climbing onto the ATV in the carport and racing toward the areas where the perimeter alarms were tripped.

How the hell did Tamara wriggle her way into my head now, of all moments?

I return my focus to where it needs to be. These perimeter alarms, they make no sense. They cannot possibly have been tripped by accident. I set up the alarm system myself, and I check it regularly, even more so since I've been getting the text messages. This shouldn't be possible, and yet it is.

I check each alarm, scanning the area. There's nobody there, and no indication as to what set them off.

Feeling unsettled, I drive through the woods, heading for the house. How Tamara would love it out here—the breeze,

the sunshine.

A flare of impatience burns through me. I dredge the cruel side of me up from the depths of my filthy soul. Too fucking bad that she'll never experience the outdoors again. She's mine. She should want nothing but me.

I pull up in front of the house. It's nothing to look at it, on the outside; dun-colored concrete that blends into the surroundings. The woods hem it in on all sides; I designed it that way, for maximum privacy.

As I climb off the ATV, my mind races. A long, dark cloud is hovering over me. The text messages that I'm getting. The business deal that, impossibly, seems to be falling through. These alarms going off. I'm definitely starting to feel as if they're all connected.

Am I just being paranoid? Of course I'm fucking paranoid. I'm a psychopathic serial killer. But my instincts are always spot on. As they say, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.

When I get inside the house, Elizabeth is sprawled on the floor by the front door. I can see that she's got blood on her face and two goose-egg bumps starting to rise on her forehead. She looks dazed, half-conscious. She's mouthing, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Anger rises inside me. I promised her she'd be safe.

I barrel through the house to my office. The door is shut. It opens outward, so it can't be blocked from the inside. I yank it open.

Tamara is standing behind the desk, frantically punching buttons my phone, which is blinking red and sending off shrill, beeping alarms.

She tried to make a phone call. She attacked Elizabeth and tried to call for help.

Oh, fuck no.

She scrambles away from me as I stalk toward her, backing up until she bumps into the wall. Her eyes are huge with fright and rage, her chest heaving. She's shrinking in on herself, instinctively trying to make a smaller target. This is familiar. We've just run through the forest, and I've reduced her to the role of cornered prey.

I walk toward her, and she jabs at me with a letter opener. I bat it away easily with a laugh. She shouldn't provoke a man like me. Adrenaline is screaming down my veins, and unholy glee sings in my heart.

This—the final act of defiance—this is what I've been waiting for.

I grin at her. "Really, Tamara?"

She scuttles to the side and tries to dart away. I catch her, pin her in my arms, squeezing hard enough to crush. Her body convulses in terror. I'm rock hard, ready to explode from the thrill of it.

"This is going to hurt."

Her legs thrash, and she flings her head around, her legs kicking wildly as I lift her off the ground. "Just fucking kill me, then!" she screeches.

"Oh no. That would be merciful. You should know me better by now, sweetheart. There's not an ounce of mercy in me." I bite her shoulder hard enough to make her scream.

I carry her out of my office and down the hallway, and she's kicking and clawing at my arms the whole way.

Elizabeth watches, and she doesn't dare smile, but there's a sullen gleam of triumph in her eyes.

Elizabeth's clothes are hanging off her, which means she'll be getting a beating as well. I told her to eat more; she disobeyed me. I rarely have to punish Elizabeth, and it never turns me on. It's just a boring necessity, an action that I must take to achieve certain results.

I drag Tamara to the playroom, and when I pull her through the doorway, she pisses herself in terror.

Good.

She fucked up big time.

I tear her clothing off with my bare hands while she fights like a wildcat and screams curses at me. Then I haul her to an area where there's a grate and a shower, and I turn the shower on full force.

I can't abide any kind of uncleanliness. I was forced to grow up wallowing in filth, and it makes my skin crawl.

Memories flash before my eyes.

The day I lost my other half. Charlemagne. My twin brother.

The day everything fell apart. The day my new life began.

I was fourteen years old.

My father, digging a grave for Charlemagne before he was even dead. Burying him alive, as a warning for me. Throwing dirt on Charlemagne's face. Charlemagne too weak to fight back. Rasping his final breaths, his dying eyes open and vacant. That was my own face staring up at the sky.

My mother, finally pushed to madness. *Finally*. Why did it take her so fucking long? What kind of vile, weak bitch stands by watching her children be murdered, one by one?

She shoved my father into the grave on top of Charlemagne's twitching body. My father, climbed out, slowly, with a terrible look on his face.

It was when he was beating my mother to death that I made my move. I swung with the shovel and hit him in the head from behind. The world's mightiest predator grunted in surprise and went down like a sack of potatoes.

Standing there, next to the pit holding Charlemagne's dying body, I bound my father's hands with my shirt, and his ankles with my pants, while he was still unconscious.

Good thing Daddy Dearest taught us all how to improvise.

I waited for him to wake up. There wouldn't be any point in killing him while he was out.

When his eyes opened and he sucked in a panicked breath, I hacked at him with the shovel, knocking his teeth down his throat, crushing his face in. I broke his arms, I broke his legs, while he convulsed and screamed. He didn't die bravely. He pissed and shit himself and begged for mercy while I mocked his weakness

I made it last.

I told him, again and again, why he wasn't worthy to live.

He died gargling on his own blood.

My mother rasped out her final breaths a few minutes later. I stood there and stared at her, trying to feel something, because I thought I should feel some emotion at the death of

my mother, even if she had been weak and cowardly. Nothing came.

I checked on Charlemagne. He wasn't breathing any more. His eyes were wide open and unblinking.

And I trudged back to the house to free the only survivor of my father's wrath.

She was weak then, nearly dead, but he hadn't gotten around to finishing her off yet.

Elizabeth.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JOSHUA

I snap back to reality, staring down at Tamara, who is crouching over the grate in the floor, glaring up at me with fear and hate.

“I’m not sorry,” she yells at me. “You’ll beat me and make me say I’m sorry, and I’ll say it because you’re hurting me, but it will never be true, *Joshua Smith*. I fucking hate you. I’ll hate you forever, and you’ll never be my master! Never!”

The feeling that surges through me... If I could feel love, I would love Tamara. She’s a fierce, magnificent animal. So worthy of me. So brave, even in the face of her terror, in the face of the awfulness that I’m about to inflict on her.

I stare down at her. My dick could cut diamonds now, it’s so hard.

“You forgot to say Master.” I grab her wrist. She tries to bite my hand as I pull her to her feet. “It wouldn’t have helped.” I drag her across the room and chain her to one of my racks. She’s squirming and swearing and fighting, and by the time I get her chained up, she’s already panting from exertion. I make sure to haul her up high, so she’s dangling on tiptoe.

“Be back in a little while, princess. By the way, did you know that the human body has a hundred billion neurons of

nerve cells? And every square centimeter of your body has around two hundred pain receptors. I'm going to become intimate with every single one of them."

I leave her and return to my office, where I sit down and start running a systems check on my perimeter alarms. I cannot find anything wrong with them. I'm going to order new alarm components and beef up the system immediately.

In the meantime, God help anyone who tries to enter my property.

And Tamara's waiting.

I take my time heading back to the playroom. She flashes me a mingled look of fear, pain, and defiance when I walk through the door. I'm sure the muscles in her arms are screaming by now.

I walk over to the racks of whips and consider my choices. Drawing out the moment. The terror will be building up inside her, swelling and swelling with nowhere to go.

I snatch a bullwhip from the rack. Lust vibrates through me as I stalk toward my conquered prey.

Her slim body draws taut like a bowstring, bracing herself for an explosion of pain. If only she knew...the physical punishment is just a warmup for the real torture that's coming.

I slash her across the back with the bullwhip and am answered by a wail of pain that's sweeter than any symphony.

"What was that?" I taunt. "I didn't quite hear you. A little louder?" And I strike her so hard that her body bucks and convulses, and her scream is loud enough to shatter glass. The bullwhip flows like an extension of my arm, and with every strike, I can feel the snap of the leather cutting into her soft flesh as if it were my hand striking her.

This will leave scars. This will draw blood. I am tattooing myself onto her with every blow.

My arousal roars through me like an all-consuming bonfire, and I have to pace myself, holding back so I don't cause permanent damage. My arm moves without direction from my brain. I'm mesmerized by the sight of the whip splaying across her fair white flesh, painting long lines of red from side to side, from top to bottom. The pop that the whip makes as it breaks the sound barrier, the snap of the leather, the sound of her screams...it's a wonder I don't come.

Her back is glowing red by the time I finish, and she's moaning and sobbing.

I walk up behind her and trail my fingers over the livid red welts, and she jerks in pain.

"This is just the beginning," I croon into her ear as I undo her cuffs. "You had it so good, baby. You'll never have it so good again. You should have appreciated my kindness to you."

"You wouldn't know..." she gasps for air. "...wouldn't know kindness if it...bit you in the ass..."

My fingers twist in her hair, wrenching a beautiful wail from her lips as I drag her over to a long, padded bench. She flails at me weakly as I strap her to it, face down, but she doesn't have much fight left. At least not physically. Mentally she's as tough as hell; she's cursing me with all she's got.

"Remember how much you love the cane, Tamara?" I taunt her.

"Go..." She gasps for breath. "Go swallow ground glass... Joshua Smith. You're fucking useless. When you die, nobody will miss you." Her voice is a trembling rasp. God, she's

amazing. I'm never letting her go. Never. She's my sweet, brave warrior.

"I've got a different kind of cane here, and I'm going to go to work on your feet. This type of punishment is called bastinado. The soles of the feet are very sensitive. You know how much it hurts when you step on a sharp rock, barefoot? Well, that's nothing on this. Think about having that soft skin slashed with a red-hot blade. And then multiply that times a thousand."

She chokes on a sob. "You piece of...piece of shit, miserable head case..." She sucks in air, her whole body trembling. "*Everybody hates you.*"

That's my girl.

I smile as I bring the cane down on her foot, smacking it against the sensitive flesh in the middle of her sole. She rewards me with an agonized shriek. I work my way up and down the bottom of her feet, and she jerks her legs madly against the straps. I've heard victims of bastinado describe the feeling as being like having their feet dunked in gasoline and then lit on fire. It's not long before she's begging. "No, please, no! Master, no, please, I'm sorry!"

It's as if God designed human bodies just for me—with their delicate nerve endings and lightning-quick panic-messages to the brain. At times like this, the entire world seems to shrink beneath me. Human beings are tiny, doll-sized creatures that I can scoop up in one hand and manipulate as I wish. I can bend them and break them with sickening ease.

I ignore her pleas, snapping the cane with small, precise flicks of my wrist.

"Master, please, oh God, I can't take it anymore!"

Oh yes she can. Nobody knows better than me exactly how much agony a person can endure before they succumb, and she has a long, long way to go.

“Oh, now I’m your master again?” I smack the soft, tender flesh of the middle of her foot again, and she screams to the heavens.

“You’re my master! I’m sorry, sorry, sorry!”

“You haven’t begun to understand the meaning of the word sorry.” I move back to the other foot and lay down a flurry of sharp, snapping blows.

“You’ll cripple me! Please! I’m sorry, Master, I’ll never— Ahhhhhh!” Her body is convulsing, her eyes huge and desperate. Her muscles are strung taut, twitching with each new slap.

After a few minutes of this, the soles of her feet are bright red from top to bottom. They’ll be bruised and swollen tomorrow.

When I’m satisfied that her feet are in flaming agony, I unstrap her and scoop her up in my arms. I carry her shuddering body over to the electrified floor plate. She’s shaking her head and desperately trying to rasp out pleas for mercy. She should know me better by now.

I hang her from the overhead chains. The musical sound of sobbing caresses my ears. I walk very slowly over to the switch on the wall, my eyes half closed, listening and enjoying. She’s not begging anymore; she’s just sagging there, whimpering and hopeless.

My hand rests on the switch, and I stare at her, fascinated. Her body is quivering and she’s hanging off the chains, trying to keep the weight off her horribly bruised soles.

I'm growing harder and harder. I unbutton my fly, grasp my cock, and stroke myself until I explode, sending my cum flying through the air.

Finally, I can't make myself wait anymore. I flip the switch and watch her dance on her tortured feet.

Her screams pour into the raw center of me, stroking it obscenely. Even though I came mere minutes ago, I'm hard again and I can barely hold myself back from dragging her over to a bed to fuck her violently. She hasn't earned it yet, though. I will never, never take a woman who isn't begging for it.

All too soon, her eyes roll back in her head and she passes out.

Then I unchain her, drag her over to a bench, and dump a bucket of ice water on her head. She wakes up with a strangled scream, flailing wildly.

I look down at her. Her face is white and drawn with exhaustion and terror. The look in her eyes...it's the look of wounded prey when it's cringing away from the killing blow and has no fight left.

"Your name is no longer Tamara. You know why? Because you're fucking nobody. I own you. You're my toy. So your name is Toy. When I call you by your name, you acknowledge it instantly."

That breathes some life back into her. She convulses, struggling to sit upright, but she's so weak that she just falls off the bench and lands on the floor with a thud. I leave her there.

"Oh no!" she wails. "No! I'll call you Master! I'll never think that you're not my master again, never! Just let me keep

my name! It's the last thing I have from my mother. Please let me keep my name!"

Then I see the look of horror and realization on her face. She swore she'd never beg to call me Master. And now she's pleading for the privilege.

I haul her back over to the chains on the wall, and she cries all the way there, weak little mewling noises. She sags on the chain, her legs quivering.

"What's your name?"

Her head is lolling and her eyes aren't focused. "My name is Tamara Bennett!" I remember those words well, because they are the last defiant words she says to me before she breaks.

I can't believe she's lasted this long. She's a wonder. She puts the men I hunt to shame.

Almost done now.

I fetch a riding crop and slash across her stomach with all my strength. Her screams are weakening, her eyes wide and hopeless, as I move up and down her torso, splashing agony across her tender skin. I have to give her credit—she lasts a lot longer than I expected.

I keep whipping her.

She passes out again.

When I bring her to with another drenching bucket of water, it's a different woman whose dazed eyes are staring at me. Her mouth is slack, her muscles limp. She's a hollowed-out shell, waiting for me to fill her with whatever I see fit.

"Ready to dance on the plate for me again?"

“Noooo...” Drool leaks from her mouth.

“What’s your name?” I hold the whip up, and she just gapes at me stupidly and rasps something. “I can’t hear you.”

There’s no fight at all in her as she mumbles, “My name is Toy, Master.”

The fierce triumph that roars through me almost makes me come on the spot. “What’s your name?” I yell again.

“My name is Toy, Master!”

I slash her breasts with the whip. “Louder!”

“My name is Toy, Master!”

I keep whipping her until the front of her body from tits to crotch is livid red. I make her rasp out her submission again and again, until her voice is hoarse and it’s agony for her, and then I make her scream it some more.

Then I do the cruelest thing I’ve ever done. Far crueler than the whipping.

I break my rule and I lie to her. It’s necessary. She needs this as much as I do; she just can’t appreciate it. She can’t hold on to hope anymore. That hope, it’s harming her. It’s making her do foolish things.

Things that might make me kill her.

And I don’t want to have to kill her.

So I whisper in her ear. “Nobody is looking for you, Toy. You haven’t even been reported missing yet. I don’t think you ever will be, because nobody out there cares whether you live or die. Why are you even fighting? There’s nothing out there for you.” And the hopeless dry-heaving sobs that rack her body tell me that my arrow has struck its mark.

Then I sling her limp body like a sack of flour over my shoulder and carry her back to her cell. I rub medicated cream on her wounds, but I'm rough and impatient. I force her to take antibiotics and drink water, but I don't give her any painkillers. She doesn't deserve it. She tried to leave me.

I send Elizabeth down the next day to take her breakfast and dinner of plain gruel, along with more antibiotics. No more lunch. I don't bring her upstairs to exercise. It's fine. Let her get weak.

Toy is in so much pain that she can barely move for days. I hear her cry out in agony.

I leave her down there in the dark for days. A week. No bath, nothing but a deliberately bland meal served to her twice a day.

One day she starts refusing her food. I send Elizabeth down with a note. "If you refuse to eat, I will shove a feeding tube down your throat and put a hood on your head. You'll be blindfolded and chained hand and foot twenty-four hours a day."

So she eats.

And once her feet heal, she stands up and stumbles back and forth every day, walking the short length that the chain will allow.

She's starting to crack for real now.

Not that shit she was faking earlier, where she was willing to endure some punishment in order to trick me into thinking I was slowly breaking her.

Yeah, she thought she'd fooled me.

This is the real thing.

I sit in my office, watching the last pieces of her fall away. She cries out to the camera, begging me. Her face is twisted with sorrow and desperation. “My name is Toy, Master! Please, Master, I’m sorry! I won’t try to escape again. Please, Master, my name is Toy. I’ll be good! I’ll do anything you want, Master. Toy will do anything you want.”

I believe her when she says she won’t try to escape again. That girl, the one with a will of her own, is dead now.

I sip my bitter black coffee and turn down the volume on the screen to dull the sound of her screams, and go back to work.

I’m feeling itchy and unsatisfied because I don’t get to see my little Toy in the flesh anymore. I miss tasting her delicious pussy. I miss teasing her until she sobs with need and frustration. I miss thrusting down her throat and seeing that look of panic in her eyes as she struggles to take me in—and then her surrender, the way her nostrils flare to suck in oxygen as she swallows my cum.

Depriving her of my presence is part of the punishment, but it’s also hard on me. I wish I could make her appreciate that. What I’m doing to her is for her own good, and I am willing to make the necessary sacrifices, but the dull ache inside me, the need for her, grows with each passing day.

I finally decide to take a day off to kidnap the child rapist. I might as well take him out before he gets custody of his children, not after. Does it really matter? Not to me. I could always tell Toy about it someday.

No! I draw myself up short. That would be weak and foolish of me. Since when do I need to trot my good deeds over to her, for her approval? She exists to please me, not the other way around.

Bagging Stewart Hamilton is pathetically easy. I shoot him with a tranquilizer and bring him back to my estate in the soundproofed trunk of my car.

I am pleased to see that I haven't lost the urge to hunt. I watch him go through the various stages of outrage and threatening, then on to pleading and bribing and begging.

The running, that's the fun part.

When I catch him and force him to face off against me, he tries to rise to the challenge. He really does. He feints and jabs, he puts up a halfway decent fight. He even gets one shot in, slamming his fist into my solar plexus, and I grunt in pain and happiness at the sensation rocketing through my body.

The knives, oh, they're glorious. The peeling away of the skin, exposing the red meat underneath. The shrill, girlish screams, the bubbling agony of his final breaths.

I dispose of him quickly, shed my coveralls, and take them back to my house to burn them.

By the time I get there, though, the elation is starting to fade, and thoughts of Toy are crowding into my head again. That's much too soon. I think it would help if she was upstairs with me, if I could play with her, spank her, make her beg for my cock. But if there's one thing I'm good at, it's maintaining self-discipline. She's not ready to come back upstairs yet, so I will suffer without her until it's time.

A couple of days later, I'm in my office reading the paper online when I'm hit with a bombshell. The Morton Media Group has been purchased.

Shock ices my veins as I read the details. The purchaser, a real estate development group, offered them less money than I

would have, but is allowing them to continue to operate their newspapers.

The purchaser is paying to move the media group's operations to smaller buildings on less valuable pieces of property. Apparently, Mr. Morton cared more about keeping his newspapers and radio stations running than he did about money. A man with principles? How fucking disgusting.

All the deals I planned to make based on this one have now fallen to pieces. It doesn't affect my vast holdings, my wealth, in any significant way, but it does affect me personally. I'm not used to failure.

I don't know how all these different threads are woven together, but when I find out who did this to me, I will end them in horrible ways. In the meantime, I have to put all future hunts on hold. Frustration coils tightly inside me. Whoever's doing this to me, when I find them, I'll stage a special little hunt and I'll make it last for days.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JOSHUA

I feel an unusual nervousness as I glide into the parking spot in my building. I haven't been to the office ever since I took Toy.

With the threat of the phantom texter hanging over my head, and all the weirdness that's been happening to me lately, I don't like leaving Toy alone in the house with Elizabeth. Oh, she's chained up and safe in her cell, but with someone still out there who delights in fucking with me, and who apparently has a way to hack into my system and set off the perimeter alarms, leaving the house like this is a huge risk.

There's one option I have if anyone attempts to breach the perimeter of my house. The nuclear option. Since I bring my hunting prey to the house, there would be too much risk of police finding DNA if anything were to lead them there. So I've wired my house in such a way that I can, just by calling in a certain code, cause it to explode completely, obliterating any trace of its existence—along with anything and anyone inside it.

No more Toy. Ever.

The thought creates a strange hollowness in me, but of course, if it ever became necessary, I could do it without blinking an eye.

Couldn't I?

I force myself to try to picture my life without her, and my brain rebels. I clench my fists in frustration, opening and closing them. On some level, our roles have reversed. I'm keeping her body prisoner, but she's taken my mind hostage.

I can't understand Toy's effect on me. What is it about her, specifically, that has called up something new and unnameable inside me?

Plato believed humans were split apart before they were sent to Earth, and spent their entire lives searching for their missing half. He said that love tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature.

But that can't be the answer for me. I'd never be drawn to someone like myself; I'm a perfect monster.

And Toy is nothing like me. Oh, I know she's a survivor—she crawled away from the wreckage of her past and rose to her feet and found her place in the world. But the similarity stops there. She is the exact opposite of me in her dealings with people, the yin to my yang. I want to open wounds; she wants to heal them.

I mutter curses under my breath as I slide out of my car and head for my office. I really, really don't want to be here today.

Unfortunately, I didn't have a choice.

A police detective contacted my office and asked to see me but refused to say why. He wanted me to come down to the station to meet him. As if. I can handle myself with perfect calm and control anywhere, but why hand him any advantages?

So I called my lawyer and arranged for him to meet me and the detective in the conference room of my building. My lawyer's advice was to make the police wait until they were willing to say why they wanted to talk to me, but I think I'd better get ahead of all this.

The police detective, Sergeant Carter, is a man in his forties with jet black hair.

Like most people, he's not good at hiding his true emotions. He means to show me a poker face, but I can see his disdain in the subconscious curl of his lip, the lines strung tight across his forehead. I don't think it's the typical envy and distrust that the working class have for men like me; I'm pretty sure it goes deeper than that.

My lawyer, Algernon Brooks, who looks every bit as preppy and haughty as his name, sinks down into a seat next to me. After we get the introductions out of the way, the detective places a manila folder on the table. He opens it and takes out a picture that he slides across the table for me to look at. A driver's license picture. Tamara Bennett, who is now my Toy.

"Tamara something," I say to him. "She worked for us as an office clerk for a little while over the summer. How can I help you, Sergeant Carter?"

To amuse myself, I manufacture an image of what she's doing right now. Crying out to the camera, bruises half-healed, beautiful tears streaming down her cheeks, her voice hoarse with sorrow as she begs to serve me. And there's not a damn thing that Sergeant Carter can do to save her.

"She's been missing for almost a month now," he informs me.

I frown in manufactured dismay. “Yes, I know—my human resources director informed me that she’d been contacted by your department a little while back. I was sorry to hear it, but I’m not sure how I can help you. She was a summer intern, and she left our firm, I think to start school.”

He ignores the question. “She didn’t just leave, though, did she? You fired her. Why?” he asks me.

Who the hell told him that? Now I’m starting to get genuinely pissed off.

I favor him with a pleasant, uninterested smile. “She acted inappropriately at a party. However, I hardly see how that’s relevant.”

“In what way did she act inappropriately?”

I lift my shoulders in a minimal, dismissive shrug. “She’d been drinking too much. Tried to flirt with some of the married guests.”

“Why did you claim that she’d left to start school when you’d actually fired her?”

“Because she would have finished with us either way, and her firing wasn’t a big deal. It was a temp job. She was nearing the end of her contract.” It’s a non-answer, but there’s not much Carter can do with it unless he wants to call me a liar to my face.

His eyes bore into me. “Interestingly, one of your security guards has also disappeared. His wife reported him missing. The last time that he worked was the day after the party.”

Yet again, I am reminded of what a stupid mistake that was.

“What does this have to do with my client?” My lawyer’s tone has a snap to it.

Carter doesn’t even spare him a glance. “Furthermore, you haven’t been coming in to work ever since the night of the party—which, as far as we know, is the last time Tamara Bennett was seen. Nor have you been at your penthouse apartment. Where have you been?”

Who the fuck knows this? Who’s been talking to him?

My lawyer jumps in. “This is irrelevant. Mr. Smith travels the country, and the world, frequently. He often doesn’t come to the office for weeks or months at a time. If he told you his whereabouts, it would reveal proprietary business information about potential future clients.”

An excellent, smoothly manufactured lie. Interestingly, many lawyers test high on the psychopathy scale.

The detective opens his folder and slides another picture across the table at me. Baxter Warburton III. He was from Maryland; I deliberately pick victims from around the country to ensure they can’t be traced back to me.

So how the fuck did Sergeant Carter link him to me?

“Do you recognize this man?”

Well, the picture sure looks different than the last time that I saw him. For one thing, he still has eyes. I make a show of studying the photograph for a few seconds. “No. Should I?”

“He also disappeared one month ago.” He’s staring at me, searching my face, waiting for those tiny non-verbal cues that would betray a normal man. Thank God I’m far from normal.

“Oh, come on!” my lawyer explodes with impatience. “This is pure comedy now, Sergeant. Are you going to

question my client about every disappearance that occurred in the continental United States one month ago? Maybe you've got some missing persons cases in Russia you'd like to close too? Afghanistan? China? We're done here."

Sergeant Carter stands up, and I can feel the frustration radiating off him. "Would you be willing to take a lie detector test?"

"Of course," I say instantly, at the exact same time my lawyer says, "No."

A lie detector test is so unreliable that they can't even be used in court. Evidence gathered by police dogs can be used in court. A judge would believe a German shepherd before he'd believe a lie detector test. And for a psychopath, passing a polygraph is as easy as breathing.

All the things that a polygraph measures—blood pressure, pulse, respiration—go wonky in a psychopath when we're under pressure. Tests conducted on psychopaths show that our heart rates actually slow down under threat. We became calmer and more focused. We are not like other men.

So, yeah, a polygraph? Bring it.

The detective's eyes flicker with resentment. He doesn't believe a word I'm saying, but there's nothing he can do about it. That cheers me up enormously. I flash him a big, insincere smile.

"We'll be in touch," he says coldly.

I smile at him as he picks up his folder and turns to go. "It seems as if you're drawing your own conclusions, Sergeant. But I tell you what. I'm going to offer a hundred-thousand-dollar reward for anyone who can give information about what happened to Tamara Bennett."

I'm angry that I have to say that name.

She is Toy, and she is mine.

And somebody is fucking with me. Somebody who's going to die.



Toy

I think I've gone mad. This is the end. I can't take much more. This isn't life. This is worse than death. The loneliness, the boredom. The only thing for me to figure out now is how to kill myself before he can get to me.

I would do anything just to get out of the cell and back up into the house, but he'll never let me. For the crime of wanting to escape and live my own life, free of chains, he's sentenced me to an eternal Hell.

I'm so angry at myself I want to rip my own face off. Why didn't I appreciate what I had before? I think of all the things that Master did for me. He was so soft and gentle when he stroked me. He loved to please me. He let me have power over my own body; he never forced himself on me. He fed me delicious food and took me up to the gym so I'd be healthy. He bathed me in sweet, warm water, lathering me with delicious smelling bubbles. My world was full of color and pleasure when I was with him. He is a god. He can make my body feel anything he wants to. He can drain all color from my existence. I shouldn't have made my lord angry. My lord and master.

I have to think like this, have to believe that Master might be good to me again someday. I keep begging him and

begging him. I promise him that I am his Toy and I will live to serve him.

I tell myself again and again that I am Toy and he is Master. I have to believe it with every fiber of my being, if I am ever to have hope of seeing the light again.

More time passes. There's nothing but the damp smell of mold and the faint light overhead, winking off every night to tell me that yet another day of my life has vanished, breaking my heart every time. When the panic swirls up inside me, I try to calm myself with deep-breathing exercises, but that just makes it worse. Every breath tastes and smells like mildew and wet dirt.

Sometimes the ghost of Sarah's voice tries to talk to me, to give me strength, but I put my hands over my ears and scream until she stops. She can't help me; she failed me. It's her fault that I'm here. It's my fault. I'm going mad and I can't remember anything about what I once dreamed of.

Being chained to the floor is a nightmare. I can only take a few steps in any direction, so I can't even pace inside my cell.

I realize I'm sitting on the bed, rocking back and forth and clawing at my own arms just to feel something. How long have I been doing that? Hours, days?

I have no bed covers with which to hang myself. However, I've slowly, secretly dug into the mattress and found a mattress coil I could use. I can slash my wrist with it. I'll have to move fast and I'll have to stab hard.

And then the door opens, and Master walks in.

And I think he knew.

He loves to drive me right to the edge of despair and then snatch me back. And the horrible thing is, I can't fake it. I

have to suffer to the point of madness to satisfy him.

I deserve to suffer. I only exist to please him, and I failed at that.

I sink down to my knees and bow my head as he walks over.

“You fucking reek,” he snarls at me. “You smell like you rolled in shit. You’re disgusting.”

“Yes, Master. Sorry, Master.” And I am. I’m sorry about anything that might upset him. Sorry about anything that might make him punish me more.

“Get up, right now.”

I scramble to my feet, hanging my head.

He leads me upstairs to the bathroom and orders me to brush my teeth. I obey instantly. Then he has me wash my crusty, dirty face.

He runs the hot water for me. I climb into the tub eagerly and sink into the bath with a whimper of relief. I am delighted when he cuffs my hands and ankles. I moan with pleasure as he runs the washcloth over my body.

This is real. This is happening. This is all I could ever dream of—me, here in the light and the sweet-smelling air, with Master kneeling between my legs, his strong hands massaging my breasts.

After he bathes me, he strokes the washcloth between my legs, and I moan even louder, desperate to let him know how grateful I am and how much I love what he’s doing to me. I’m not faking it, not in the slightest. The rub of the cloth between the swollen, needy folds of my pussy lips sends shudders of

delight rocketing through me. After feeling so little for so long, every sensation is magnified a million times.

He slowly, carefully, shaves me until I'm completely smooth, and my breathing quickens with pleasure as his fingers spread me open for inspection. I am exposed to the air, my eager flesh waiting for him to stroke it back to life. But his hand withdraws.

“What is your name?”

I gaze up at him, so very grateful to him for letting me obey his orders. For letting me please him. “My name is Toy, Master.”

He makes me repeat it ten times, and I do, without hesitation. I'm frantic to keep him happy.

I can't go back in the cellar.

“May I lick your pussy, Toy?”

“Yes, Master. Please, Master,” I beg. “I love it when you lick me. Please lick my pussy, Master.”

He nods and stands up. After he drains the bathtub, he undoes my cuffs. He hands me a towel to dry myself.

When I'm done, he orders me to dry him, and I do so gratefully, toweling the water off his hard, sculpted body.

Then he wraps a towel around his waist and leads me naked down the hall to his bedroom.

Master let me be in his bedroom. I am so very lucky.

He stands before me and points at the floor. “On your knees.”

Oh yes. I can make him happy now. I have been practicing holding my breath every day in case Master ever decided he

wanted me again, and now I can hold my breath for several minutes. Making Master happy is more important than breathing.

I take him in my mouth, and he sinks in all the way, inch by inch.

I suck his cock eagerly, lovingly, glorying in his groans of pleasure. I drink every drop of his cum.

Then he has me lie down on my back on his soft, beautiful bed, and the silky comforter caresses my skin as he places his strong hands on my thighs and spreads them open. He goes down on me, teasing me the way he used to. Tongue swirling, thrusting inside me. The tidal wave of arousal gathers and rises higher and higher. He notes my tortured pants and the quivering of my thighs, and pulls away just in time.

And I give him another piece of my soul.

I look at him, my chest heaving in desire, and I beg. "Please, Master. Please fuck me."

He smiles at me gently, running his finger down the wet seam of my pussy. Maddeningly light. *Do it harder.* "Do you really want me to fuck you, Toy?"

"Yes, Master, oh, please. Oh God. Please fuck me."

His eyes spark with cruelty and malice. "Do you deserve it, Toy?"

My heart drops, and my mouth droops in sorrow. "No, Master."

"No, you don't. You made me sick with how dirty you were this morning. When I think about that, I don't want to fuck you. I want to puke."

And he gets up and walks away, breaking my heart as I swallow my sobs, because I tried to do what Master wanted, and somehow I failed.

But today he puts the good collar on me, the skinny collar. I am so grateful to Master for putting the skinny collar on me. He gives me soft, beautiful pants and a shirt and bra to wear. He puts the long chain on my ankles.

He takes me to the dining room and lets me eat a real breakfast with him.

After breakfast, there are tears of gratitude in my eyes when I bow my head respectfully and say, “Thank you, Master.”

His eyes snap with fury. “Did I say that you could speak, Toy?”

I freeze in my seat, the fork falling from my trembling fingers. I’m horrified. I’m so stupid. Will he put me back in the cell?

He used to let me thank him. I don’t even have that anymore. My escape attempt has thrust me to a new, lower level of Hell. Down in the depths of the cell, I dreamed that someday it would be like it was before—I could thank him, I could fall to the floor and kiss his feet, I could be the eager, grateful slave and he would appreciate it. He would tell me how much he loved it when I obeyed.

Now that will never happen.

I’m shaking all over. I hug myself to try to make myself stop.

I can’t make him angry.

“No, Master,” I whisper. “I’m sorry I spoke without permission, Master.”

I glance up at him, desperate for just a glimpse of the kindness he showed me after he punished me in the past. There is none. His eyes are blinding glacial ice, burning me with their hatred and scorn. “You’re a stupid cow, aren’t you, Toy?”

For some reason, that really hurts. It’s a bleeding cut right across my soul. He’s never called me names before. He used to call me beautiful and strong and worthwhile. Then I ruined it all because I’m an idiot. “Yes, Master, I’m a stupid cow.” Tears leak from my eyes and stream down my face. If he says it, it must be true, but I tried so hard to please him.

“Pants around your ankles. Bend over the table, right now.”

I scramble to obey.

He pulls out his belt and whips my ass so hard that I howl in pain, my legs jerking with each smack of the leather across my flesh.

And I’m grateful for it, for every agonizing slash, for the flaming burn that coats my skin when he’s done. Because at least I’m feeling something. Anything is better than that awful numbness of being chained in a dark room day after day.

After he whips me, he snaps, “Put your pants back on.” His voice is thick with hate.

Master hates me.

Oh God, nobody will ever love me, ever.

I would do anything to make him happy, but it’s too late. I cry hopelessly as he takes me to the library. I go pick up a

book and sit with it on my lap, but I don't read it. I don't think I want to read anymore, ever again.

There are other worlds nestled between those pages. They will call to me, they will whisper forbidden thoughts, tell me of places I can never see, people I will never meet. They speak of a different life. They might give me wrong ideas. I can't risk thinking bad thoughts.

And on some level, I know that those books also represent hope. I have no hope now. I will never even be able to please my master. He's taken that from me. I will just exist, carefully and quietly, and try not to make Master too angry. Sometimes he will give me pleasure, sometimes he will let me please him, and that is all I deserve and all I will have.

After lunchtime, it's time for me to work out. He takes me to the exercise room, and I put on my exercise shoes. Weeks of being chained have weakened my muscles. After just a few minutes, I stagger and fall off. The contempt on his face burns terror into my heart.

"Please, Master!" I scream. "Please don't put me back in the cell! I'm so sorry, Master. I'm just a stupid cow, Master. I'm nothing. I'm nobody! I'll try harder, Master!"

He whips my back with his belt again for begging him, then makes me get back on the treadmill for ten more minutes. My legs are burning, every gulp of air draws white-hot fire into my lungs, but I don't dare ask him to stop. The room goes blurry, and I desperately force my legs to keep moving. I pray that Master will save me. He doesn't say a word. He just stands there and watches me struggle to breathe.

Finally, I lose consciousness.

I wake up on a couch in the library. Not my cell. The couch. I cry with relief.

I quickly get up and begin pacing down the long halls so I can start strengthening my muscles, so I can do a better job for him tomorrow. I won't be weak and stupid again. I won't disappoint Master again.

He's a good master. I am just a useless toy. My job is to make him happy. If I can keep him happy, he won't make me wear the bad collar, and he'll let me out of the cell during the day.

Every morning, for days on end, after he bathes me, he teases me with his mouth and fingers. I beg him to fuck me. I wail with my need for him. My body heaves with sobs. Often, he makes me bend over the dining room table and spreads me open and laps me until I'm crying and shaking, pulling back just when I'm at the brink. Afterward, he stands there and strokes my skin, not because he wants to please me, but because he wants to draw out the sensual torture. After he teases me, my body seethes with desire for hours, and when the desire slowly, agonizingly recedes, he seems to know instinctively, and he resumes my sensual torment.

He is the source of all pleasure and pain in my life.

I beg him, again and again, to fuck me. And finally, he says yes.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TOY

We're in the playroom.

I'm naked and chained to the St. Andrew's cross, trembling with anticipation.

My master is finally going to fuck me. Will he stop hating me someday? Will he let me show him how sorry I am for being stupid?

He takes out one of his floggers and begins whipping me with it. Slowly, sensually, the leather fringe caresses my back, and I find that it's too gentle. I want more. My pain tolerance has grown considerably, and now I find I crave it. I want that heady rush of pain and pleasure. I want the tendrils of the whip to bring me back to life.

He seems to sense that, because he begins whipping me harder and faster. The leather stings as it splays across my back. My skin grows hot with his attention, and a delicious lightness flows through my body. Soon I'm drifting away, the whipping somehow releasing me from my bonds, and I'm nothing but pure sensation. I feel every smack of the whip, and I love it. He moves down to my ass, and I feel each cheek grow hot, and I arch my back and push my ass toward him, rocking from side to side.

I'm floating on a cloud of delirious pleasure when he unchains me, and I slump into his arms. He slings me over his shoulder, his muscles bunching as he carries me across the room.

He drops me roughly onto the bed, on my back. He strips slowly, his glazed eyes watching me, a cruel smile of conquest curving his lips. Then he grabs a condom from his dresser drawer and slides it onto his thick, erect cock as I greedily watch.

"Yes." I breathe out my surrender. Yes to the end to my torture, yes to giving up another piece of my soul. Yes to sinking lower than I ever dreamed possible and begging for the privilege of my kidnapper's cock.

Walking over to the bed, he climbs on and parts my thighs, and bends down to caress me with his tongue. At first it's the gentlest and softest of touches, like a feather trailing over my heated flesh, and then it grows firmer and firmer. He spreads me open wide with his fingers and penetrates me with his tongue, drawing agonized whimpers from deep inside me.

Please, please, let me come.

My thighs start to tremble as I reach the peak. He pulls away. He lifts my legs so my ankles are wrapped around his neck, and the thick head of his erection presses against my opening. I moan as it slides into me.

"Oh, Master."

He's so big that I feel the burn of my muscles stretching as he forces his way in. He keeps thrusting, advancing, inch by punishing inch, until the head of his cock is nudging up against my womb.

I squirm impatiently, but he holds me still and makes me wait.

He draws it out, cruelly. Pumping his hips, stretching me, hurting me in the most deliriously wonderful ways. Then withdrawing. Then starting again. Waves of sensation rising and receding.

It's ecstasy. It's sweet torment. He's every bit as amazing as I always dreamed he'd be.

I start to cry, to wail, to beg.

Tears stream down my face as he picks up the pace, slamming into me, balls slapping against the cheeks of my ass.

When he finally lets me come, I scream with pleasure and shock. Wave after wave of orgasm washes over me, drowns me. I am high on sensation, floating in some strange netherworld of unbearable ecstasy.

He groans as he comes, his fingers sinking into my thighs hard enough to bruise. My inner sheath is convulsing, squeezing him, and my legs quiver uncontrollably as orgasm after orgasm rocks my entire body.

“Yes,” he growls. “Yes. So good.”

He withdraws very slowly, and as I lie there, gasping, he trails his fingers down the small of my back. It's more intimate than sex; it's a connection between us, an acknowledgment of our delirious connection.

Then suddenly he snatches his fingers away, as if he realized he was being sweet and tender and stopped himself before it could go on too far.

I lie perfectly still and hold on to hope. If I'm really, really good and obedient, perhaps someday he'll touch me like that

again.

Afterward, he puts the thin collar on me and clips a leash to it. He lets me put on a robe, then leads me, stumbling and weak-kneed, down the hall.

We go into his media room to watch television. He sits down in his chair and gestures at me. “Kneel.” I kneel at his feet, and he props them up on me.

I try to shut out the sounds of the television, going tense with the effort. I sing songs in my head and make silent screaming noises. I can’t know about the outside world. There is no outside world for me.

Elizabeth comes into the room. “Nothing for me right now,” Master says. “And I didn’t ask you to come in here. Please don’t bother me when I didn’t summon you.” There’s a moment of silence.

“What?” he snaps.

I sneak a peek, and I see that she’s just staring at him, swaying where she stands. Then she falls to the ground with a thud.

Master pulls his legs off me and runs over to her. I don’t know what I should do, so I just stay crouched on the ground, a silent piece of furniture, as he scoops her up in his arms.

I noticed that she was getting paler and thinner. She’s miserable because I’m here, and she’s not allowed to take it out on me or bully me, so she’s just shrinking in on herself.

I feel no pity at all.

I crouch where I am for a long time, close to an hour, humming loudly to myself to drown out the sound of the

television. I need to pee, and my bladder starts to throb with urgency.

When Master finally returns, I have to decide what will make him angrier—if I pee on the floor, or if I ask permission to go to the bathroom. I am very brave, and I risk asking him. He rakes me with a look of contempt. “Of course you can fucking go to the bathroom. What are you, stupid?”

Pain courses through me. His words bruise me so badly.

“Yes, Master, I’m very stupid.” Why can’t I be smart? What should I have done instead? Should I have just peed on the floor?

I hang my head in shame as I hurry to the bathroom, but I also feel an emotion that is something like anger, but it can’t be anger because I would never dare to be angry with Master.

He isn’t being clear about the rules. All I want to do is follow the rules.

But I banish that thought from my head. I cannot criticize Master. If anything is wrong, it’s my fault, not his.

That night, he asks me if I want to sleep at the foot of his bed or in the cell. And I am so grateful. I beg and beg to sleep at the foot of his bed.

He’s looking at me with an expectant expression. I don’t know why at first, and then I think I have figured it out. This is the last thing that I swore I would never do. Master wants to know if I am devastated by breaking my final vow to myself. Of course I’m not.

I’m far too broken for that.

CHAPTER TWENTY

JOSHUA

Toy behaves perfectly for me.

I chain her to the foot of my bed every night. She submits, instantly, to every command. I make her answer to the name Toy and acknowledge me as her master, many times a day. I exercise her on the treadmill, and several times she falls off into my arms, nearly fainting, rather than ask to stop. She watches me fearfully, desperate to please me.

When I say cruel things to her, she cries and cries and begs me to forgive her.

She is completely passive except when I fuck her. Then she writhes underneath me and cries out in pleasure, and I feel her pussy spasming on my cock, and it makes me come so hard I think I've died and gone to Heaven. Not that I'll ever know what Heaven feels like, if there is such a place.

And yet something's lacking.

I find myself being harder and harder on her. When I take her to the playroom, I whip the shit out of her. I put clamps on her nipples and pussy and make her crawl across the floor to me, and she wails in pain the whole way and then kneels at my feet, quivering, waiting for me to release her from the cruel clamps but not daring to ask. I make her wait a very long time.

Often I sit there and read a book, propping my feet up on her back while her tears drip on the floor.

She's a perfect little Toy. She'd suffer agonies rather than disappoint me. And I make sure she does.

After a couple of weeks, to reward her for her good behavior, I order a dozen couture gowns in her size. It takes a week for them to arrive from Paris. I have them delivered to a town two hours away and send Elizabeth to pick them up, because I don't want to leave the house if I don't have to. Elizabeth has severe agoraphobia, but she suffers through it to go out and pick up our supplies a couple of times a month. Food, clothing, household goods. It's necessary. I don't like to be seen anywhere in this area, to preserve my anonymity.

I hang the dresses on a rack and slide it into the center of my bedroom and bring Toy in to look at them.

"These are for you," I tell her, waiting for the gush of gratitude and excitement that should accompany such a generous gift.

She barely glances up at them.

"Thank you, Master," she whispers, standing with her hands hanging at her sides, gaze trained on the floor.

Shock and anger blast through me. These are beautiful hand-stitched creations. Models wear them on the cover of Vogue. Twenty grand or more each. She's dismissing a few hundred thousand dollars' worth of dresses with a flick of her eyes.

"You don't like them?" My voice is harsh.

Instantly, her eyes are like saucers, and she flinches in abject terror. I feel that burn of arousal that reminds me, yet

again, that I am a truly sick and terrible individual. My cock stirs in my pants.

“Yes, Master, I’m sorry, Master,” she whimpers. “I love them, Master. Thank you, Master.”

“Which one do you like best, Toy?” I snarl.

She hurries over to the rack, her eyes wide with fright. She begins carefully looking through them.

She picks one out, her hands shaking. “This one, Master. Thank you, Master. It’s beautiful, Master.” It’s black with a lacy fringe on it.

“Why, Toy?” I ask, with a nasty bite to my tone. “Why do you like that one best?”

“They’re all beautiful, Master.” She’s sobbing now, terrified of what I might do to her. “But this one looks like a flapper dress from the 1920s. I’ve always loved the style from that era.”

“You’ll wear it for dinner tonight.”

“Yes, Master! Thank you, Master.” She’s staring at the ground, gulping, trying not to make too much noise when she cries.

The sight makes my cock harden. I tell her to get on her knees.

She sinks down quickly, eagerly.

I unbutton my slacks and ram my cock down her throat so hard that she chokes and flails in panic. I hold her head still while she struggles to breathe, and make her suck me, then pull out when she’s only halfway done.

“You give lousy blow jobs,” I snarl at her, and the look on her face...it’s like I just murdered a puppy in front of her.

It’s not true. She gives amazing, world-class blow jobs. Her mouth is a national treasure.

I’m just angry that she wasn’t excited about the dresses I gave her. *Since when do I care about anyone else’s feelings? What the fuck is wrong with me these days?*

She starts crying.

She’s still crying when I make her turn around and get on her hands and knees right there on the floor. I quickly roll on a condom and shove my cock inside her without bothering to lube her up, and she cries out in pain as I tear her sensitive inner tissue. I fuck her hard and rough, ramming into her, and she’s wet within a minute, but still cringing and weeping. Her muscles are tense and clenched. I reach around and stroke her clit as I’m fucking her, until I feel that trembling in her core that tells me she’s close. Her clit swells with my attention as I force pleasure on her for my own sake rather than hers, and finally, her sheath convulses on my cock and she comes explosively. And she’s still crying.

For some reason—this has never happened to me before—I can’t come. I pull out of her and stalk out of the room without looking back. The sound of her sobs follows me down the hallway. I go to the parlor, where I fling myself into my chair and try to figure out why the hell I even care what my idiot brainless slave thinks about anything.

Yeah, I could punish her for not reacting to the dresses like I wanted her to, but what did I want her to do instead? Do I want her to lie to me and pretend she loves the dresses? Because she’s a lousy liar.

Her behavior confuses me. Just when I think that I've got the basics of human behavior figured out, someone throws me a curveball that leaves me annoyed and frustrated.

Take the dresses. They are perfect for her, I know that.

Why didn't they make her happy? Women like gifts. Women especially like gifts that are personalized. Gifts that show that you know what they like.

She should have been excited and grateful I bought her those dresses. Instead, she barely looked at them. She couldn't care less that I bought them. And I think...well, I was certainly offended. If I had feelings, I would say she'd hurt them.

Does that mean I have feelings now? And how would I be able to tell? It would be like a blind man regaining his sight and trying to identify the colors of the rainbow.

I settle back in my chair, wearily running through my daily security checks. Review the Blackthorne video feed. Read over the intel that my private investigator has gathered on the police who are investigating the disappearance of Toy and the security guard. I could take care of Sergeant Carter pretty easily; wife died of cancer, daughter ODeD, nobody to miss him, and it wouldn't be hard to stage a suicide. He seems to be the driving force behind the investigation. The detective who's assisting him on the investigation has a gambling problem; I could use it to either blackmail him or discredit him.

Heather is still missing, vanished without a trace. Something is definitely up there. My private investigator found out that when she quit the bagel shop, she didn't do it in person; she called it in. Did she vanish voluntarily?

Toy's face swims in front of me again, pushing aside all other thoughts. I picture her quick, indifferent glance at those

gowns I worked so hard to select, and I pick up a small statuette from my desk and hurl it across the room in an entirely uncharacteristic fit of anger. That isn't me. I am cold and calculating and controlled.

What the fuck is happening to me? What is happening to her?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

TOY

I think I've been here a couple of months now, but it could have been longer. Maybe three or four months?

I thought that changing for Master would make him happy, but I have failed somehow.

He has grown cold and withdrawn, and he says cruel, horrible things to me every day. I deserve them, but I also remember that he wasn't always like this. When I was less obedient, when I thought about escaping and fought back, there were moments of kindness. Now his words are sharper than knives and his looks wither my soul.

I'm very angry with myself for failing. I wonder what I could do differently. How I could be better.

I think I'm doing everything I can. I spend most of my time keeping my mind blank, just waiting for orders. I no longer worry about my own comfort or safety—the only thing that's important is pleasing Master.

I'm gratified by how much pain I can endure for him. Punishments that once would have had me panicked and screaming and begging, I now suffer through without a peep. I have come to crave the whipping and the paddling, because they give me a chance to prove my devotion. He doesn't seem

to notice how high my pain tolerance is now, which is devastating, because all I want to do is make him proud of me.

I accept that he's killed me. He lied to me when he said he wouldn't kill me. He killed Tamara. The girl who loved the smiles on people's faces, and coffeeshops, and books, and music; the girl who dreamed about someday making a difference...she's dead. I can't be myself anymore, because I can't stand to be locked up in that room alone anymore. I need Master. I am alone in the world without him. Sarah doesn't visit me in my head anymore, and neither does the dark tormenting voice that blamed me for destroying my mother.

I thought I was making a difference in the world, and now I know that I failed at that. I never touched a single soul out there.

I should have known. Didn't those lonely days in the group home teach me anything? A year of looking up hopefully every time a car pulled into the driveway, expecting my mother, and having my heart break every single time a stranger emerged. If my own mother didn't care about my existence, why would anybody else?

Freedom is pointless. Fighting is pointless. If Master freed me, where would I go? What difference would it make if I were free, with nobody to be happy at my return?

Master is the only thing in the universe that matters. He *is* the universe.

So I have to be Toy.

But that's not what he wants from me either.

When he gives me permission to ask him questions, I try to ask him questions that will make him happy, like, "How can I please you, Master?"

But that makes him angry.

He is withdrawing more and more.

And then it happens. In the bath in the morning, after he washes me, he hands me the cloth and tells me to wash *myself* between my legs. He no longer makes me beg him to kiss my pussy—he doesn't ask at all. He stops having sex with me.

A darkness fills me, a whispering terror of what's to come. Master has grown tired of me. He will kill me soon, and... replace me, maybe? *God help the next girl.*

That's a terrible thought, a treacherous thought. Master is good and Master gives pleasure and is merciful whenever I deserve it.

But I can't stop the thought. If I had the chance and could kill Master to save the next girl, would I?

Maybe.

Finally, after days and days go by, he leads me through a door that's never opened before, and I know it's the end. He's grown weary of me and he's going to kill me. I am not afraid, just numb and resigned. I glide behind him in a dream, wondering where I'll go after I die.

It will have to be somewhere better than this.

These rebellious thoughts are coming into my head more and more these days, and they are dangerous. Maybe that's why he's going to kill me. Because he can read my mind and he knows that my control is starting to slip.

It's starting to slip because of him. Because nothing I do is ever, ever good enough for him, because even complete surrender and submission has not satisfied him.

But when he takes me into a room, it's not what I expected. Visions of a butcher's table and a row of knives swam through my head...not this.

It's a room set up for martial arts and sparring. There are punching bags hanging from the walls. There are nunchucks and throwing stars and things I don't recognize.

He takes off my collar and ankle chains. He points to cubicles that hold clothing, and directs me to put on an outfit of baggy pants, a T-shirt, and sneakers.

"I'm going to teach you self-defense," he says to me. "Just think, if you get good enough someday, you could kill me and free yourself." There's a cruel, challenging glint in his gaze.

I'll never be that good, I think to myself in despair. And that's what he intended when he said it. My despair.

He's trying to make me angry.

"You may reply, Toy."

"Thank you, Master. I will never be that good, Master."

"True, unfortunately." There's an odd weariness lacing his voice. What does he mean by that? Does he want to die? Once we're dressed, he leads me over to the mat.

"The style of combat I'll be teaching you is Krav Maga. It means 'Contact Combat' in Hebrew. It was developed by a Jewish man during the rise of the Nazis, and meant to very quickly enable your average civilian to defend themselves in a street-fight. It's the primary self-defense system taught to the Israeli army, and due to its effectiveness, it's spread worldwide. Although there are elements of boxing in it, along with many other self-defense systems, it's not boxing. You're not going to stand there trading blows until you tire out or your opponent lands a hit that knocks you senseless. The

purpose of Krav Maga is to learn to quickly assess the threat, deliver a devastating strike, and get the hell away.”

I nod dully.

He begins teaching me some basic principles. I cautiously go through the motions, terrified that if I try too hard, if I actually hurt him or resist him, I will suffer the consequences. About twenty minutes in, he slaps me in the face so hard I stagger.

“You didn’t even try to block that!” he snaps at me. “If you don’t start putting some effort in, you’ll be strapped down hand and foot in your cell again, with a hood on your head. Is that what you want?”

Panic surges through me, lending me strength. Not the cell. Not the cell. I can’t go back there, ever. *Oh God. I’ll die.* Without a word of reply, I hook my foot behind his leg in an attempt at a take-down. He moves his leg out of the way and dances back, grinning. I freeze in terror and my heart leaps into my mouth. *Am I going back into my cell?* My mind starts racing, trying to come up with ways to make him kill me.

“Much better,” he says, his eyes glowing with malice. “During our training sessions, you may do your very best to hit me, knock me out, disable me in any way you can, without consequence.”

The rest of the session passes quickly. Afterward, he takes me into the bathroom and watches me while I bathe. He doesn’t even bother to climb in with me.

I know why he’s started the sparring sessions. It’s because I’ve become boring, and he wants to see at least some spark of life in me. But I have no other choice. If I fight him at all, his punishments are so terrible I can’t survive them.

We go into the room day after day, and spend a couple of hours in there instead of in his gym. The weeks drag by, and I get better each day, but I never come close to being able to disable him, and I never will. After all, he's the one teaching me. There's also the fact that I'm 5'5" and about a hundred and twenty pounds, and he's 6'3" and about two hundred pounds of solid muscle. And he's been training for a very, very long time. And he's just naturally faster, stronger, and more lethal than most people.

I enjoy the sparring, but I try not to. I don't want to feel anything anymore. I want to stay numb until the day I die.

I don't think it's going to be enough for him. It doesn't seem to reawaken his interest in me. And he said that he won't ever let me go, so what will happen if he just gets bored? Will he break his promise and kill me, or just lock me back in my prison cell and forget me, which would be worse?

He doesn't have sex with me anymore. I bathe myself while he watches. Often, his attention wanders as I'm bathing. And I miss the sex. I loved feeling his hands on me, his mouth. I loved his cock inside me. He was an amazing, fantastic lover, incredibly attentive. And I loved how much he loved being with me. The whole time that we were screwing, I felt powerful and sexy and desired. His body was incredibly responsive, he loved my touch and everything I did to him.

He gave me multiple orgasms every time we were together. Every single time. And now he acts as if he can't stand the sight of me.

I keep practicing my breathing sessions every day in case someday he wants me to suck his cock again, but he never does.

One day, as I'm sitting in the lounge, wearing the good collar and the good ankle chains and staring at books I'll never read, he strolls in. I glance up at him quickly. He's so heartbreakingly beautiful. I love to look at him, to caress the sculpted planes of his face with my eyes. I'm not allowed to touch him with my hands.

"I have to leave overnight, Toy," he says. I freeze. He hasn't done that since I can remember. What will it mean for me?

"Yes, Master," I whisper.

"I can leave you in your cell, or I can chain you in the playroom, Toy. Which one do you prefer?"

My heart constricts with panic. *Not the cell. The darkness, the dank smell, the endless days, my screams echoing off the walls...*

"In the playroom, Master."

He scowls at me.

"Are you going to thank me for letting you have a choice, Toy?"

I hunch my shoulders defensively. "You punish me for speaking to you without permission, Master. I am not allowed to thank you unless you request it."

His gaze flickers in annoyance. But that was Master's rule! I am obeying his rules!

Nothing I do satisfies him. I feel a surge of frustration, and I stare at the floor to hide my face in case he notices. But he doesn't. Maybe he doesn't care anymore.

Silently, he leads me to the playroom and chains me up by a grate in the floor.

“Elizabeth will bring your food, Toy.”

“Thank you, Master.”

His cold graze travels over me, icing my skin. “I could leave you with entertainment, but I think it’s a good time to remind you of the fact that the only pleasure in your life comes from me. If I am not here, you don’t deserve any pleasure. My absence equals pain.” And he takes off the good collar and returns a minute later with the very thick collar, which I deserve because I have failed to make my master happy. He wraps it around my neck and fastens it.

He also sets down a roll of toilet paper and wipes next to me, and a blanket and pillow. Master is very kind. He did not have to give me those things. It is important for me to think about how good Master is to me.

He leaves with a look of annoyance pinching his perfect brow. He shuts the door behind him, and I am alone in a room full of whips and dildos, staring at the white walls.

I look at the toilet paper and wipes and the blanket and pillow. I feel the thick, choking collar which will force me to stare straight ahead until Master chooses to take it off me. My neck and shoulders and back will become cramped and painful, and soon I will be able to think of nothing else.

I am failing to feel grateful. I can’t make myself do it.

For the first time in a long time, I am starting to feel something other than a desperate desire to please him.

I feel angry.

I gave up everything.

I sacrificed my identity. My dreams. My personality. Everything to keep him happy.

And now he's mad at me, disappointed with me, for following the rules that he created.

I struggle to regain the safe dullness that I've felt for the last...weeks, months? And I'm sick at the thought of what will happen to me when I fail.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JOSHUA

A sour brew of frustration eats at my gut as I head to New York.

The police contacted my lawyer and asked me to take a lie detector test after all. It's a waste of my time, but if I refuse, it will look suspicious, so I just need to do it and get it the hell over with.

And there's a public charity auction tonight that I promised ages ago to attend. I contributed a pre-Raphaelite sketch. I could beg off, but at this point, with the police investigating me and aware that I haven't been staying in my penthouse, I am afraid that might look suspicious.

So I will stop off at my empty penthouse suite and don a tuxedo. Then I will go rub shoulders with a bunch of boring ass-kissers for a couple of hours, while I mentally go through the steps of field dressing them and wrapping their parts in butcher's paper and mailing them to their families. I find these creative visualization exercises to be very soothing.

In the morning, my lawyer and I will go to the police station to do the lie detector test.

I'm curious why the police are pushing for this now. Has someone given them new information, since Sergeant Carter

last spoke to me?

I am still completely in the dark about who's behind all of this. Someone has clearly infiltrated my company, if they know that I fired Toy. And that person knows the address of my penthouse apartment and knows that I haven't been staying there.

I'm also worried about leaving the house unguarded at this point.

There shouldn't be any reason to worry. I rebuilt my entire alarm system. And I have the solution to any invasion of my property by law enforcement, or anyone else who could pose a danger to me. Just blow it the fuck up. It's only money, right?

And yet, somewhere deep inside me, I don't know if I would ever do that. Could I kill Toy if I had to? I'm not sure.

This is bad. This is very, very bad.

I'm checking the video feeds at Blackthorne daily now—but he's always there. It's not *him*. They keep him sedated and calm and very, very securely locked up, because Dr. Barnard knows what would happen if they fail, and not just to himself and his family. Their prisoner is the only man who's as vicious, cunning and ruthless as me, and he can never set foot outside those walls again. People would die—innocent people, not just predators. That isn't a problem for me, but Dr. Barnard, like most people, has a conscience, and it would weigh heavily on him.

I should fly out to California to check on him one of these days, but I hate to leave Toy alone for that long.

The smart thing to do would be to run, go to ground until I can solve this mystery. I could even take Toy and Elizabeth with me. I own property overseas, and I have fake identities

set up in case I ever need them. I am a very organized psychopath who plans ahead.

But my stubborn pride won't let me do this. Only cowards run. My father taught me that. A lot of his "wisdom" was just self-serving bullshit, but not all of it. At the same time that he was torturing me, he was very painfully driving home necessary lessons in survival—not just of the body, but of the self. Better to die as the man that I am than to live cowering or submitting to another.

I will not flee from some nameless chickenshit *phantom* who won't even meet me on the field of battle.

What I will do is find him and fucking force him to fight me before I demonstrate the definition of the word "agony".

He—or she, possibly—has snatched far too much power from me already. All hunts are on hold until I can figure out what I'm up against, and that is not acceptable. I'm feeling the need to kill again, and it's adding to my general irritability.

The situation with Toy bothers me even more than my nameless adversary, though. She brought so much satisfaction to my life when I first captured her. She was a better high than any drug. I woke up excited for what every single day brought to me—and now that's gone, and life feels dull and flat again.

She does everything I tell her to, and it just pisses me off.

I want her to have some spark of personality. No, more than that – I want her to fight me.

But she's afraid that if she does, I'll beat it out of her.

And she's right.

I have never been able to tolerate defiance. The rules of survival were beaten into me early on. Whipped, burned,

stabbed, punched, kicked into me. I am a god. I am a king. I rule absolutely or not at all. These are the rules I've established with Toy. She may not defy me in any way.

But I also don't like this new thing I've created.

It's a situation I've never encountered before—a dilemma without apparent solution.

I am always able to compartmentalize, though. I am on my best behavior when I arrive at the Mid-town Museum for the auction that evening.

The red carpet laps like a bloody tongue down the marble steps. Flashbulbs explode like supernovas, and photographers swarm and churn behind the velvet ropes, howling questions at me as I stride past them. "Joshua, no date tonight?" "Joshua, are you seeing anybody these days?"

I just flash an enigmatic smile at them. If only they knew the answer to that question.

Yes, I'm seeing someone exclusively. I kidnapped her and beat her name and her identity right out of her. She's chained up in my torture palace right now, with a thick collar squeezing her pretty white neck and yesterday's whip-marks fresh on her ass.

That thought brings a genuine smile to my face. I truly enjoy manipulating people, choosing what they will think and what they will believe. It's more fun than a game of Cards Against Humanity. I've presented this magnificent façade, and the paparazzi have swallowed it whole and are begging for more, please.

It occurs to me that in the past, I would have arranged for a beautiful socialite to accompany me to the auction. I wouldn't have had sex with her, because I only had sex with women

who were blindfolded and ignorant of my identity, but being seen with models and starlets was good for my image. I probably should have done that for tonight. I can't believe it slipped my mind. Then again, the thought of another woman touching me all night long makes me murderous, so it's just as well.

When I get inside, all the glitterati are drifting among the exhibits, sipping cocktails and preening for the cameras.

As the night drags on, a steady stream of women find ways to bump into me, rub up against me, and I go rigid with disgust. My cordial mask almost slips several times. I haven't had sex in weeks now, but I find myself oddly faithful to Toy. I will find a way to regain that spark again, and I will fuck her raw when I do.

I am at the bar, looking over their inferior selection of Bordeaux, when someone taps my shoulder hard.

I glance down in my annoyance, but it's not another gold-digger with a hungry crotch. It's Sergeant Carter. I hadn't noticed how much shorter than me he was, until now. He can't be more than 5'8". He's stuffed into an ill-fitting tux, and his eyes are bloodshot. He doesn't reek of alcohol, though, so it's not the demon rum that has him looking so disheveled; something else is haunting him, eating away at his soul.

I smile benevolently at him. "You don't look well, Sergeant. Having trouble sleeping?"

He fixes his gaze on me. "I know what you are, Joshua Smith."

This should be fun. "Oh, and what is that, exactly?"

"A fraud with a phony identity and a dicey past. A man who makes the people close to him disappear." His Brooklyn

accent drips with loathing.

“And you felt that it was so important that you relay your insignificant little opinions that you needed to come harass me tonight? Because we already have an appointment tomorrow morning.” I look him up and down. “Or perhaps you came to me for advice on how to dress. Here it is. Burn that abomination you’ve rented and stop trying to mingle where you don’t belong.”

He smiles, showing even white teeth. “I came so I could make a note of who you go home with tonight. So when she disappears too, we can add that to our list.”

I manufacture a cold smile. I incline my head toward the Police Commissioner, who flashes me a smile and waves at me. I’m a generous contributor to the Police Officers’ Benevolent Society.

Then I return my attention to Carter. “Do you enjoy your job, Sergeant?”

He’s not intimidated in the slightest. He meets my gaze steadily, which is more than most men are capable of. “Not if it means being hamstrung by rules and regulations while girls are dying.”

“There’s nothing more tedious than a crusader chasing after a lost cause.” I stifle a yawn and let my gaze wander the crowd before favoring him with a cruel, calculating smile. “Do you think if you can find that missing girl, it will make you feel better about how you failed your own daughter?”

To his credit, he doesn’t flinch or curse or blubber. He just looks at me with amusement and contempt. “You know the worst kind of man to make an enemy of? A man who has nothing to lose. I’ve watched rich assholes like you get away

with shit for far too long. My wife died of cancer because her boss didn't clean up the asbestos in her workplace, and he's living in Bermuda right now, swimming dick-deep in whores. My Molly died because she was partying with some rich little piece of shit who didn't call an ambulance because he didn't want daddy to cut off his allowance. He walked away scot-free, and you think I care about losing my job? Please."

His face is flushing redder and redder, and sweat beads on his forehead. "And no, I don't think I'll find Tamara Bennett, or what's left of her. Or her neighbor Heather Abelard, for that matter." So he knows about Heather's disappearance too—and thinks I'm responsible for the disappearances of two girls. His hazel eyes fix on me. "But if I could take out the person who killed her, I could spare more women from suffering the same fate."

Oh, good. Just what I need right now.

It's too soon to tell if he's going to prove to be mildly annoying or an interesting challenge.

"I'm fascinated by how your mind works, Sergeant. I'd love to hear more of your thoughts. Perhaps I should come visit you on Pennyroyal Street, sometime soon, to continue this discussion?" Yes, I made sure I knew where he lived.

"Apartment 3B," he says without flinching. "Looking forward to it."

He meets my gaze and refuses to drop it, until someone walks up and taps me on the shoulder. I incline my head politely. "Until we meet again."

Carter glowers at me, then sidles away, sliding through the crowd. Manhattan's upper crust scowl and move away so he

won't rub up against them. He stinks of the lower classes. Poor man. He's very much out of his league here.

I could still stage his suicide, but that would be discourteous under the circumstances. Unlike my little phantom texter, Sergeant Carter challenged me like a man—openly. He threw down a gauntlet. Only a weakling with no concept of the laws of chivalry would kill him or get him fired. I will let this game play out however it is meant to.

A little while later, I've returned to the bar and am about to order the least offensive of their Bordeaux selection when a slender blonde woman with a bony chest slides up next to me.

“Joshua Smith,” she slurs, and the sickly-sweet scent of half a bottle of bargain-basement perfume mingles with the rum and coke reeking from her pores. Her hair is bleached platinum blonde and hot-rolled into perfect waves. “I don't think we've been introduced.”

“Yes, let's keep it that way.” I turn away.

“I'm Tiffany. And I'm very friendly.” She seizes my hand and tries to put it on her silicone-enhanced left tit. I grab her wrist and hold it crushingly hard. She yelps in pain as I rearrange the muscles in my face and drop my mask. I let her see the look in my eyes—the one I show to my prey right before the knife descends.

“I wouldn't touch you if my cock was wearing a full hazmat suit. Touch me again and you'll withdraw a bleeding stump.” I release her wrist, and she's crying as she scurries off. That cheers me up considerably.

I lean against the bar and close my eyes and think of Toy. Sweet, broken Toy. How will I ever fix her?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Toy

Master is gone all night and most of the next day. When he enters the playroom, I can see he's furious. I've never seen him quite like this before. That icy mask of his rarely slips, and when it does, when he's mad at me, it's still a cold, controlled kind of anger.

But today he comes boiling through the door, eyes blazing with rage. I hold as still as possible, so panicked that my breath sticks in my throat. He seems to be moving in manic fast-motion.

He stalks over to me and practically rips my collar off. Then his hands close around my throat and he pulls me to my feet. I'm gurgling in panic; I can't breathe, and my hands flail and slap at his wrists. Instinctively, I try the Krav Maga technique that he's taught me. I bring my hands down on the insides of his elbows, and my knee comes up toward his groin. He twists away easily.

He eases up a little bit, enough that I can breathe.

"Your technique still sucks, Toy. Fucking useless at everything, aren't you?"

I start to cry. “Yes, Master, I’m useless. I’m sorry, Master.” I would die right now for one kind word. I’d die happy.

“Somebody is looking for you, Toy,” he snarls. “Someone has been bombarding the fucking press with messages about you and implying that *I’m* behind your disappearance. The police interrogated me for hours today. They ambushed me with all kinds of information that they shouldn’t have access to. I was forced to do a press conference, upping the reward for information leading to your return. Who knows that you went back to pick up your purse that night? Who would have that kind of information? Other than your former neighbor, who could be behind this? I know it’s not her, because she never reported you missing.”

A shock wave rolls over me and my knees give out. He hauls me to my feet, and I stand there for a moment as the implication of what he just said floods my body with light and warmth.

Somebody cares about me. I am not invisible. I am not worthless like Master tells me over and over.

But who? If nobody reported me missing in the first place, why would they suddenly be after me now? “I don’t know who would look for me, Master. I have nothing and nobody.”

He’s staring straight into my eyes. Anger flickers over his face. “You have me. And I am everything.”

I bob my head as much as I am able with his hands closed around my throat. “Yes, Master.”

“The person who did this has been sending anonymous emails to both the police and the newspapers. And they’ve been naming me as a suspect. You must know who it is.”

“Heather was my only friend!” I protest weakly. “I mean, I thought she was my friend.”

“Somebody at the place where you volunteered?”

“Nobody that I know of, Master. If they didn’t report me missing after a month, why would they start now? Master?”

The thought of that place... Tears start running down my face and I can’t stop crying. Oh God, I miss my old life. That’s why I never think of it, because it will sap the last bit of my strength and it won’t matter because no matter how miserable I am, there’s nothing I can do to escape this.

“Stop crying,” he snarls. “Right fucking now.”

“I c-c-can’t.” I’m having some kind of breakdown. I can’t remember how to breathe. I’m shaking so hard I’m almost convulsing. Images of the people back at the shelter flood my mind, summoning up a drenching wave of misery.

“You c-c-can’t?” he mocks me, and throws me to the floor. I curl up and hug my knees and wail, rocking back and forth.

He goes down on his knees next to me, grabs my hair and yanks my head up. “Who?” he screams. Who is this angry man? He never used to lose control like this. “Who did you tell about me?”

“Only Heather!” I cry. “I swear, Master, I swear!” Tears and snot run down my face, and I’m gulping in panic because I can’t make him happy but I must make him happy.

He looks down at me in disgust. “Wash your face.”

He uncuffs me and storms toward the door. He doesn’t even bother to put the collar or the ankle cuffs on me, he’s so angry.

Then he pauses in the doorway and looks back at me with a great weariness on his face.

“Your technique when I choked you, it was good,” he says. “It would have worked on anyone but me. You’ve gotten much better, very quickly. You’re actually a natural.”

He waits expectantly.

“Thank you, Master,” I whisper, and as he walks away, the thought springs unbidden into my head. *Fuck yourself up the ass with a nail-studded baseball bat, Joshua Smith.*

How dare he lie to me just to make me feel badly, when I’m spending every waking second trying to please him? How dare he expect me to continue living like this, when there’s no reward, no acknowledgment, ever? Hearing him admit that he lied to me about my technique makes me so angry I want to cut his throat and watch him bleed out.

And wait, wait, wait...something else...

My mind frantically picks through everything he just said.

“Upping the reward for your safe return...” If nobody knew I was missing, then why would there be a reward in the first place? Master certainly wouldn’t have made it public and offered a reward unless someone had come looking for me.

Wild fury seizes me. He lied to me. That lie was worse than anything else he’s ever done to me. He lied to me knowing how I was abandoned by my own mother and how that haunted me with self-loathing. His lie broke my heart, made me feel worthless, made me feel ugly and invisible.

Something in me snaps. I can’t submit anymore. It’s the beginning of the end for me, and I can’t even wrap my head around what that will mean.

I stagger off to the bathroom to wash my face.

As I'm walking down the hall, trembling with fury, it hits me.

Mark.

The man in the doorway.

There's a strong possibility it's him. He knew where I was going. He talked to me about work sometimes. He used to work in computer security.

Fear fills me.

I am terrible at lying to Master... No, fuck that, to Joshua Smith.

He can see right through me. Just by looking at me, he'll see that I'm trying to hide something from him. And he'll torture me until I talk. I won't be able to help myself. He's a one-man Spanish Inquisition.

There is only one way to save Mark. And now that I think of it, one way to save myself.

I look in the mirror. *I am Tamara Bennett.* I have been kidnapped by Joshua Smith, who tried to break me and make me into something I'm not, but he failed.

I am at peace.

Joshua hurt me horribly when he told me that nobody was looking for me. Now I know the truth. There's at least one person out there who cares, and that is enough. And that is worth dying for. This nightmare is about to end. I will finally float free away from here.

I start running the water in the bath. I fill it up with bubbles so he won't see. The razor that he uses to shave my

pussy is in a drawer with cans of lather and washcloths; I hide it in a cloth and carry it to the tub.

He finally got sloppy. My plan worked. I'm just not escaping the way I'd planned. But this will do.

I slash my wrist under the water, hunching over so the camera won't see the look on my face. It hurts way more than I expected. It's searing agony down my wrist, but the thought of giving Mark up to Joshua hurts worse.

Time ticks by, and I start to slide into oblivion. Warm, delicious lassitude swallows me, and I float away to freedom.

I wake up to horror.

Because I'm not dead.

My wrist is throbbing, and I am restrained hand and foot on a bed.

Joshua is looking down at me, his face twisted with rage.

He says one thing.

“Why?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

TOY

Master is gone all night and most of the next day. When he enters the playroom, I can see he's furious. I've never seen him quite like this before. That icy mask of his rarely slips, and when it does, when he's mad at me, it's still a cold, controlled kind of anger.

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I wake up to horror.

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Joshua is looking down at me, his face twisted with rage.

He says one thing.

“Why?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

TAMARA

Panic floods my body, and I involuntarily jerk against the chains, then pull myself back.

There is only one way to stop him from interrogating me and figuring out the truth. I have to distract him by going on the offensive.

“Fuck you, asshole!” I scream at him. “You’re not my master, Joshua Smith, you’re a fucking crazy loser sack of shit! I hate being here, and I’d rather die than spend one more second with you. This isn’t living. This is Hell!”

He glares down at me, face flushing with fury, but for some reason I’m not afraid.

“You think this is Hell, you spoiled bitch?” he shouts at me. “Hell is watching your father kill your brothers one by one and waiting for your turn! Hell is watching your father bury your twin brother alive! Hell is your very first memories being of hearing your mother scream while your father rapes her up the ass! Hell is watching your daddy rape little girls and being forced to jerk off to it if you want to live another day! Hell is being starved, and burned, and cut, and walking barefoot through the snow all winter long!”

“Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?” I laugh, a harsh, horrible sound. “I’m fucking glad you suffered. I wish you’d suffered more. I wish your father had finished the job.” His eyes widen in surprise. He wasn’t expecting that from passive little Toy, or compassionate, caring Tamara, but I’m not either of those anymore. My pain and desperation have forged something new. “You took everything away from me. You destroyed my life! I don’t care if this is a gilded cage, it’s a goddamn cage, you asshole, you psycho, you nut job, and you make me sick!”

“I don’t make you sick,” he says, tightly controlled fury dripping from every word. “I make you come. I make you beg for it.”

“Yes, you had to *make* me beg for it.” I pour all my pent-up loathing and contempt into my hateful glower. “I didn’t do it on my own. I never would have. Just kill me and get it over with, you scum-licking pig, because I am Tamara Bennett, and I will end your disgusting life or die trying. I am not Toy, I was never Toy, and I never will be. You fucking failed at breaking me, like you fail at life, you piece of shit.”

Instead of answering, he turns and storms out of the room.

As soon as he’s out the door, I hear him shouting. No, roaring. An animal sound of pure fury. I hear glass breaking and a door slam repeatedly.

I’ve made the iceman lose control.

I smile to myself.

I shut my eyes and remember that I’m Tamara again. It feels so good to be Tamara.

With nothing else to do, I start reciting lessons in my head. Algebra. I invent algebra problems in my head and solve them.

Then I move on to history. I start to recreate history classes from high school and quiz myself.

After a few hours, I realize that I'm crying, but I don't feel sad. I feel weak and dizzy and I'm floating on a strange kind of high.

My kidnapper *Joshua Smith* comes back into the room.

"Why are you crying and laughing at the same time?" he demands.

Was I laughing? So many feelings are flooding my body that I don't know what to do with them.

I look at him haughtily. "You'd have to be human to understand, Joshua dick-sucking piece-of-crap Smith. And by the way? You're a liar, you little turd-breath asshole. You lied about nobody reporting me missing. You know why you had to lie? Because you're fucking weak!"

He lashes out and slaps me, and my ears ring, and I laugh and laugh, spiraling up into hysteria. "Oh my God. My God. Thank you for proving my point, wussy girl. I call you weak and it hurts your sad little feelings, and you respond like a puppet because I jerked your string. You just slapped a woman half your size who's chained to a bed! You're so brave, *Joshua!* Did that make you feel good about yourself? Are you going to come now?"

Just fucking kill me already. What do I have to say to push him over the edge?

"Fuck this," he growls. He undoes my cuffs. He scoops me up and throws me over his shoulder and carries me down the hall, down the stairs, heading for my cell.

"You don't deserve a nice clean room. You'll stay down here, cuffed hand and foot, in the dark. Enjoy your new life."

“Good,” I spit at him. “I don’t ever want to see your face again, because you make me sick.”



Joshua

A week goes by, and I miss her every single day.

All day long, thoughts of her crawl through my head. I’m trying to orchestrate a takeover of a string of failing hotels, and I can’t think straight enough to concentrate on it.

Not only that, she’s not breaking this time. I don’t understand it. She talks to herself all day long, reciting what sound like classroom lessons. She looks up at the camera and laughs at me and insults me in every way possible, mocking my sexual skills, my general adequacy as a man, my need to make up lies to control her. She gloats about how many times she faked orgasms. Now, there I know she’s lying, because I felt her body clench around my cock and measured her panting breaths, felt her rapidly hammering heart as if it were my own.

And yet it actually—I have to admit this—on some level, it hurts my feelings. Feelings I didn’t know I had.

I sit in wonder at this strange, unrecognizable thing I’m becoming.

She hasn’t made me into a good man. I’m never going to let her free, and I still want to kill. Need to kill. If I weren’t worried about the phantom who’s nibbling at the edges of my life, I’d go out and kill someone new today. Maybe the judge. That would be fun. I’d enjoy it.

So if I’m not the old me, and I’m not a good man, what am I?

I play through various tortures in my head, imagining scenarios that might make Toy sorry she ever defied me. But it all feels hollow.

I thought I could rewrite her, and I failed. I believed that the minds of all prey were the same, that they could be permanently reshaped in any way I chose, given the appropriate stimuli or lack of stimuli. But the scrappy little fighter was lurking under the surface the entire time. I can torture her into obeying me, but I can never take away her free will.

One day, when Elizabeth goes downstairs with Toy's daily gruel, Toy starts in on her. She mocks her, calls her old and ugly. "Joshua will never love you, you sour-smelling old bitch. Your twat reeks like a tuna sandwich someone left in the sun for a week. Do you see the way he tries not to breathe when you come into the room? It's fucking hilarious."

Elizabeth lets out a guttural howl and throws the bowl of gruel at Toy's face. Toy just laughs at her and resumes her mockery. "Did you actually think he'd ever put his dick in that dried up snatch of yours? You dream about it all night long, don't you? Do you touch yourself when you think of him?"

Her cruelty is breath-taking. Highly impressive. Worthy of *me*. Where did it come from?

She was never like that before. Can people actually change their essential nature?

Is that what's happening to me?

Elizabeth flashes a frantic look at the camera on the ceiling, and her face crumples in mortification. She knows I heard every word Toy just said. She runs out of the room. She doesn't come to me for new instructions, or for punishment for

throwing the gruel. She runs straight to her room, and I hear the shower turning on.

She's washing herself because she believed Toy, because she thinks she smells bad. Toy hurt her, which means I should punish Toy, but how? If pain and threats of death won't move her, what will?

I watch Toy lying there in bed with the gruel slowly drying on her face. That drives me crazy. I don't want Toy to be dirty. Elizabeth lets her up to use the toilet exactly three times a day, and she doesn't get to wash herself afterward. I can feel the filth crawling on Toy's skin as if it were my own, and it makes me itch. Phantom stench drifts into my nostrils, roiling my stomach and putting me off my food.

I let the day drift by. When Elizabeth never comes to my office, I go find her in her room.

It's the room of a grade-school girl. Her walls are crowded with framed pictures of fairy-tale couples. Cinderella, Rapunzel, Snow White—all of them pictured gazing adoringly at their princes. I used to think that she decorated her room that way because she was a case of arrested development—she stopped maturing emotionally after my father kidnapped her and raped her.

Encased in the amber of eternal childhood.

Now I realize that those fairy-tale couples represent her impossible dream: her and me. How could I never have noticed? Oh, right, because psychopaths lack empathy.

“Elizabeth! What the hell are you doing in here?” I snap.

She scoots back on her bed with the Ariel comforter and cringes away from me, refusing to meet my eyes. Her disobedience is a slap to my face.

“Look at me, you fucking moron,” I snarl at her. She flinches and makes horrible sobbing noises. I force myself to temper the anger in my voice.

“Toy was lying to you. You don’t smell bad. You do a very good job for me. You are very useful to me. Don’t listen to anything she says. She’s angry at me and taking it out on you. Her words are meaningless. All right?”

Elizabeth manages a dejected, miserable nod.

Then she looks at me hopefully and draws her finger across her throat.

She wants me to kill Toy. She has never before, in her life, requested anything from me, and this is what she asks?

That bizarre protectiveness flares up in me. I’ve committed such evil acts against Toy that any sane person would say I should be flayed alive, but if anyone else threatens her, I want to dismember them. It takes everything I’ve got to keep my voice steady. “I am not going to kill her. And you are not to harm her, or I will set you on fire and watch you burn. You will go down there tonight and wash her face off with a cloth and give her dinner.”

I could, of course, go downstairs myself, but I know Toy hates Elizabeth, so this is part of my punishment.

Elizabeth shakes her head frantically. She mouths, “Please.” She’s never refused an order from me before. In the past, she never would have dreamed of it.

I feel as if my world is crumbling away from me. I have to regain control. I just gave Elizabeth an order, and I have to make her follow it. My very identity depends on it. *You’re the king, or you’re nothing.*

I walk over to her calmly as she shrinks in on herself, trying to get smaller and smaller. I grab her by the hair and pull her off her bed, dropping her to the floor. She lands with a squawk.

“You will go down there, and you will feed her and wash her face, or you are no longer useful to me. And don’t ever refuse an order again.” I storm out of the room without waiting for an answer, and the sound of her hoarse, horrible sobbing makes me want to vomit.

No, whatever Toy has done to me, she has not turned me decent.

That evening, when Elizabeth goes down to feed Toy, I watch closely. The minute Elizabeth walks through the door, Toy lashes right into her.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the sad little old maid come to feed me. What does it feel like knowing your sour snatch makes Joshua want to puke? Did you like listening to him rape me? Did it get you off?”

Rape her? I never raped her. Damn, that pisses me off.

Elizabeth’s shoulders shake, and she starts to shrink in on herself.

“Your entire life is dedicated to a man who will never love you. He’s got the sex drive of a rutting dog, and how many times has he fucked you? I’m guessing never. Pretty sad, Elizabitch. He’d rather beat off than fuck you. Want me to be quiet? Why don’t you just kill me, Elizabitch, and you’ll finally have him all to yourself? Until he grabs the next one, of course. Come on, you foul old bitch! Choke me out right now—you know you want to!”

Elizabeth drops the bowl of gruel on the floor and turns and runs out of the room, screaming like a banshee.

Fucking hell.

Fury lifts me from my chair before I even realize that I've stood. I stalk out of my office, muscles coiled with rage.

This ends now. One way or the other.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JOSHUA

Toy doesn't even bother to look angry or scared when I come in. She just looks amused. She smells so bad that I have to breathe through my mouth, and her face is crusted with dried gruel, but she looks at me as if I'm the one who's disgusting. As if I'm dogshit on her shoe.

“Well, well, if it isn't the mighty Joshua bitch-face Smith himself, come down from on high.” Her voice cracks; she hasn't had anything to drink all day.

“Careful,” I snap. “You don't know what I've got planned for you, Toy.”

“Oh, let's go with Tamara. Come on, Joshua shithead Smith, you're not still fooling yourself into thinking you're my master, are you?”

“You will speak to me with respect or I'll bring out the skinning knives.” Why the fuck am I threatening her with something I'm not going to do? That's a rookie mistake. It's the kind of thing mothers do with their toddlers.

And she doesn't flinch. There's not even a flicker of fear in her eyes, either because she doesn't believe me or because she doesn't care anymore.

“Bring it,” she taunts me.

Without a word, I walk over and unchain each cuff. I pull her to her feet.

She flashes me a hideous grin. Gruel crumbles and falls from her face. “Is this the part where you tell me how much I stink, and you think I should cry and apologize, even though you’re the one who chained me up down here and didn’t let me shower?” Her breath reeks with every word. And yet I’m strangely aroused.

“Please, keep talking.” I twist my hand in her hair, painfully hard, and march her out of the room.

“Since you asked so nicely, Joshua Smith.” Her voice is raspy as we reach the foot of the stairs. “Where’s Elizabitch? Crying in her room? Trying to wash her twat clean enough that you’ll want to fuck her? She reeked of so much perfume and soap that it made my eyes water when she came down to feed me.”

Cold fury frosts my soul. I slam her up against a wall. Toy looks up at me with a sneer twisting her lips.

“Listen the fuck up.” There’s murder in my eyes. “You will stop attacking Elizabeth. She is extremely loyal to me, and I protect what’s mine.”

“I break what’s yours. I think I’m doing a pretty good job with her, wouldn’t you say?”

I take another tack. “You like to pretend that you’re compassionate, right? Well, spare some for her. She is a little girl who’s never grown up. My father broke into her trailer home, killed her parents in front of her, and raped her that same night, when she was twelve. That went on for a year. He used her whenever he’d hurt my mother too badly. Ripped open every hole, made her bleed. Elizabeth suffered internal

injuries so bad that she's permanently scarred inside. I brought her out of that Hell, and she depends on me for protection. She is the only person in my life who's ever actually cared about me. So I will not tolerate you attacking her."

She just meets my gaze steadily, without an ounce of fear. Grown men would be pissing themselves at this point, but not my Toy.

"She only cares about you because she's fucked in the head. She's a selfish cow who's helping to keep another human being prisoner, and therefore she's every bit as much my enemy as you are. Given the first opportunity, I will kill her. And you. God, I hope it's both of you. Why are you wasting so much time on me? Do you think you can make me back into Toy again? Even you can't be that stupid."

Enraged, I spin her around and bend her arm up behind her back hard enough to make her scream. I keep bending it. "Say you're sorry and call me master!"

"Eat shit and die, motherfucker! Ahhhh!" She screams in pain, but she won't obey my orders. She would rather let me break her arm.

And I don't want to break her.

I ease up a little bit and force her up the stairs and into the bathroom. I have been defeated, for the moment. I need to regroup and figure out how to regain control of this situation. But first I need to get that godawful stink off her.

"Get in. No bath. Shower."

She gives me a flat, cold look.

Before she gets in, she peels off the bandage that Elizabeth has changed for her every day. It reveals a raw, red line going vertically up her arm, tracing the path of her cephalic vein, and

a shiver of anger burns through me. The idea of Toy wanting to leave me in any way, escaping by killing herself, really pisses me off.

Hot water streams over her and streaks through the filth coating her slim body. She's tense and remote, staring at the tile wall in front of her, no longer desperately seeking direction from me with her pleading gaze. I stand there, watching her slowly soap herself off, and I realize that my cock is rock hard and desire is flooding through me. This girl, this is the one who turns me on.

The broken, vacant eyed, fearful slave who crawled for me? She made me sick.

Toy tips back her head and opens her mouth, letting the warm water rush in, drinking it thirstily. I stare at her parted lips and imagine them wrapped around my cock. Except now I realize that there's a real risk she'd bite my dick right off.

After the shower, I have her dress in cotton pants, t-shirt, and bra. I always keep half a dozen outfits for her in the bathroom.

I put the short chains on her ankles, out of spite. I reach for the thick collar. She looks at me. "Put that on me, and I won't eat. You can shove a tube down my throat and force me, blah blah blah, big man that you are, but sooner or later, you're going to get bored with me as a vegetable, and you'll just fucking end this shit-show that's my life. Now, where are those skinning knives you promised me?"

I can't let her continue to defy me like this, so I give her an out. "You don't want the collar? Get down on the floor and kiss my feet."

She stares at me for a long moment, too long, then lifts one shoulder in a casual, insolent shrug, moving reasonably quickly. She presses her lips against each foot then sits up. The expression on her face is bored, and she didn't say, "Yes, Master."

I still don't know what I'm going to do about this, but I realize that I don't have to decide right away. This is a new experience, and I crave new experiences, don't I? I can learn from this. I can stop anytime I want to. I can change directions. I can bend her to my will again when I choose, but right now, I have a front-row seat to a show featuring a facet of human behavior that is brand-new to me. So I will study and learn, and I will win in the end.

At least that's what I tell myself.

I bring her into the playroom and chain her up with her hands over her head, hauling her up until she's on her tiptoes. Then I leave to fetch us some dinner, which Elizabeth prepared earlier. Part of me is hoping that leaving her dangling in the playroom like that will psych her out and weaken her, but I don't think it will have the effect I want.

And indeed, when I return and lower her to the ground, she just curses at me.

I take her to the table, and she glances down at it with a flicker of contempt. I've set the table with paper plates and plastic cutlery and plastic cups, so she can't use anything to hurt herself.

She settles down, her expression pinched with disgust, and I examine this strange new creature curiously. What do I want from her?

I am part furious, part fascinated.

I will try a different approach tonight.

“I have a problem at work, Toy,” I tell her.

A frown puckers her forehead. “That’s not my name.”

“That’s what I’m going to fucking well call you, and you will answer to it.” I’ve let things go too far. I’ve got to regain some control. I’m still working out the new rules of our existence in my head, but I will not tolerate this continued disrespect.

“So, back to my problem at work, Toy.”

She looks at me as if I’ve grown antennae. Complete bafflement. “Tamara. And why are you telling me about it?”

Don’t people who live together have conversations about their problems and help each other solve them? That’s what happens in books and on television shows. I try to explain it patiently. “You understand what makes people tick. I don’t. So you can help me with this situation.”

She rolls her eyes and shoves a bite of filet mignon into her mouth. “Well, I’m just riveted, *Joshua*. What is your problem at work?”

“My CFO’s husband died unexpectedly of a heart attack ten days ago. It is affecting her work product.”

“Oh.” Understanding dawns on her face, and she nods, and I see a glimpse of the old Tamara. “You want to help her through this. Well, first of all, I’d give her at least a month’s paid leave, maybe two. And of course, make sure she knows about all the counseling options that are available to her, but I’m sure you already have. And then— What?” She stops, because she sees the look of annoyance on my face.

Why doesn't she get it? "I need to know the most efficient way to fire her, to reduce the chance that she will file a lawsuit against my company, and also how to ensure that her replacement doesn't pull the same crap."

Her face wrinkles in horror and disgust. For some reason, that makes me angry. Why? I've never cared what anybody thought of me.

"You're going to fire a woman because she's sad her husband died?"

Why are prey so stupid? Do I need to spell it out with crayons? "No, I'm going to fire her because it's affecting her work performance."

She slams her plastic fork down on the table. Anger sparks in her eyes. "You're a horrible, repulsive monster."

"I thought we established that a long time ago." I reach forward and grab her chin, squeezing hard. She winces, and tears of pain shimmer in her eyes. "And by the way, every time you insult me or disrespect me, it gets added to the list. I'll fucking bury you in a coffin and leave you there until your oxygen runs out if you keep this up."

She manages to wrench her face from my grasp. "God, I hope so. Can we get started? I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll never have to see you again." Then she shoves her plate away. "Were you actually trying to have a normal conversation?" She sneers. "Because that was an epic fail."

That interests me rather than angering me. I am always willing to learn from my mistakes. "Explain."

"I said something that you didn't like, and you threatened me with harm."

“Well, obviously. What’s your point?” Again, it’s that Martian-speak that dribbles from people’s mouths when I’m just trying to have a simple conversation with them.

She takes a deep breath, then lets it out very slowly. From my studies, I know what that means. She’s angry with me, but she’s trying to calm herself down. “You’re sitting there trying to make me think we’re in some kind of relationship. People in relationships disagree on very important issues from time to time. If one person goes nuclear every time that happens... well, the relationship’s not going to last.”

“I don’t know what made you think that. This isn’t a relationship, because that implies that you and I are equals. We’re not. And *you will* speak to me with respect.” I blast her with the look and the tone of voice that have made grown men shit themselves.

It bounces off the icy bedrock of her new flesh. “I’d have to actually feel respect for that to happen. Come on, Joshua Smith, admit you failed and just end it for me.”

She wants me to surge toward her in fury, to whip her or snap her neck. She wants to control me by making me angry. For the time being, I won’t give that to her.

I lean forward and lace my fingers together, examining her face, trying to figure this out. “Before I put you in the cellar that last time...you were happy when I rewarded you with my approval and conversation. Now you’re not. What changed?”

In reply, she tries to stab me in the eye with her plastic fork.

I’ve never been so turned on in my life.

I bat her hand aside easily and growl “That’s *it*. You want punishment? I’ll punish you, baby.”

I leap to my feet and sweep the dishes in front of her aside. I bend her arm back and yank her pants down. My arousal has taken over. I can't contain it.

“Are you wet for me, sweetheart? I know you are.” Her hair spills down over her shoulders, half hiding her face. With my free hand, I slide two fingers inside her tight sheath. I curve them up to meet her G-spot, and slowly, tauntingly, move them in and out. Her inner walls swell, closing in on my fingers as I lovingly torment her sensitive core.

She clenches her fists, and her head is twisted to the side, and her face melts into a look of pure ecstasy. She's sucking in deep breaths and whimpering with each stroke. I feel her sheath clenching around me as I drag my fingers over her G-spot again and again.

Finally, she pants, “Let go of me. St-stop that.”

“Now how many minutes did it take you to remember to say that?” I taunt her. “I lost count.”

I slide my fingers back out and give her ass a tremendous smack as I keep her pinned down on the table. She cries out, a hoarse sound of pleasure and pain, and my raised red handprint blooms on the white globe of her right cheek. I have marked her as mine. I smack her again and again, her flesh quivering and jiggling beneath me, until I've laid an entire garden of those red, red roses on her pale flesh.

Arousal floods through me, and I fumble with my pants and bury myself in her wet heat.

I'm sliding in and out, in and out, and hot waves of pleasure flow over me. She squirms wildly underneath me, whimpering in protest at first, then settles down and pushes

back. I love it when she does that, when she surrenders to me completely, her body gone helplessly wanton and needy.

“Oh, oh, oh...!” she wails, and I force myself to stop and slide almost all the way out. She gives a strangled cry and rocks her hips, pushing back against me so I’m inside her again. “No!”

“All right, Toy, if you insist.” Laughing at her, I start fucking her again. I don’t even need to touch her clit to get her to come. Her inner walls convulse and squeeze me so hard I have to pull out before I come inside her. I’m not wearing a condom, so I pull out quickly and explode, spraying her buttocks with my hot, sticky seed.

She lies there, face down on the table, her body shuddering with the aftershocks.

I pull her up and wrap my arms around her, trapping her. I breathe into her ear, fiercely. “You’re still mine, little Toy.” She stiffens with anger, and I love it. I’m actually hard again already. “I will never let you go. Never. Never. Never.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

JOSHUA

I march her into the bathroom, and this time I run the bath water and climb in with her. I make her get on her hands and knees, and fuck her again right there in the bath. I slam into her so hard that her whole body rocks, her breasts hanging down into the water. She comes within minutes, her tight tunnel convulsing, and I feel the answering rush of ecstasy swelling up inside me. I'm not wearing a condom, so I pull out and splatter my seed over her gleaming wet buttocks.

When she settles down and slumps against the tub, facing me, she flashes me a sullen, defiant look. "Is that the best you've got? I thought you were going to punish me," she sneers.

At that, I laugh. "Now you're just being a bratty sub, Toy."

"I'm being a what?" Her face is comical in its confusion.

"It's a BDSM term. A submissive is expected to obey her dominant and do her best to please him, but some subs deliberately misbehave and act like little brats so that their dominant will have to discipline them. Because being punished turns them on and makes them fucking come." My lips curl up mockingly.

She meets my gaze with a look of manufactured boredom. “Whatever helps you sleep at night. Speaking of which, can I get back to my fucking cell?”

“No, you cannot.” I look at her across the sea of frothy bubbles. “I’m going to ask you again, Toy, why did you try to kill yourself?”

She sits up abruptly, exposing her shiny clean breasts. Again, I feel my cock stirring. God, she’s magnificent when she’s fierce. “Because you made me into something I wasn’t. Something disgusting. Something I hated.”

“I hated it too,” I murmur before I can stop myself.

She launches herself at me so quickly that I barely see it coming, and throws her full body weight on me, screaming like a banshee. My head bangs painfully against the tile wall, and her nails claw at my face.

Furious, I scramble out of the bath and haul her with me, dropping her onto the tile floor. Water sloshes everywhere. I kick her in the ribcage, and she lashes out with her leg, hooking it behind me, and brings me down to my knees. She’s screeching like a madwoman the entire time.

I slap her in the face, twice, so hard that her eyes briefly lose focus. Then I grab her by the throat and squeeze until she’s gurgling and wheezing and her face goes red. The whole time, she’s glaring at me with a killing rage.

When she settles down, I release my grip a little bit.

“You motherfucker!” she howls. “You put me through hell for nothing! For nothing! And you lied to me just to control me and make me weak, you revolting little bitch!”

“It worked, didn’t it?” I taunt her because I’m angry. And I grab her wrists and pin them over her head, lying on top of her

on the soaked bath rug.

I'm rock hard again, but her mood has flipped. I can feel her body go rigid with disgust underneath me, her flesh practically trying to crawl away from mine.

It hurts me.

"Settle down," I snap at her.

"I will chew your face off in your sleep, shithead! *Coward!*" Her body is as stiff as a board underneath me.

I squeeze her wrists hard enough that she grunts in pain, but she never stops glaring at me. "Listen the fuck up, because this temper tantrum shit is going to get old fast. I'm not going to let you go, and I'm not going to kill you. And I'm not going to let you kill yourself. So you can just get that out of your head right now."

She doesn't say a word, and her gaze drifts off to somewhere over my right shoulder. She's ignoring me, dismissing me from her mind. I need to give her something more.

I loosen my grip on her wrists. "I'm going to say something I've never said to anyone before. I made a mistake. This situation with you... My entire survival drive depends on me seizing control of everything and everyone around me, dominating every human being who gets close to me, but with you... I went too far, Toy. I won't go that far again."

"Tamara." Her beautiful brown eyes bore into me, trying to stab me to death with the force of her hatred.

"I prefer Toy, and I'm still in charge here, sweetheart." I see a little flicker on her face, a twitch of muscle that she isn't even aware of, and I remember that she always reacts that way

when I call her sweetheart or baby. I decide I will do it more often. Positive stimuli to get positive results.

“When I lied to you, I thought I was helping you.” At her disbelieving laugh, I shake my head. “Truly. I was afraid you were going to force me to kill you. You’re so fucking strong. It was so hard to break you down that I needed to cheat, and that was weak of me. You’re right about that. It was beneath me. The truth is, the director at the homeless shelter and your landlord both reported you missing within a few days. Your neighbor Heather never did, but she also moved out of her apartment right after I took you. The director never gave up. She’s been a thorn in my side, going back to the police again and again. She organized the employees at the shelter, and they’ve been calling too, checking up on the case several times a week.”

Her muscles relax a little and tears shimmer in her eyes. I bend down and kiss her shoulder.

“Are you actually apologizing?” Her voice is husky with emotion. Not for me, I know. For her lost friends, her lost life.

“That’s not something I am capable of doing.” I make my voice gentle, and I stroke a wet lock of hair from her face and tuck it behind her ear. She stares up at me, eyes shining. So beautiful. My precious, lovely Toy. “I don’t want to lie to you again, and to say that I was sorry would be a lie. Being sorry would require a conscience, and I’m not wired that way. In my world, I define right and wrong. For me to apologize would mean that I was saying I thought what I did was...bad. You want me to be honest with you? I’m not sorry. What is right is what benefits me. End of story. But I am saying that I should not have gone so far when I punished you. And we’re going to

have to work out a new set of rules and a new way to get along. Because I'm not going to lose you."

"Why?" she demands despairingly, her face twisting with anguish. "I just want to be free. I hate it here. I hate you, and if I could kill you, I would. I will keep trying to kill you, myself, and Elizabeth, until I succeed. Do you not understand that?"

"I do. And all I can do is watch you day and night so I can protect you from yourself," I say, and something dull and ugly that might be sorrow flows through me. I cannot bear to make her into a helpless slave again, and I can't bring myself to end her life, so sooner or later, the inevitable will happen. I'll slip up. She'll kill me, or herself, or Elizabeth.

And yet I'm still not going to kill her. Even to save myself.

Once upon a time, I thought she was nothing like me. Now, as I look down at her wretched face, I see tiny facets of myself in her. Survivor of a poisoned childhood, someone who put themselves back together and came out stronger for it. She's got hidden reserves of toughness that I never even glimpsed. And she's got a mean streak in her too.

I like that about her. I like it a lot.

I like everything about her. If I were a normal man, I'd say that I love everything about her. She makes me wish that I could be what she needs, what she deserves.

But I am the man that I am, hard and unchanging and incurable.

I lean down and press a gentle kiss to her forehead. "Come on. We'll go into the media room and watch a movie together—you can pick the movie—and then we'll go to bed." She goes stiff again. "What?"

“Watching movies just hurts me. It’s like looking through the bars of my prison at what I can never have.” Her shoulders slump and her muscles melt completely. Tears brim in her beautiful eyes and spill onto her cheeks. When I bend down to kiss them, she twists her head away. “For the love of God, Joshua. Please. I’m begging you. I want this to end. You could do it painlessly. If you’re not going to kill me, end my suffering. Let me go.”

I slide off her and sit up. She sits up too, hugging her knees and staring at the floor. Tears are streaming down her face now. I’ve made her cry oceans. The thought drives a splinter into my soul.

“Things will be different now. I won’t put you back in the cell, ever again. We’ll resume our sparring, and I can let you get on a computer that’s not connected to the internet, and you will sleep in my room. You will have to speak to me with respect, and as long as you do that—”

She’s shaking her head, her long, wet locks sliding across her back.

I have just offered her so much. It should be enough, right? I don’t understand what the problem is here. “You’d rather be dead than spend time with me? You’d rather be dead than let me make you come every day, feed you exquisite meals every day, give you the run of my library and any movie or TV show ever, talk to you, laugh with you, spar with you, dress you in the most beautiful clothes...?”

She shakes her head, crying quietly.

I heave a sigh of frustration. “Okay. It’s still not going to change my mind. I’m a selfish bastard, Toy. I don’t understand my feelings for you, but I can’t be without you. I need you, all

right? When I think about losing you...it...it's not what I want."

I groan out loud at my utter failure to say what I mean. "I can't find the right words for this, Toy. I'm articulate in many ways, but I'm not fluent emotionally. But the bottom line is, I can't do it. Don't ask me again. Instead, I'm going to make you content to be here. I will find a way. I always get what I want, Toy. You're wasting your time trying to fight me." Yes. This is a challenge, and I will solve it.

I will.

I have to.

I scoop my miserable, heartbroken slave up in my arms and carry her toward my bedroom.

Her body is limp; she's not bothering to fight. She's a sleeping tiger, though, and I can never let my guard down around her again.

When we get into the bedroom, I carry her over to my closet and set her down, keeping an eye on her as I fetch her a T-shirt to sleep in. We'll go to bed early. I'll chain her to the head of my bed, so she's sleeping right next to me. A woman sleeping next to me, all night long. That will be a new experience. New experiences are good, aren't they?

I don't know. Looking at her miserable face is a drag on my mood. I'm actually being affected by someone else's emotions. My earlier elation has fizzled, and whatever sick, leaden feeling has taken up inside my chest now, I hate it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

TAMARA

The days drag by as I try to adjust to this strange new life. The rules are not clear anymore.

Joshua takes me into the sparring room every day, and he trains me for as long as I want. Two or three hours. He's teaching me all kinds of dirty tricks. How to escape various chokeholds, how to gouge out eyes, how to turn anything into a deadly weapon. Hide heavy objects in a pillowcase and use it to smash someone's brains out. Use a lighter and a can of hairspray to make a flamethrower. Where all the tender, vulnerable spots on the body are, and how to strike them to instantly disable someone.

There's a tiny spark of hope in me. The skills he's teaching me are actually useful. Joshua let his guard down once, and I got access to the razor. Maybe it will happen again.

I hate that tiny spark of hope, though. Giving up, preparing myself mentally to die, was the hardest thing I've ever done. Hope is dangerous. Hope will weaken my resolve.

He's hard on me when we're sparring, and I'm murderous. I'm sincerely trying very, very hard to maim or kill, but of course I never do. Sometimes Joshua puts on a thick, padded suit with a mask and lets me practice eye-gouging, throat strikes, groin-kicking.

Our sparring sessions always end in fucking. Always. Rough, hard, glorious. I struggle at first, then submit every time, and it's like it's part of our sex play. I could refuse him, but the horrible truth is, I crave it. His mere presence, his heated glance, makes my sex damp with desire. The more violent our sparring, the more I want him. Pinned down on the floor, writhing underneath him, fighting to get away but really wanting it...just like the fantasies I used to shamefully entertain before I ever met him.

He resumes bathing me and shaving me in the morning. I let him cuff me to the tub without trying to fight, because I find it heightens the pleasure for me. And that ends in fucking too. That's sweeter and more tender. I get the best of both worlds from him—soft, gentle sex, and brutal, hard fucking. I have an amazing sex life. Several orgasms a day, and they're always mind-blowing, explosive, shattering.

If I wasn't his prisoner, he'd be the perfect lover.

But I am his prisoner. I finally go and try that front door that used to taunt and terrify me, and of course it's locked. I knew it would be, but I still stand there and cry as I uselessly yank on the doorknob.

At night, at the dinner table, as I sit there with one ankle chained to the chair and the chair bolted to the floor, he tries to draw me out in conversation. I keep my answers monosyllabic and dull.

He starts telling me about his childhood, not as if he's looking for pity, just as if we're boyfriend and girlfriend, getting to know each other. Except the childhood that he tells me about is so horrifying that it sounds like something out of a Stephen King novel, and it frequently kills my appetite. His

casual discussions of his brothers' deaths bring tears to my eyes.

The worst of it, to me, is that it could have been stopped early on. There were several visits to their deep woods cabin by concerned social workers—who apparently weren't that concerned after all, because each time, after a brief visit, they left the family to their fate. The murderous eyes of Joshua's father burned into his family's flesh as they spoke politely to the state employees. Those idiots didn't even bother interviewing the family separately—they did it right there in the room with Lenin Montgomery watching them. And they swallowed all the lies and went back to their offices content.

Apparently Lenin was able to put on a human face when he needed to, just like his son. But the similarities stop there.

Lenin Montgomery was a pedophile rapist and an insane survivalist with the world's most warped notions of child-rearing. Brutal, day-long physical fitness drills. Forcing his children to run miles through the woods in the summer heat without water, to sleep naked outside in the winter, to catch and kill animals with their bare hands. Setting them against each other, making them fight and not letting them stop until someone had drawn blood. Constantly pounding his sick, twisted vision of life into their vulnerable heads. All that predator-versus-prey crap. "Eat the weak." You're king, or you're nothing.

Killing Joshua's siblings one by one. His mother, a frail, beaten-down thing, sitting by dully and not fighting until the day his father buried Joshua's twin, Charlemagne, alive.

Joshua, watching his mother die and feeling absolutely nothing.

The sound of Charlemagne's death rattle. The way Joshua describes it, carefully and precisely, with words leached of emotion, I can actually hear the horrible sound in my head.

The reporter who guessed that Joshua Smith was living under an assumed name was right. Joshua's name, originally, was William Montgomery. As in William the Conqueror, because all the boys in the family were named after powerful leaders. The last name Montgomery might have been a lie, given that their father was a sociopath who lied about everything. Joshua had done some research into his family after he killed his father, and couldn't find any evidence of where they'd come from.

I understand him now, although I don't forgive him. The compassionate part of me wants to climb into a time machine and travel back to Joshua's childhood with an Uzi, to rescue him, to rescue all of them. I can empathize with Joshua's dark urges. I don't just want to go back in time and kill his father, I want to drag it out for weeks of hideous torture, drinking in every scream.

But I stay hard. I stay strong. I'm sorry this happened to Joshua the same way I'd be sorry if it happened to anyone, but it doesn't excuse what he's done to me.

As the days march by, he talks to me about his business over meals. He tells me how he selects companies to acquire, and the various ways that he makes sure that he gets what he wants—some legal, some not. He's designed software that allows him to hack into just about anywhere, so he's always got an unfair advantage.

He's giving me an education and a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at high finance. He's telling me all his secrets, confiding in me like a lover, making me feel special.

When he isn't wearing his icy mask of hate, he's funny and witty and entertaining. I saw that side of him when I was working for him, sometimes, how he'd show his appreciation to employees who'd excelled in their positions and they'd just light up. His approval is sweeter than honey. He's still a hard-ass, still controlling and sinister, but there's something sexy about that too.

But I keep my walls up. This man tortured me and locked me in a cell, and he is the reason I will never be anything more than a chained-up puppet, existing only for his amusement. My world has shrunk down to the interior of a well-decorated prison because of him.

One day at lunch, when he's talking about how he hunts his victims, he tells me about the software he uses to find the murderers. At that, I perk up, briefly.

"You could sell that to police departments, to the FBI," I say after he describes it to me. "It could save so many people."

But he shakes his head. "A large part of my process is illegal," he says. "Once my software does the preliminary work of identifying disappearance clusters, my next step is to use it to hack into numerous email and social networking accounts and bank accounts of the victims, friends and family and employers of the victims, and suspects. The police could never do what I do. They're restricted by the law."

Disappointed, I go silent again. I still refuse to speak to him in more than monosyllables, unless we're sparring.

So he starts offering me things. Trying to bribe me.

"Since you haven't tried to kill yourself in the last three weeks, I am willing to take you outside." He springs that one on me at dinner one night.

It's already been three weeks since I was released from my cell? Fuck me. What's it like outside now? It must be late fall, at least. Maybe winter. I'm hollow with sorrow and despair at the thought of how long I've been here.

This is the only life that I'll know, locked inside these walls. The months sliding away into years. Unless I finally manage to kill him, or myself.

"No," I say, looking at my plate as I eat.

"Interesting. Why not?"

Interesting. My misery is *interesting* to him. I glare down at my pasta. "A glimpse of the outside world, as a patronizing pat on the head for being a good little girl? It would be torture, not pleasure. It would remind me of the freedom I can never have again."

"I didn't say a glimpse. We could walk outside every day that the weather permitted."

"You could take me for daily walks like a dog chained to your leash, you mean? Again, no."

He sighs, as if he's a parent dealing with a very trying toddler. "Your sulky attitude is getting very boring, Toy. What would make you happy aside from freedom?"

I shoot him a nasty look. "If you shut the fuck up and let me eat my food without talking to me. Forever."

"How unfortunate." He gives me that bland, maddening smile that reminds me who's in control here. "That's not going to happen. Anyway. I find that I'm interested in your ideas, your perspectives." I scoop up a forkful of fettucine, avoiding his gaze and trying not to let myself feel flattered. I know what an intellectual snob he is, how few people he respects enough to carry on more than a brief conversation. The fact that he

never seems to tire of me, that he considers my thoughts and ideas worthy, it makes me feel good about myself. But also angry with myself. After everything he's put me through, I refuse to be that easy.

"I'd like our conversations to be civil," he continues, "and I'd like to achieve that without having to revert to my more brutal methods of chastisement, but my patience is nearing an end. And if you tell me to kill you one more time, I'll hang you over the electric plate until you pass out. Or maybe I'll heat up my branding iron." And just like that, the warm feelings that were fizzing around inside me evaporate.

The thought of my flesh being burned makes me quail inwardly, so before I lose my nerve, I drop my plastic spoon, casually pick up my plate of pasta, and throw it in his face. "Kill me."

And I brace myself for pain. A lot of pain.

Instead, his eyes flare with what I swear is arousal as he sits there with fettuccine alfredo sauce dripping onto his shirt.

He loves it when I fight him. It turns him on.

"I'm disappointed in you, Toy." He picks up a napkin and mops strands of pasta from his face. "If you were smart, you'd start negotiating. How about a million-dollar donation to the battered women's shelter?"

That sends a shockwave through me. He says it so casually, but that's an enormous amount of money. My God, the lives that could be changed with that money. I could actually do some good before I figure out a way to end myself. He's offering me a little bit of power.

"What would you ask in return?" I ask cautiously.

He cocks his head. “First answer a question. This is the first offer of mine that you’ve shown any interest in. Oh, and you briefly got excited when you thought I could use my software to benefit law enforcement. You talked to me then, but after that, you stopped. Why don’t you want things for yourself? Why do you care about helping people so much?” I hate the mockery lacing his voice.

How can you answer a question like that? How can you explain compassion and empathy to a man with an iceberg heart?

“Penance for my sins, maybe. I just... I want to make a difference to people.”

“That’s pure ego, you know,” he says with mild contempt as he picks up his napkin and scrubs at his face. “You just want to do good things for people so you can feel better about yourself.”

I shrug. “All philanthropy is selfish at heart. It doesn’t matter. Yes, it feels good to do good things for people, to make the world a better place. So what? Does that mean I should do bad things, and make the world a worse place, so I don’t feel good? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Interesting point.” He chews it over, considering it, then nods. “This helps me understand philanthropy, on some level. So are we agreed? Anonymous million-dollar donation, in exchange for you answering questions when I ask them?”

Fuck. Damn. Hell.

He’s doing it.

He’s breaking me down. He swore he’d make me accept my life here.

And I’m letting him.

Just for now, I promise myself.

Not forever.

“I will accept the deal, if you answer one question for me.”

“Depends on the question.”

“You keep offering me things—physical objects, money, a walk in the prison yard—to try to get me to accept what you’ve done to me. What would make *you* accept having your life stolen from you and living as someone’s slave, under their complete control, and knowing you’ll never talk to another person again for the rest of your life?”

“I’m not you. I’m me. We’re different people.” That baffled look appears on his face again.

“Right. That’s Joshua-speak for ‘I utterly fail at understanding normal human emotion.’”

He shakes his head chidingly. “I answered your question as best I could, given that your question made no sense in the first place. Now, my turn. I want you to tell me ten things that you love about being here.”

I could be petty and tell him nothing, but that would be a lie, and he might cancel the deal. If I can really get him to donate a million dollars to the shelter, that would be huge.

Frowning, I stare down at the table and force myself to open up to him, as I’ve done too many times since he kidnapped me. “I...I love it when you bathe me. I love sex with you. The gentle, sensual whipping, and when you spank me just right—I love that too.” My face grows hot with resentment, and I clench my fists and press my thighs together tightly. I don’t want to give him this. It’s like validating what he’s done to me, and again, he’s invading my mind and

making me feel disgustingly vulnerable. Like being strapped down to an ob-gyn chair and put on public display.

“That’s three.” There’s an impatient snap to his voice now. “Go on. And don’t stop until you get to ten, or the deal is off the table.”

“Can we just have a damn conversation without you threatening me?” I yell at him.

He gives me a nasty smile. “Given who and what I am, probably not.”

I heave a sigh. “When you made me confess to what I’d done to my stepfather, it took an enormous weight off my shoulders.” I hold up my hands to tick the numbers off. “That’s four. When you made me talk about my mother’s death and told me it wasn’t my fault...sometimes, you have a way of saying things that can make me believe almost anything. I have felt a darkness lift from me ever since that day. I haven’t done my tapping rituals in a long time, and I don’t wake up in the middle of an anxiety attack any more. That’s five. I love the selection of books that you have here. That’s six. I love the food that you serve. That’s seven. I love sparring with you every day and getting to pretend I’m actually hurting you for every rotten thing you’ve done to me. That’s eight. I love the artwork here. That’s nine. I love the furnishings in the house. That’s ten.” I clench my splayed-out fingers into fists.

That’s ten pieces of my heart and soul he just pried out of me. I’m hyperventilating, tears burning in my eyes. Damn him. I swore to myself, when I reclaimed my identity as Tamara, that I would never again let him hurt me emotionally. And here I am. He knows exactly how to get to me.

“What about when I gave you the dresses?” he asks.

Again with the damn dresses. I flash him an annoyed look. “No, frankly, I didn’t love that at all. Why do you care so much about the dresses?”

“Because it was the first time in my life that I’ve ever attempted to buy someone a gift and genuinely wanted to please them.”

The look on his face... If it were any other man, I’d say it was a look of hurt and confusion. But this is Joshua Smith, the world’s slickest psychopath. He’s just manufacturing that look to mimic a normal human response, isn’t he?

If I’m forced to be honest with myself, I’m not entirely sure. He isn’t lying when he says that my presence here has changed him. I know he’s opening up in an odd way, doing things he’s never done before. He’s treating me differently than he’s treated anyone in his entire life. Perhaps I have touched something inside him, made him a little bit more human.

I shake these confusing thoughts from my head. He’s staring at me expectantly.

“You never buy gifts for Elizabeth?”

His perfect brow wrinkles. “No, why would I?”

“You just don’t get people, do you?” Then I laugh at myself. “Right, right, look who I’m talking to. So you never show her the slightest appreciation or acknowledgment of what she does for you. No wonder she’s miserable. Then again, if you bought her gifts, it would just give her false hope. All right, you wanted to know why I didn’t like the dresses. Seeing them just made me think that nobody but you would ever see me wearing them.”

“Who else do you want to see them?” There’s a dangerous edge to his voice now. Is Joshua actually jealous? What new level of madness have we reached? Dear God, the look in his eyes. I think if he ever saw me flirting with another man, he’d gut him like a deer.

“I would just get the pleasure of wearing them to a restaurant, to a play, to a movie, to an art gallery opening... I mean, I can’t explain it. Why do you wear nice clothing when you’re here?”

He smiles mockingly. “Why, to please you, Toy.”

“That’s Tamara Bennett to you, Joshua Smith. And bullshit. You wear nice clothing because it pleases *you* and feeds your grandiose ego. Where are we, by the way?” I throw the question out, since we’re actually having something resembling a conversation. Maybe he’ll give me something for free.

“What will you give me if I tell you?”

Nope. Nothing’s that easy.

“What could I give you? Thanks to you, I have nothing of value.”

“Self-pity is unattractive, Toy.” He’s really quite cuttngly nasty when he wants to be. “Try again.”

“I promise I won’t try to kill myself.” I give him a weary shrug.

Genuine anger flashes in his blue eyes. “Of course you will. Don’t lie to me, Toy.”

I laugh, a harsh, bitter sound that grates on my own ears. I can’t remember the last time I laughed with joy rather than mockery. “Why not? You lied to me. The one thing you swore

you'd never do, and you're so fucking weak and cowardly and pathetic that you couldn't even follow that *one little rule*. You couldn't control me without lies. Do you have any idea how much contempt I have for you because of that? God, you make me nauseous." I'm angry all over again as I say that. Rage burns through me like a cleansing fire.

He leans back in his chair, the anger fading from his face. "We're quite a pair, aren't we, Toy? I wonder what's going to become of us."

"One of us will die at the hands of the other."

"Perhaps. Well, if you plan on killing me, you'll need your strength." He shoves his plate of pasta at me. The remains of my own plate are splattered on the table in front of him. "Eat."

I shake my head.

"Do you know what a funnel gag is, Toy? It would allow me to shove food into your mouth and down your throat." He says the words politely, and I feel a bizarre shiver of arousal.

He has well and truly screwed me up for life. His threats turn me on now. God help me, even if I escaped, I'd never be free of him.

I look up and meet his eyes. "I'm genuinely not hungry right now, Joshua. When you forced me to tell you the things that I love about being here—that was hard on me. I lost my appetite."

He looks at my hands and sees that they're shaking. "Why?" He seems to be genuinely interested.

"It's painful for me to open up like that. I spent a lifetime building up walls, and when you tear them down like that, it makes me feel weak and exposed." My muscles tense up, and I clench my fists to stop the trembling.

“I see.” He thinks about it for a moment, then stands up and walks over to me. He pulls me to my feet, and...wraps his arms around me.

“What are you doing?” I ask, astonished.

“It’s called a hug, Toy.” He says it with gentle mockery.

He’s hugging me to make me feel better.

His arms tighten around me, and I melt into him before I can stop myself. His body is so strong, his grip so firm. I rest my head on his shoulder and close my eyes and breathe in his warm, masculine scent, the faint whiff of cologne and sweat and male musk. Then I circle his waist with my hands and hug him back.

I hug my kidnapper.

I hug my torturer.

I just want to feel better about everything, I want to leave my nightmare behind even if it’s just for a few moments of make-believe, so I pretend that he’s none of those things. I keep my eyes closed tight and pretend that he’s my boyfriend, my lover, my protector. And in a way he is. I have no doubt that if anyone tried to harm me, Joshua would kill them or die trying. He’s the only man in my life. The only man who’s ever given me an orgasm. When we have sex now, it feels like making love, and he always, always makes sure that I come first.

Why couldn’t he have been like this when he first took me? I think I’d have been in love with him by now.

He begins stroking my hair, gently, fingers trailing through the tresses.

“This isn’t so bad,” he murmurs, and I’m not sure if he’s talking to himself or me. And a little bit of me melts. This is probably the first time he’s ever hugged anyone, and, heart-breakingly, the first time he’s ever been hugged. Several minutes slide by, slowly, sweetly.

I open my eyes and tip my head back to look at him. He’s staring down at me, and the look in his eyes is pure tenderness. It looks like love.

“You could let me go, Joshua,” I plead for the millionth time.

“If you truly knew me, Toy, you would understand that I can’t.” I think his smile is tinged with sadness. At least, if it were anyone else, that would be a sad smile. “I simply can’t.”

How can anyone truly know someone as fucked up as you, Joshua?

I step back out of his arms, as far as I can go with my ankle still chained to the chair, and my body cries out at the loss of his warmth.

He bends down and uncuffs my ankle.

But he doesn’t set me free.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

TAMARA

“I need your help,” Joshua says over lunch one day. Six days have passed since he promised that donation to the shelter. I’ve started keeping track of time again, counting each day of my life that I’m trapped here.

I need to do that so I can stay angry at Joshua, because the new Joshua is addictive and I’m starting to crave his company too much. When he has to miss lunch because of work, I actually miss him. And I can’t stop thinking about what it felt like when he hugged me. I have to toughen up or I’ll lose myself to him. The idea of falling in love with him frightens me even more than the idea of being his mindless slave.

“We all have needs. For instance, I need a sharp knife so I can slit your throat,” I say, and I take a bite of quiche.

He ignores me. “Elizabeth fainted an hour ago, and she’s still losing weight. But she’s eating more than ever. I watch her eat, now, and she finishes everything on her plate. She should be gaining weight. There’s the possibility she has some kind of illness, but given how withdrawn and distressed she is, I think that it’s somehow psychological.”

“And?” I look up from my Portobello mushroom burger. “You know my feelings about Elizabeth, or frankly anyone who would choose to keep me prisoner. And before you start

bringing up all the weepy girly crap about how much she suffered as a child, that's all the more reason for her not to help keep another woman prisoner. My ultimate goal is to kill both of you. Squash you like cockroaches."

His eyes snap with anger. "If you don't help me, I'll find a way to close down the shelter."

Shock lashes through me at the thought of all those women being forced out onto the street, but I've been practicing hiding my emotions, and I just shrug. "Whatever."

"My, my." Joshua leans back in his chair and looks at me appraisingly, like a piece of art he might bid on. "What happened to kind, sweet, caring Tamara? Where did this nasty bitch come from?"

"Spending time with you was bound to rub off on me." I shove my plate away. "Also, close the shelter down, and I will never voluntarily have sex with you again. That's not a threat, that's a promise."

Frustration ripples over that perfect face of his, and it makes me happy. "Elizabeth could die."

I put on the blank mask that I practice in the mirror every day. "Cool. One down, one to go."

Joshua shakes his head, and contempt pinches those perfect features. He pushes his chair back and stands up. "Evil isn't a good look on you, Tamara."

"Would you let me go if I helped you? If it was the only way to save her life?" I call after him.

He shakes his head.

"Worth a try," I say with a bitter laugh. "And good to know exactly how much of a selfish prick you are. You'd really let

her die rather than set me free?”

“Absolutely.”

I feel a well of rage swelling up in me. *How can he be so heartless?* And this is the man Elizabeth would die for. Poor her.

He starts to walk away.

Something stirs inside me, sinking sharp little claws into my conscience. “Wait.”

He pauses and looks back at me expectantly

Why am I helping him? Why am I helping *her*?

Because that’s who I am. Because if he kills that part of me, then he’s won.

“Do you have a camera in her room? In her bathroom?”

He looks confused. “No. I don’t need to. Why?”

“She’s making herself throw up.”

“She’s *what?*” If the situation were different, the look of confusion on his face would be hilarious. It’s a sitcom twist of bewilderment. “Why would she do that?”

“Joshua. Is it really that difficult for you to see things through a normal human being’s eyes?”

“Yes. So help me.” He looks genuinely worried. He actually cares about her, as much as he’s capable of caring about anyone. “Please.”

“She can’t fight you directly, so this is her passive way of getting back at you. She’s hurting herself, and disobeying you, to spite you. You’re causing her an enormous amount of pain by having me here. She could live with you banging anonymous prostitutes, but this is different. You’re forcing her

to watch you court me. You're finally developing something resembling feelings for a woman—and it's not her, and she's lived her whole life for you. It's got to be agony for her, every minute of every day." As I say this, I finally start to feel a little bit sorry for Elizabeth.

I'm still very, very angry with her, but she's such a pathetic, wretched soul, I have to pity her too.

"Damn it." Comprehension dawns on his face. "She's been using tons of breath freshener to cover the smell. I thought it was just because you made her feel like she smells bad, but she didn't want me to know that she'd been puking. All right. You're good at all that compassion crap. How do I fix this?"

I shake my head. "Not every problem has a solution, Joshua. Honestly, and I'm not just saying this to get my way, but the only thing you could do that would come close to helping her would be letting me go or killing me, which you won't do because you're a useless asshole." My voice rises with anger as I speak. These bursts of rage come out of nowhere these days.

Wearily, he waves away my insults with his hand. "Can we not waste time stating the obvious? I need to find a way to make her stop feeling whatever it is she's feeling."

Jesus. How can a genius be so stupid? "Don't you get it? You can't. Even if you killed me, it wouldn't solve the underlying problem, which is that she's a mentally damaged woman who's obsessed with a man who can never love her. You can't make her feelings go away. Feelings don't work like that."

He frowns, shaking his head, dismissing the notion that there's something the mighty Joshua Smith can't do. "I'll go talk to her." He pushes back his chair and walks away.

“Good luck with that,” I call after him, and there’s pure spite in my voice. The hell with him and her both. I reel my pity back in. They’re a sick, terrible pair; they deserve each other.

He reaches the door, then turns around and comes back. He quickly gathers up all the plastic silverware.

“Good call,” I say, looking at him with pure, unadulterated hate. I could have made that spoon into a shiv. And I would have.

He stands there, the plasticware clenched in his hand.

“Thank you for helping her,” he says to me. He sounds sincere. He’s got that look in his eyes, that tenderness that might even be real.

“I’m regretting it already.”

“No you’re not. I’ll be back in a few minutes. You can tell me what you’d like for dinner.”

I can’t hide the surprise on my face.

“You’d actually let me pick the menu from now on?”

“I didn’t say that. We can take turns.” He smiles at me. “Unless you pick really crappy food. Then it’ll be all me.” I smile back, then I catch myself.

No. Joshua’s not my boyfriend, and we’re not having a fun afternoon of light banter. I am sitting here chained to a *fucking chair*.

I make myself scowl and look away. He said he’d be right back, but he leaves me sitting there for a very long time, and my bladder starts sending me sharp signals of urgency. I’m pretty sure that I’ve been there at least an hour. What is he

doing? There's no way he's spent that much time with Elizabeth. I start yelling, with increasing annoyance.

“Damn it, Joshua! I'll pee on this chair if I have to!”

He comes storming in and unchains me, then hurries me down the hall to the bathroom. His demeanor has completely changed. Something big has happened. “Settle down,” he says impatiently. “I'm dealing with an emergency.”

After I pee, he rushes me toward the playroom. “I'm going to have to restrain you for a few hours,” he says as he hustles me through the door.

I'm curious what could have the normally unflappable Joshua Smith so rattled. His muscles are as taut as bowstrings, and his eyes have gone distant and stormy. “What's the emergency?”

Tension radiates from his body and wrinkles his normally smooth forehead. Whatever it is, it's got to be big.

“Someone embezzled a hundred million dollars from me, sent it to a Swiss bank account that I can't access. It's impossible, and yet they did it.” He bites out each word as if he's spitting poison.

My jaw actually drops. Someone did that to Joshua? He's a genius, he's paranoid, he's alert to threats all the time. How in the hell?

“Was it the same person who set off your alarms that day?” I ask him, hazarding a guess.

“I don't know yet. What made you think that?” He looks at me narrow-eyed, as if suspecting I might somehow be behind it. I wish.

“Because those were both times when someone managed to get past your defenses. It just seems logical. I hope you don’t figure it out, you know. I hope they ruin you.” I smile serenely. Someone’s hurt him. I wish I could find that person and give them a hug.

His eyes spark with malice. “You’re a very smart girl, Toy. And I enjoy your company, but I’ve let it distract me when there were threats that needed to be addressed. I’ve been off my game. I’m back on it now, believe me. I will find out who did this to me, and I will make their punishment last for weeks.” Then his expression turns thoughtful. “I don’t think it’s Mark. I wish it were—that would make it so much easier.”

My blood turns to ice. “What did you say?”

He glances at me impatiently as he moves me toward a chair on the floor. “Mark, your homeless friend. Mark is the one who sent those emails to the police and the newspapers, telling them that you went on a date with me right before you disappeared. Mark didn’t cover up his email trail all that well, which is one of the reasons I don’t think he’s the person who stole my money, or even the person who set off my alarms. That person is way more sophisticated, so apparently, I have two enemies, not one.” A contemplative look crosses his face. “Not surprising, considering the kind of life I lead.”

No, no, no... “You’re wrong,” I say frantically. “Mark’s not that sophisticated. He’s just a washed-up drunk—he doesn’t even remember my name from one day to the next.”

Joshua looks at me in annoyance. “You’re a crap liar when you’re stressed out, Toy, which is too bad for you, because that’s the most important time to be good at it. And my private investigator traced the emails back to him. Mark used several different internet cafes. He used a fake name and paid in cash

to try to hide his tracks, but my PI hacked into their security cameras and saw him at the terminals sending the emails. I just got the report back this morning. The thing is, Mark's been in rehab for the past few days, and the money just vanished a few hours ago, so I don't think there's any way it could have been him."

All the strength leaves my body. Mark noticed I'd disappeared and tried to help me. Mark finally went to rehab. "Did you kill him?" My voice quavers with unshed tears.

"Not yet." His casual words stab me in the gut. "Put your foot in that ankle cuff."

"Joshua, please!" There's still hope. "I'll do anything you want. I'll...I'll go back to being Toy. Please. Don't hurt him."

He shoves me closer to the ankle cuff. "I hated Toy, remember?"

"What do you want?" I scream, desperate.

He shakes his head. "He declared himself my enemy when he sent those emails. I am not capable of letting him live after that. He's not prey, Toy. You don't have to worry that I'd torture him. I'm going to make it quick and painless. I'll kill him in his sleep, I promise."

He grabs my leg, and I struggle and kick at him, but he overpowers me, pulling me down to the ground. I'm chained up and helpless, raging.

"Nooooo!" I wail, sorrow overwhelming me. "I will end you, Joshua! God, I wish I'd never met you. I wish I'd never gone to Heaven that night!"

He looks at me, uncomprehending. "You wish you'd never...gone to Heaven? Are you having some kind of breakdown?"

“Heaven! The nightclub where we met!”

He shakes his head. “I have never been to a nightclub called Heaven. The first time I met you was after you started working for me.”

“Do you ever get sick of lying?” I rage. “Why would you even bother lying about this? You think my memory is that bad? You were wearing a pinstriped suit with a lavender tie and drinking two-hundred-dollar shots of Macallan whiskey, and you tried to get me to leave with you.”

His eyes bore into mine. “I don’t own a lavender tie, but more to the point, I never drink hard liquor. Only wine. Have you ever seen me drink hard liquor? And I never pick up women at nightclubs. I already told you—before I met you, I used to hire escorts and bring them back here, blindfolded. Can you seriously imagine me trolling a nightclub for dates?”

And then it hits me. “Oh my God. It wasn’t you. Of course it wasn’t you. He was much too charming. You’re never charming.”

“Excuse me?” He actually sounds offended.

My eyes fly to his face as I examine him with horrified fascination. “He was seductive and charming. He was like Casanova, with all the smooth-talking bullshit. You never do that. You’re a ‘let the woman come to me’ kind of guy. You would consider it beneath you to try to charm a woman into bed with you. To you, it would be like begging. I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. That’s why you never acknowledged me when I started working for you. You’d never met me before. But he looked exactly like you, Joshua. I mean, so much like you that physically, I wouldn’t be able to tell you apart. Who could it have been?”

The look on his face makes me gasp. It's a mixture of shock and alarm.

“Charlemagne.”

His dead twin? The twin who was supposedly buried alive by their father? Is there something Joshua hasn't told me?

He quickly undoes the key on my ankle cuff. Then he hauls me over to the intercom and slaps the button. “Elizabeth, get out of the house, now!” he bellows.

I hear something strange. “Joshua,” I say. “What's that hissing noise? What's that smell?”

CHAPTER THIRTY

JOSHUA

I smell it too. Gas. Poison gas, hissing out of the vents.

“Hold your breath!” I shout.

I suck in my own breath and grab her by the arm, and we run through the house, heading for the front door.

I never told her the end of Charlemagne’s story – which was that my father failed to kill him, after all. I was dazed with shock at killing my father, and I didn’t do a very good job checking my brother’s vital signs. After I staggered off, he crawled out of his grave and made his way out into to the world, same as I did.

I didn’t find out that he was still alive for years, though.

And when I did, I had him thrown into a very secure mental institution. Not secure enough, obviously.

How long has Charlemagne been out? How did he make Dr. Barnard lie to me and keep those fake videos online so I’d think he was still locked up? I keep tabs on Dr. Barnard’s family too – he hasn’t sent them anywhere to try to hide them from me. I know he loves them. And he knows I’ll kill them. How did my brother pull this off?

No time to worry about it right now. The first thing I have to do is get Toy and myself to safety.

Charlemagne is a genius who's even more talented at computer hacking than I am, and he looks exactly like me and thinks like me. And he is very, very pissed, because he's been in that mental institution for the last six years.

I had to do it, because he was killing people—not that I'd have a problem with that, except he was doing it in a very sloppy, public manner.

He tracked down and killed every social worker who'd come to our house and failed to remove us from that hellscape. Went right into their homes and butchered them, and then killed the head of the department of social services for good measure. He barely bothered to cover his tracks. That's what happens when you let rage and revenge choose your kills for you.

When I saw the cluster of murders, I knew who was behind it right away—which meant there was an excellent chance that law enforcement would figure it out too.

With his self-indulgent killing spree, he risked getting caught by the police. That meant he risked exposing our entire twisted family life, and my murder of our father, and my assumption of a fake identity and fake social security number.

It wasn't even that hard for me to track my brother down and capture him. I could have, should have, had Charlemagne killed instead of keeping him locked away. I spared his life when I didn't have to. I've spent a fortune over the last six years, bribing Dr. Barnard to keep Joshua hidden from the world. It doesn't matter to my brother that I spared him. He'll want revenge.

Looking like me, and with his computer abilities, he will have been able to infiltrate my company at the highest levels. He'll have penetrated every last system of mine. He may even

have been in my house. He will have completely wormed his way into my security system.

He's been fucking with me for months, drawing it out. He stole a hundred million dollars from me—a twentieth of my net worth. He ruined my Morton Media business deal. He fed the police just enough information that they'd start sniffing around, but not enough to convict me. Not yet, anyway. He could have ended my life at any time, but that wouldn't be enough for him. He has bigger plans than that.

And somehow, he sent Toy into my path. I imagine he had the same reaction to her that I did—an instant, overwhelming attraction—and he sent her to me knowing that, as similar as we are, I would probably react the same way. All part of his long game, whatever that is.

Elizabeth is waiting by the front door, punching the keys over and over again, but the door's not opening. I push her aside and punch in the code to the keypad, but it doesn't work.

My lungs burn. Toy's cheeks are puffed out and her face is turning red. Thank God for her breath-control practice.

I punch in a second code, an emergency backup code, and the door opens.

We rush into the airlock room. The door behind me stays open, although it's not supposed to. That means the gas will pour in here too, from the hallway, even though there are no air vents in here.

Elizabeth's eyes roll back in her head, and she falls to the ground.

I'm still holding my breath. I punch in the backup code. The front door opens.

The cold air hits me like a refreshing slap in the face.

I suck in gulps of oxygen as I bend down, grab Elizabeth by the wrist and drag her outside. I maintain a death grip on Toy's wrist at the same time.

It's mid-October, bracingly cold, and a chill breeze whips through the air. The minute we're outside the front door, Toy goes mad. She lashes out and kicks me in the back of my leg, bringing me to my knees. Then she bites me on the hand so hard that my flesh tears and blood flows.

I have to let go of Elizabeth for a moment to control her. I'm forced to punch Toy in the head, hard enough to leave her half stunned, and then I start giving Elizabeth mouth-to-mouth.

Toy starts crawling away.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. She's either going to find the cops and give up all my secrets, or get lost in the woods and freeze to death. But I can't stop CPR; Elizabeth's not breathing.

The icy survivalist in my brain howls for me to just leave Elizabeth to die and go after Toy.

Before I met Toy, I would have done so in a heartbeat and never suffered a twinge of conscience over it. Fucking Toy, she'll be the death of me yet.

Elizabeth coughs and splutters and her eyes flutter open. She stares at me, searching my face for something. I'm not sure what. Then she reaches up and touches her mouth with trembling fingers, as if to savor the feel of my lips on hers.

I turn my attention back to Toy, who's up on her feet and running like a gazelle.

My vision becomes laser focused. I leap up and run after her, and she's surprisingly fast, but I catch up with her quickly and wrap my arms around her, pinning her arms to her sides

and lifting her off the ground. Again she does the thing where she wraps her legs behind my knees and makes me fall, and as we do, she rears her head back, and there's a crunch and an explosion of pain as she breaks my nose.

My fierce, magnificent Toy.

She's screaming and howling. "No, no, no! Never again!"

"Cut the shit!" I snap at her. "Who knows what the fuck my brother has done to the house? He could blow it to pieces! He could be out there waiting with a sniper rifle! We have to get the hell out of here, now!"

I climb to my feet and throw her over my shoulder, hurrying toward the Mercedes that I keep parked in the traffic circle in front of my house and praying that Charlemagne hasn't sabotaged it. She's writhing and kicking so hard I almost drop her.

As I reach the car, I don't see Elizabeth there waiting for me. What the hell? I don't have time for this! I glance back at the house and see that she's running for the front door. She's going back in.

"Elizabeth!" I yell at her. "Get back here! What are you doing?"

I run back to the house, still holding a wildly struggling Toy. Elizabeth runs right through the airlock room and into the house.

She turns around to look at me. She points at Toy, then gives me the middle finger. Then she opens her mouth wide and sucks in huge gulps of air.

And falls over backward.

I drop Toy on the ground with a thud, suck in my breath, and make it partway into the room, but whatever the gas is, it makes my eyes sting and I can't go any further. I turn away and run back outside, leaving Elizabeth behind to die.

I feel a tsunami of a horrible emotion that I don't recognize rolling over me. Oh God, I think it's grief. I will never see Elizabeth again. Never.

What has Toy done to me?

How can I have these disgusting feelings?

I shake my head, blinking hard against the burning of my eyes, and look for Toy. Of course, she has run off again.

I run over to the car and fetch the Glock that I keep in the center console and tuck it into my waistband. Then I chase after her as she runs toward the woods, her bare feet slapping on the cold ground.

“Toy! Get the hell back here or I will cut your fucking tits off!”

Do I hear sirens far, far away? Has Charlemagne called the cops on me?

I need to get out of here, immediately. Toy is slowing me down.

The ice-hearted reptilian part of my brain knows what to do. I must kill her to save myself. This isn't a game of cat and mouse anymore. This is the very real possibility of me going to prison or dying in a police shootout.

I fire the gun once, over her head. “Get back here or I'll shoot!”

She ignores me and keeps running, so I point the gun at her, aiming for center mass. Shoot the torso rather than the

head—it makes a better target, and there are all kinds of juicy internal organs in there. My bullets are hollow-point; they'll make bloody confetti of her insides. I'll toss her body in front of my house, flee the scene, and blow that shit sky-high, incinerating her and all the evidence.

I will do this.

I can do this.

Everybody exists to serve my purposes, and when they threaten me, they need to be eliminated. Simple as that. She's getting further and further away from me, disappearing into the woods.

The iceman survivalist inside me pulls the trigger. But the new thing that Tamara created jerks the gun at the last second so that the bullet flies right by her left ear.

She trips and falls to her knees but gets up again. She limps away slowly. She must have wrenched her ankle.

I tuck my gun in my waistband and catch up to her easily and carry her back to the car. Desperation makes her wild.

She snatches the gun from my waistband and jams it into my throat, and I stop moving instantly. Her finger is on the trigger. It doesn't take much pressure at all to fire a Glock. She could do it without even meaning to.

“Put me the hell down!” Her voice is trembling.

“Take your finger off the trigger,” I snap at her.

“You don't give me orders anymore, asshole. Never again. Put. Me. Down.”

I should have shot her through the heart when I had the chance.

But no. I couldn't ever kill her. Even now.

I very carefully set her down and back away from her. She's holding the gun in a two-handed grip. Not a very good one, but she doesn't have to be good at this distance.

"Tamara." I keep my voice steady. "You're right, you're not Toy, you never were. I apologize, Tamara. I am sorry for what I did to you. And you're not going to shoot me. That's not you. You're pure good, Tamara. You live to help people, to make things better. We need to get out of here, baby, before my brother shows up. He won't kill you, Tamara. He'll torture you to get back at me. He'll peel your skin off. He'll burn you alive. You wouldn't be the first woman he's tortured to death." No, after what he did to those social workers, she'd be at least the fifth.

I start walking toward her, slowly.

The gun wavers in her hand, and her eyes go wide and desperate. She steps back, wincing in pain from putting weight on her ankle.

"Please don't make me kill you!" Her face twists in panic. "I can't be your slave again, Joshua. I can't! Just leave!"

"You won't be my slave." I'm almost on her. I reach for the gun.

She shoots me in the foot, then screams in surprise at what she's done.

Instantly, I compartmentalize the pain. And I glory in the fact that she couldn't find the strength to kill me.

I lunge forward and snatch the gun from her hand. I wrap my arms around her as she howls and cries.

“Tamara. It will be different. I want you to come with me right now, I want you to stay with me of your own free will.”

“Never!” she howls. And the pain of it squeezes my heart.

This is what heartbreak feels like. No wonder people whine and cry about it so much. It’s vile. It makes me angry and sick to my stomach. It makes me want to kill people.

My shoe is filling up with blood. Even with my ability to compartmentalize, it’s getting hard to ignore the throbbing agony in my right foot. I feel a little lightheaded.

Yes, those are sirens I hear.

“I understand.” I stare at her so she’ll see the truth in my eyes, but she’s twisting away from me. “Whatever happens, I’m sorry for what I did to you. And I thank you for what you did for me. You made me almost human, Tamara. If I could feel love for anyone, it would be you. You are love in human form, the most beautiful thing I’ve ever been privileged to know. You broke down my walls and set me free.” I kiss her neck gently.

Every word is gulping up time that I don’t have, but it doesn’t matter, because I had to tell her that. She needs to know how I feel. She deserves that, and much more.

But I’m also not ready to surrender yet. It’s not in my nature. We’re going to drive away. I’m going to blow up the house when we’re at a safe distance, and then I’m going to move us to one of my other hideouts. And I will find and kill my brother.

I am sure of all these things. I am not a man who panics. I am not afraid at all.

I open the trunk and drop her in with a thud as she screams. This isn’t my sound-proofed trunk; that car is in my

garage, and we don't have time to go in there. Also, I don't know what Charlemagne might have done to the garage. He could have messed with the locks, and he could trap me in there.

This is a fun game for him. He's somewhere close and he's watching. I'm sure of it. *Will he be forced to kill Tamara? Can he do it? Will he go into the garage so I can lock him in? Will the police catch him before he can escape?*

Everything about this situation is fucked up beyond belief, but I will adapt and survive. If I survived my father, I can survive anything.

"Listen," I tell her. "Just keep quiet, and when we're safe, if you still want to leave me, I'll let you go as soon as it's safe for me to do so."

In response, she tries to lash out at me with her foot.

And I slam the trunk shut.

I hear her kicking the trunk and screaming.

I need to leave, I need to get the hell out of here as fast as I can, but instead I yank the trunk open and look down at her, at a face that's still beautiful to me even though it's contorted with utter hatred.

"Tamara," I say to her. "I meant what I said. I know you don't believe me, but if you just do what I say, I'll set you free soon. I'm taking up valuable time when I should be driving the hell away from here, and the cops are coming, and I don't have to tell you this, because I've already got you trapped in my car trunk. I'm saying it because it's true. You've made me feel things I never thought I could feel. I'm not the man that I was when I first took you. Please just trust me. I'll get us out of here, I'll keep you safe, and once my brother's locked up

again, I will open my front door for you and you can go anywhere you want.”

“Lying bastard. Why don’t you bleed out already?” she spits at me. I slam the trunk again.

She hates me, but it doesn’t change my feelings in the least.

I blink hard as I quickly pull off my shoe and use my sock to bind my foot wound and slow down the bleeding, then I limp over to the driver’s side car door and climb in. My eyes are watering.

Am I crying?

Elizabeth is dead, because of me, because of my monstrous selfishness.

Tamara might not choose me. If I keep my word to her and let her go, she might leave. After everything I did to her, she’d be insane to stay with me, and my beautiful girl is many things, but she is not insane.

Yes. I am crying. I am a man who is capable of sorrow, who is able to shed tears. There is something astonishingly freeing in this. I wish I could have cried for my brothers. For my mother. They deserved my tears. This feeling is like a scouring fire, cleansing and painful at the same time.

“Thank you, Tamara,” I whisper, and I turn the key.



Tamara

It’s suffocatingly hot and dark, and I scramble wildly, trying to find a trunk release latch. Joshua probably disabled it.

I kick the trunk lid, uselessly.

Will he really set me free?

Of course not. He's lied to me before without even blinking. And he's not the kind of man who'd sacrifice his life for someone else.

He called me Tamara. He opened up the trunk again, and I could hear sirens. He took the time to tell me how he felt about me, even when it meant he was risking prison, or death.

I want to believe.

If he were willing to let me come and go as I pleased, would I come back to him?

I can't possibly be thinking that. Not after what he's done to me.

Me, in an empty apartment... Going to work, talking to people on the subway... I'm trying to picture it in my mind, but all I see is a blank screen. What would I do without him? Where would I go? I can't imagine life without him anymore. I don't know if it's because I forced myself to stop thinking about the outside world in order to survive, or if it's because I've developed some twisted, symbiotic attachment to him.

Or a terrible mixture of both.

The car starts to move.

Elizabeth is dead, and shockingly, that makes me feel awful. I was vile to her, but she was as much Joshua's victim as I was. She was so wretched that she killed herself to escape her eternal torment.

We're bouncing over rutted roads. I'm trapped. It's dark. It's like a coffin.

Calm down. Calm down.

The car stops.

I coil my legs back so I can lash out with a kick when he opens the trunk. Nothing happens.

The car sits there for a long time. Have the police pulled us over? That must be it. I start kicking the trunk and screaming at the top of my lungs.

The thought of Joshua being arrested makes me feel queasy. That's ridiculous. It's so stupid. *I will tell the police everything. I have to.*

Would he really have set me free?

I want to believe it. After all this time, after everything I've been through, I still want to believe in the basic decency of humanity, and more, I want to believe in him.

I don't understand my snarled, tangled feelings for him, but I don't want him dead. I had the chance to kill him, but I couldn't do it.

What will I do? What will I say when I'm freed? I don't even like the idea of him being in a jail cell for the rest of his life, but I refuse ever to be a prisoner again.

I will have to tell the police what he did to me. It's like Joshua has shaped me into his own image; made me hard and selfish, a survivalist. It's either him or me, so I choose me.

Nobody is answering me, and I can't hear a thing. My throat hurts, so I stop screaming.

The trunk opens, and I lash out, and someone grabs my legs and drags me out of the car.

I look up at the handsome face looming over me.

He drops me on the ground with a painful thud.

“We need to change cars,” he says to me.

The sirens are closer. We’re on a dirt road hemmed in by trees, and light snow is drifting down on us now. I shiver and hug myself.

I look up at him, keeping my voice steady. “Joshua. The police are here. Just let me go, and I won’t say anything. Just like we agreed.”

He shakes his head, smiling.

“No need to pretend, princess. You know I’m not him. But I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced. I’m Charlemagne. Or I was. I go by a different name now. You may call me Micah.”

My shoulders slump in despair.

“So Joshua is dead?” The thought makes me want to weep, or vomit.

I don’t want him to be dead.

I want him back. I want to hit him and hurt him and forgive him. I want to believe him. I want to trust him. I want to destroy him. I want him to really, truly love me, so we can be together forever.

“Of course not.” Charlemagne’s eyes glow with madness. “Don’t be an idiot. That would be way too fucking easy. He had me locked up like an animal, Tamara. Now that he’s fallen in love with you, I finally have the perfect weapon. I’m going to pay him back.”

He scoops me up in his arms. We’re on a narrow dirt road, and there’s a car parked up ahead—no, a van. I scream and

struggle wildly as he opens up the back door, but he holds on to me easily.

Lying on the floor of the back of the van, I see a woman, hog-tied and gagged.

The shock of recognition punches me in the stomach.
Heather.

No wonder she didn't report me missing. Her eyes are huge with fright and she's making desperate grunting noises.

It's my fault she's here. She's going to die in agony, because of me.

Charlemagne holds up a syringe and horror rips me apart, and I scream and scream.

“Night night, Tamara.”

Thank you for reading *Cruel Beginnings*. If you'd like to continue Tamara and Joshua's story, [click here](#) to pre order.

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