



CRUEL WORLD

BOOK ONE

CRUEL

BEGINNINGS

LILI ST. GERMAIN
& LYRA PARISH

CRUEL BEGINNINGS

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LYRA PARISH



CONTENTS

Author's Note

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[What's Next?](#)

[Newsletter](#)

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Cruel Beginnings

Cruel World, #1

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*To all the baddies who tend to fall in love with the villain...
we've given you several to choose from.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Cruel Beginnings is a dark romance that contains sexually explicit scenes along with mature and graphic content that is **not** suitable for all audiences.

READER DISCRETION IS STRONGLY ADVISED.

A detailed list of content warnings
can be found on our [website](#).

PROLOGUE



THREE DAYS FROM NOW

The boat lists to the side, as precarious as the small glow of hope I still have left in my heart.

“You look like a child when you’re scared,” the man standing before me remarks, sliding the blood-red tie from his neck. I feel so small, sitting here on the edge of his palatial bed, an offering for an underworld king.

“I *am* a child. I’m barely sixteen,” I whisper.

It’s a lie. I’m eighteen. About to graduate high school. My whole life is ahead of me.

Until this.

I’m clinging to the hope that my lie will help me somehow. Surely he’ll take pity on me if he thinks I’m only sixteen?

Or... have I just made things worse for myself?

I swallow painfully as nausea grips me. Doesn’t he get seasick living in this floating mansion in the middle of the sea? Doesn’t he worry that he might drown in all this water so far from any shore?

Javier cocks his head to the side, smiling. The gesture is meant to be casual. Disarming. I can tell my fear amuses him. It’s written on his angular face, in his cat-like black eyes, clear as day.

Javier Marin is a panther. This boat, his jungle. And me? I am nothing but food to him. Another meal to snatch up in his

jaws and consume.

“Sweet sixteen and never had a cock inside you,” Javier replies, draping the tie ever-so-casually around my neck. I don’t dare breathe as he pulls one end, only stopping when the knot rests firmly at the hollow where my collarbones meet. “You’re not a child, sweet girl. You’re a missed opportunity.”

His expression shifts from predatory to something softer, but that doesn’t make me feel better. He reaches his hand out to me, the large red ruby ring he wears around his middle finger glinting in the moonlight. It’s the exact color of the figure-hugging satin dress he has chosen for me. The same color of his tie, the same tie that winds tight around my throat, an unspoken promise of violence.

Everything in this world is the color of blood.

“Birdie.” Javier snaps his fingers, signaling his impatience. “Come.”

I accept his grasp, letting him pull me to my feet. The luxury super yacht cuts through choppy water, and I look like a baby giraffe learning to walk in patent stilettos.

“You look lovely.” Javier pushes me toward a full-length mirror beside the bed. “See?”

I do see, even though I’d rather not. I see a man, poised and lethal, immaculately dressed, with casual violence in his eyes. Then I see myself—a girl, barely a woman, trying to look older with makeup and fancy clothes that don’t fool anyone. Grief has hollowed my stomach and paled my cheeks. The dark circles under my eyes won’t go away. My gaze trails down to the thin metal band clasped tight around my wrist, and the sight of it—locked and immovable—forces my attention away from the mirror. I scratch my wrist furiously as I try to get my fingernails to the flesh the band is pressed tightly against.

“You’ll get used to it,” Javier says, watching me. “Mommy did.”

I think of my mother, lying lifeless on the ground. The silver band around her wrist was the only thing that marred her

pale skin. I marvel at how cruel Javier Marin is and how he cuffed the same bracelet on me in the wake of her demise.

“I came to you for help,” I protest feebly, unable to take my eyes off the silver that ensures he knows my every move. It’s fused from a special alloy and locked with a key only he possesses.

Javier chuckles. “Yes, you did,” he agrees. “What a *silly* girl you are.”

CHAPTER 1



ONE WEEK AGO

“*Y*ou should keep your helmet on while you fuck me,” my girlfriend breathes as I’m swinging myself off my Ducati in her father’s four-car garage.

Jesus. She’s not usually this horny for it. Maybe it’s the leather jacket. Maybe she’s been reading smut again. It’s never predictable with Lindsey, but I don’t usually mind. She’s got just enough crazy to keep this island interesting... and she can suck dick like she’s trying to suck your soul out of your body.

I kick the stand open with my boot, unfolding the strong metal and gently easing my bike to the side, making sure the kickstand takes the thousand pounds of weight before I let go of the handlebars.

I’m frowning, confused, not that Lindsey can see my face with the visor of my helmet still closed. I snap it open, raising my eyebrows as I see what Lindsey’s wearing.

“What are you wearing?” I ask. “It’s Saturday. And your skirt is... *short*.”

Her green eyes dance with mischief, her full lips quirking into a devilish smile. She’s a stunner, my girlfriend, but the schoolgirl outfit she’s wearing—really just the tartan skirt and white blouse she wears each day to Valmont Academy—ain’t it. She’s rolled the skirt up around her waist so high that the hem barely covers her ass. She’s wearing her half-buttoned school blouse, a calligraphy V embroidered above the left breast as part of an intricate Valmont Academy school crest ...

and just below the embroidery, I can make out the outline of a hard nipple.

She's not wearing a bra. Interesting.

I ignore her earlier request, taking my helmet off and hanging it on the handle of the motorcycle. "Lindsey, come on. I'm here to study."

She laughs. "For what? Target practice? I'll let you practice in me."

I shake my head. "Is your dad here?"

"Nope!" She's practically bouncing as she takes my gloved hand, leading me through the garage into the kitchen and through her parent's house to the sweeping staircase that will take us to her bedroom.

"Are they due home?" I ask, picking up my pace as Lindsey takes the stairs two at a time. I can see brief flashes of her bare ass as she bounds up the stairs—she's not wearing any panties. Nice. My dick is hard at the sight of her pink pussy peeking out from under the same school uniform she wears to sit beside me in the classes we share at Valmont Academy.

In her bedroom, I take a moment to look around. Four-poster princess bed. Dollhouse in the corner. A hand-painted canvas of Harry Styles on the wall. Lindsey is twenty like me, but she's the definition of a Nepo baby, a total daddy's girl, and a spoiled brat.

Still. I can't really say no, can I, when she's already sliding up on the end of her bed and spreading her legs in a suggestion that I'd have to be an idiot not to understand. I grin, stepping closer so I'm standing in the gap between her spread thighs. Her pussy is already glistening wet and ready for me.

Not a bad way to spend a Saturday afternoon.

The schoolgirl outfit is nice, but I want to see the whole package. Lindsey has some of the prettiest tits, and right now, her shirt is in the way. I start unbuttoning between her breasts, and she pushes my hand away. "Keep it on. Pretend we're in the bathrooms at the academy," she purrs. "Pretend we've got

five minutes until we get caught.” She sits up and starts unbuttoning my fly, pulling my boxer briefs down for better access, moaning when she gets her hand around my engorged cock. I mean, we do fuck in the bathrooms at the academy all the time, so this roleplay is hardly something new. I go with it, though. Hell, if it gets her off, that’s only a bonus.

I grip her hips, pulling her closer to me so that her ass is hanging off the edge of the bed. Lining my tip with her pussy, I push into her slowly at first, testing how receptive she is. I’ve barely touched her, and she’s already dripping. *Definitely reading smut before I got here, then.* She’s so wet, her pussy practically sucks me in, and I slam the rest of my length into her, bottoming out against her cervix as she screams. It’s a different scream from normal... almost a scream of pain. Lindsey’s a kinky bitch, so pain isn’t always a bad thing for her... but this doesn’t feel right.

I freeze immediately. “You okay?”

She nods, sucking in a breath as she grips my arms. “Yeah.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“Shut up and fuck me already.”

You got it. I pull out of her and flip her onto her front, dragging her ass up so she has to balance on her hands and knees. I push her head down into the mattress, so it’s just her ass up in the air, and ease back into her wet heat. Her pussy is soaked, and the smacking sound it makes when my cock slides in and out of it are obscene.

“Oh, God,” Lindsey cries, slamming back into me with each thrust. “Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*”

I lean over her, pushing her shirt up to plant kisses along her spine. As I do, I grip my hand around the top of her right arm to steady myself. As soon as I start to apply pressure to her bicep, she flinches, burying her head in the mattress. Normally I’d assume she was about to come, but her pussy isn’t pulsing, and her skin isn’t flushed pink with orgasm—

she's just flinching as if I've hurt her. *What the fuck is going on?*

A horrible suspicion envelops me as I gently drag my thumb down her upper arm, ever so gently, feeling for the little plastic rod that sits under her skin and acts as long-term contraception.

I can't find it. Doesn't mean it's not there, and I can't see her arm properly with the shirt sleeve covering it, but still....

No. It couldn't be that. I'm overthinking. Still, I decide to test my wild theory.

"I'm getting close," I lie. "Turn over, I want to cum in your mouth."

"No," she says quickly, pulling away from me, so my cock slides out of her and flipping onto her back. "I want you to cum inside me."

Do you now? Instead of slamming back in her, I spread her pussy lips open with my thumbs, sliding two fingers in and slowly finger-fucking her. She starts to protest until I use my thumb to rub firm circles against her clit. As I continue to fuck my fingers into her pussy, I'm specifically feeling for the strings of her IUD. They never bother me, but I can sometimes feel them when we fuck, depending on the angle and how wet she is. Yes, she's got two forms of implanted, long-term birth control, just like every other female of childbearing age on Valmont island, an insurance policy against unplanned pregnancies. Really, it's just a rule made by a council of mostly rich older men to enable them to fuck anyone they want, raw, without fear of being baby trapped or otherwise extorted by way of unwanted pregnancies. They don't even sell condoms on this side of the island; that's how tight this shit is sewn up. God forbid some dude brings an STD here and starts spreading it with his diseased dick. It's why we all get blood tests once a fortnight for our "general healthy and well-being." Yeah. You can't tell me anyone cares *that* much about my iron levels, thank you very much. It's just one more way to control us, to remind us we're dutiful residents of the island and members of Valmont's elite society.

Anyway. I'm not worried about STDs right now. What I'm worried about is that my girlfriend is acting weird as fuck, and it hurts her when I touch either of the places she's usually got birth control implanted. I can't find the IUD strings with my fingers. And I can't feel the rod in her arm.

I could just flat out ask her, but I know she won't tell me. And I need to know. I need to know if she's gone and done something stupid.

I'm going to have to pull out every inch of my grade school drama classes to convince her of my next performance.

"Oh, you feel so good," I say, sinking my dick back into her pussy. She whimpers as I rip her shirt open to see her full tits bounce with every thrust of my cock. I play with her nipples, licking each one to form stiff peaks, my right hand hovering at her elbow.

"I'm so fucking close," Lindsey whispers, her eyes glazing over as I pound her like a ragdoll. Wrapping my left hand around her throat, I squeeze just enough to turn her on. She loves being choked. Almost instantly, her pussy gets tighter, and she reaches a hand down to rub her clit. "So close!" she cries out.

Good. Nice and distracted.

I seize my opportunity, grabbing the elbow-length hem of her shirt sleeve and pulling it up her arm, almost to the shoulder, finding a large waterproof bandage stuck to the spot where her birth control implant usually rests under her skin. Her eyes fly open, and she starts to push me away, but I've got her by the throat, my hips pinning her lower half to the bed. I'm much stronger than her. And now I'm *pissed*.

She was just about to come, too, and I can see the frustration written across her face as I feel the tightening pulses of her pussy dissipate before she even got to strangle my cock with the force of her orgasm. I squeeze her throat harder, eliciting a choke from her as I rip the bandage from her arm.

Time stops, or at least that's how it feels. My stomach twists as I see the bloody hack job she—or someone else—has done to the skin of her bicep. Several deep gouges have been cut into her flesh, and the bruise-mottled wounds have been glued back together poorly with sterile strips. Blood still oozes out of the tiny gaps between them. I take my fingers and press on the spot where her implant was, a scream trapped in Lindsey's throat that my grip doesn't allow to escape. There's nothing there. She's removed it. I frantically think back to the last time we fucked. A week ago. I've seen her in a bathing suit since then, with no evidence of a wound on her arm. I'm in the clear. She can't be pregnant. I don't think.

I let go of her because I know if I keep my hands on her, I'll fucking strangle her to death. And I can't kill my girlfriend. I'm too young to be charged with murder. Especially on Valmont Island, where the punishment for murder is a little... different from the real world.

Just like the punishment for removing your birth control in secret.

I can't say I've ever respected the mandatory birth control rule. Watching my own sister recover after having to get an IUD inserted at the age of *twelve* was fucking horrifying. At least they put her under for the procedure and then prescribed her oxy to keep the pain down, a small mercy I'm told isn't a thing on the mainland. We're very into our painkillers here. Probably why there are so many pill-popper housewives amongst the elite, who stay high on opiates while their husbands fuck around with younger women.

It's also why we have a resident doctor whose primary role is attending to the aforementioned birth control implants... and aborting the occasional accidents that still inevitably happen.

Lindsey lies on the bed, grabbing at her throat as she gasps in sips of air. "I'm sorry," she rasps, panicking. "I'm sorry."

A brief moment of guilt courses through me. Hope I didn't do permanent damage. But then I remember that she's trying to cause me eighteen years of permanent damage right now,

and the guilt vanishes, replaced by a fiery need to punish her for what she's done.

My cock is still semi-hard. I wrap my hand around myself and pump a few times, stepping back into the juncture between Lindsey's splayed thighs as she looks at me with a mixture of panic and wonder. Does she think I'm so desperate that I'll take the risk of impregnating her and just fuck her with no protection anyway?

Oh, baby. It's going to be so much worse than that.

"You want my cum inside you, huh?" My voice is dripping with venom. Lindsey begins to crawl back up the bed, away from me, but I'm faster. I grab her ankles and pull her back to the edge of the bed, holding her down with one arm over her hips, staring up at her as she tries to push me off. "N-no," she whimpers. "It was stupid. M-m so sorry."

"Lie still or I'll go straight to the council and tell them what you've done."

Her green eyes widen in horror. "You wouldn't." She's terrified for her fucking life. I might as well be holding a gun to her head.

"I *so* would. And you know what they'd do to you, don't you, baby?"

She doesn't respond. "*Don't you?!*" I growl.

She nods as tears roll down her cheeks.

"Say it," I demand. "Tell me. What they'd do."

She swallows a hiccuped sob. "Th-they'd take out my ovaries," she weeps.

I nod. "Yes, they would. And then what would they do to you?"

The pause is deafening. Inside the silence is everything terrible about this secretive island society we're told we are so lucky to be born into. Luck is a double-edged sword, at least on Valmont Island.

"Sell me. Marry me off. Or give me away."

“That’s right. To who?”

She covers her face, crying harder. I almost feel sorry for her. *Almost*. “Whoever will have me. An enemy. A friend. A brothel. Whoever has use for a whore.”

I nod. “That’s right.”

I ease my arm off her hips and stand, tucking my rapidly softening dick back into my jeans.

“Are you going to tell the Empyrean table? Oh my God. I’m so sorry, Darius. Please, you have to believe me. I think I’m fucking bipolar or something. I just... I just had this crazy image of us, married, with a baby. You’d go to work and I’d take care of our precious baby and bake and make you dinner and we’d just live together and be happy and fuck all the time, and... I mean, what the hell else is there to do with our lives on this island?”

I look up at the ceiling. “You can’t even bake. Not that I give a shit about your baking skills.” I take a breath, trying to tamp down my rage. “You should have waited until we were married. Until we had permission. The right way. There are rules. I know you know the rules.”

“Come on, Darius,” she says. “I know you don’t love me. You won’t marry me. You’re just keeping me around until you find a better option. I’m not your future wife—I’m your current thing to pass the time.”

Well. I’ve never really thought about it in such stark terms, but she’s not wrong. I just didn’t think she knew that.

“What are you going to do?” Lindsey asks, in a small voice.

What am I going to do? I should report her. I have to, don’t I? Keeping secrets like this goes against everything the Empyrean Table stands for. But... I’ve known this girl since we were toddlers being raised by our nannies while our mothers lunched at the country club and floated through life as functional alcoholics. “I’m going to make you a deal.”

She sits up, wiping her eyes as some of her panic dissolves. “W-what kind of deal?”

“I won’t tell anyone you’re a little would-be cum thief, but only on these conditions.”

She winces at the term *cum thief* but doesn’t argue. “I’ll do anything.”

“First. I’m taking you to get both contraceptive implants replaced this afternoon. I’m going to watch while they do it. Do you understand?”

She nods. “Of course. Thank you.”

“Second. You’re mine now. And I don’t mean my girlfriend. You’re my errand girl, my bang maid, my fleshlight. You do what I say *when* I say. That goes from picking up my drycleaning to washing my cars to sucking my dick when I’m bored. Maybe even fucking my friends if I feel like they need some pussy.”

She nods eagerly until I get to the part about fucking my friends.

“Your *friends*?” she asks uneasily.

“Anywhere, anytime,” I say viciously. “That goes for time, place, and holes in your body. You can struggle all you want, but it’s not rape if I say it’s okay. And why is that?” I ask, waiting for her answer. I clear my throat.

“Because I’m yours, now,” she repeats.

“And because you’re a?”

“Cum thief.” Her cheeks are red with shame.

“Don’t worry though, you won’t get pregnant. You’ll be protected from that, at least. Can’t say the same for whatever diseases those guys might pick up from the mainland. Because you know they’re going to take you raw every single time.”

Lindsey’s eyes fill with tears. I’m a fucking asshole, a terrible man—and I don’t care.

“Okay,” she says, her eyes distant.

I’m making this shit up on the spot, but I know the real thing I want from her—information. I’ll save that for last.

“Shhh,” I say gently, pushing her back down on the bed and grabbing her knees, shoving them into her chest so that her pussy and asshole are exposed to me. She’s still wet from earlier, and I spread that wetness over her clit, massaging circles that make her legs shake. My cock grows hard again as I think of her fucking whoever I say, whenever I say when all she’ll want is for *me* to fuck her. I am a terrible person, but so is she. A match made in hell. I slam inside her once more, her face going slack with pleasure, but it’s short-lived. I pull out and move slightly lower, pressing the blunt tip of my cock against the firm rosebud of her asshole.

“No,” she says, panicking. I raise my eyebrows. “This is your punishment, Lindsey. You wanted me to cum inside you? That’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

“Please, don’t,” she sobs.

“Okay. I’ll just tell the Empyrean table then.”

“No!” she yells. “No. I’ve just...I’ve never done that before.”

“I know,” I say, pushing against the tight ring of muscles hard enough to make her scream. I slap my hand over her mouth, squeezing so no sound can escape her mouth.

“Shh,” I whisper, breaching her asshole, almost blacking out from how tight she is around me. “Take it like a good girl.”

It hurts her, but it hurts me, too. When I look down, there’s blood. *Childbirth probably hurts more*, I reason. That’s what she was trying to get out of me. A child. And that pain lasts a lifetime. Better for me to punish her now.

“I’m not a complete monster, Lindsey. You can touch your pussy. Make yourself come while I fuck you in your virgin asshole.”

She’s crying too hard to really hear me. I raise my hand and slap her pussy hard, hitting her clit, making her scream as she jerks in shock.

“Touch yourself,” I order her. “Or I’ll keep spanking.”

Lindsey's gone, though, no longer listening to anything I'm saying, no longer able to hear me. It must really hurt. I'm not exactly small, and she's so incredibly tight back here.

I stop pumping into her and take her hand, placing it on her clit for her, helping her rub herself. I refuse to let her come by my own hand.

"Lindsey," I whisper, grabbing her chin and forcing her to look at me. "Tell me whose idea this was. Tell me who did this to you, and I'll go easy." *Easier*, anyway. I doubt that's possible when there's no gentle introduction to being fucked in the ass for the first time, especially with zero preparation, not even a finger in there first to loosen her up first.

She seems to come back to the room to me. Her green eyes shine with tears, with terror. "I can't," she weeps.

"It'll be our secret," I whisper, my cock still seated inside her ass, but I'm perfectly still, no longer moving. She's started touching her clit, finally, and her body responds instantly, softening bit by bit, her tight asshole relaxing in tiny increments, stretching to accommodate my sudden, violent intrusion.

I think I know already. I think I've known deep down that things for Lindsey aren't exactly... *normal* at home. She's never said anything, but I've suspected since we were kids.

Fuck it. I knock her hand away from its lazy half-assed attempt at rubbing an orgasm out and set my thumb against her clit, just as I start moving ever-so-slowly in and out, in and out. The blood, as twisted as it is, acts as a lubricant, allowing me to saw in and out of her. She moans, fresh tears rolling down from the sides of her eyes, soaking into her hairline. Some tears dribble down into her ears, and I'm not sure if the moans she's making are from pleasure or pain.

Both. They're both.

"Tell me," I urge her, picking up my pace, circling her swollen clit faster as I rut into her ass. I lean over, taking a nipple into my mouth and biting down. She cries out, closing her eyes. And even though I'm furious, I'm starting to realize

how much I'm enjoying this, too. There's no pussy as tight as Lindsey's pulsing ass. No fist could squeeze my cock this hard. No other betrayal is so devious that I could ever fathom sodomizing my own girlfriend as she begs me to stop.

"It was your daddy, wasn't it?" I murmur, slamming into her as I work her clit. She gasps, her eyes flying open as she meets my knowing gaze. "He cut this out of you," I touch the wound on her forearm with my free hand. "And he ripped the IUD out with his dirty hands, didn't he? So I would put a baby in you. So he could manipulate me. So he could try to take my seat at the Empyrean Table."

She's so close to coming. So close. Juices leak from her poor empty pussy, and onto my cock as I slam into her ass. "Tell me, Lindsey, and you'll be spared the Table's judgment. This was your Daddy's idea, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she gasps, her tits bouncing as I continue raping her tight hole.

I knew it. But that's not all I know.

"That's why you weren't a virgin our first time, isn't it?" She's so close. So achingly close to coming on my dick. "You were saving it for someone special, but he took it first. Say it, Lindsey."

Shame and pleasure are at war, her expression distraught.

"Yes!" she screams, the first pulse of her orgasm building. "Oh, fuck! He f-fucked me! Took pictures and videos. He told me I was his good girl!"

Her orgasm rises and falls, her entire body tensing, and all I can think is *that fucking monster*. Screwing his own daughter. We were seventeen our first time, and she wasn't a virgin. So he'd already fucked her before that. I'll make sure he gets punished for the way he's taken her devotion to him and twisted her to be a weapon to use for his own sick, twisted desires for control.

"Did you like it?" I ask. I don't need to know. It's beyond the information I require. Now, I'm just being a fucking prick. "Did Daddy make you come your first time?"

She nods vacantly, and is she... ? Damn. She's about to come again. "H-he licked my pussy until I came. Told me how special I was."

"And then?" I'm going to hell. I know this.

Lindsey chokes on her words as her next peak builds. "And then he held his hand over my mouth while he popped my cherry."

"It hurt?"

She nods, squeezing her eyes shut. "Oh, G-god. It hurt, yes, it hurt. More than this. I was s-screaming. He just k-kept telling me I was his good girl."

"You're *my* good girl now," I tell her, and her entire body comes alive as I say the words. Her orgasm is so hard, so long, that she nearly breaks my dick off as her asshole clenches around it. It's so tight, I feel like I'm about to black out. "Say it," I grind out.

"I'm your good girl!" she screams, her entire body seizing up again, her hips rising off the bed, her empty cunt making a wet smacking sound as my pelvis slams against it. That final clench sends me over the edge, my cum spurting from my cock, groaning as I fill her up. The relief is exquisite. I'm a fucking animal as I push her knees to her shoulders and bury my dick inside her as hard as I can, knowing it hurts her, hoping the pain teaches her a lesson.

I pull out of her, my cock still twitching as a string of pink-tinged cum seeps from her asshole, clinging to the tip of my cock, keeping us connected.

"Don't move," I instruct her, reaching for my phone. I snap a few photos of her gaping asshole, of the cum seeping out, and I make sure to get a few with her face in them. I take photos of her arm wound, too.

"Where'd you put your IUD after he took it out?" I ask her. Lindsey is staring at the ceiling now, boneless, her legs still spread wide as cum spills from her ass onto the comforter she's laying on. When she doesn't answer, I lean over, about to

click my fingers in front of her face. It's only then that she focuses on me.

"It's under the dollhouse," she snaps. I rake my eyes up and down her pitiful form. "Go take a shower, little cum thief."

Slowly, she moves off the bed and stumbles into the attached ensuite, more pinkish cum sliding down her thighs. In any other situation the sight of my thoroughly-fucked girlfriend struggling to walk, dripping with my cum, would be beautiful. Now, it's just sad. A single pulse of regret twists inside my stomach before I tamp it down.

She lied to me. She tried to baby-trap me.

And she could have cost me my fucking life.

I stalk over to the dollhouse, lifting the entire thing up and tossing it to the ground. It splits apart when it hits the hardwood, the sound of destroying something so precious to her satisfying beyond belief. Sure enough, the IUD, a small, Y-shaped piece of plastic with small white strings hanging from the bottom, sits on the table, no longer hidden by the dollhouse. I take the IUD and shove it in my jacket pocket, zipping the pocket closed as I disrobe, piling my clothes on the edge of the bed. I've never fucked anyone to the point of making their ass bleed before, and I would very much like to clean myself up before I get the hell out of here. As I approach the ensuite, I see Lindsey sitting in the bottom of the shower, the water beating down on her as she shrinks away from me. "Please, not again," she begs.

I shake my head, holding my hands out to help her up. "I just want to wash up," I say, lifting her to her feet. She nods, looking beyond me to the broken dollhouse she can now see from this angle. A peculiar look ghosts across her face, and then it's gone, and she's blank once more.

"I broke it," I explain, taking a bar of soap from the ledge and starting to clean Lindsey up.

She nods again, her eyes still riveted to the scattered pieces. "He bought it for me," she whispers. "After the first—"

after my first time. For my birthday. For being a good girl.”

I freeze mid-lather as a memory slams into me full-force. My twin sister Davina and I, twelve years old, in this very bedroom, a week after every girl in our grade had their IUDs inserted. We all got to miss a week of school. The girls spent theirs being forcibly operated on, and then bleeding and cramping at home. The boys got to attend a camp on the mainland where we played laser tag and went to an archery range. Nothing is fair here. Nothing.

The day I returned was Lindsey’s twelfth birthday. Her mother threw an elaborate garden party, rented ponies, balloon garlands, a total show of excess. And when Lindsey was overwhelmed Davina and I snuck up to her bedroom with her, where we hid in this very shower, where my eyes landed upon that fucking dollhouse for the first time.

Lindsey’s birthday present.

Her twelfth birthday present.

And now, I’ve come to learn, a present in exchange for her innocence.

He forced her when she was twelve years old. His own daughter. *Jesus Christ*.

“Lindsey,” I say.

“You don’t understand,” she whispers.

I look back at the dollhouse. *Twelve years old*. “I do now,” I say.

“I didn’t really want a baby,” she says softly. “I just wanted you. That’s the only reason I went along with his plan.”

“I’ll never forgive you for what you’ve done. I’ll never trust you. I’ll never touch you again. But neither will he. Okay?”

That seems to bring her some kind of relief. “Okay,” she agrees.

CHAPTER 2



ONE DAY AGO

*I*t's the same every time. I drive my speedboat to Devil's Pass—a small atoll filled with colorful fish and completely fenced off from public access—to make my exchange. I hand over thousands of dollars to the boat that pulls up alongside mine and get a fat wad of whatever party drug we're currently into in return.

My friends and I might live on a private island with surveillance and constant monitoring, but there are always ways around that. As a member of the Prince family, I enjoy a couple of unique perks that none of my peers have—a dead father and absent mother means I have very little supervision, compared to most. And being the son of one of the most powerful families on the island—in name, and legacy, anyway—means I am allowed a certain amount of freedom lesser families will never experience. Not even my own sister was free of the shackles of Valmont Island's Emphyrean table—a fancy term for the council that makes the rules and enforces them. My father was on the council before he died, which gives our family standing, but it's still an elite society of sexist pigs still operating this Island. A girl sets so much as a foot out of line, and she's punished swiftly, and brutally.

Another reason why I haven't told anyone about Lindsey's little fucked-up attempt at baby-trapping me, aside from the doctor who replaced her IUD with a rod in her arm that will stop any pregnancies for the next three years. I'm not a good guy, but I'm not deplorable. If the Emphyrean council found out

Lindsey had secretly removed her birth control in an attempt to get pregnant, they would force her to have a hysterectomy the same day.

There are no second chances in a place like this.

Which is why it's ironic that nobody gives a shit what I'm doing at any given time. Who I'm fucking. Where I'm going. The official rules are to never leave the island without first filing a travel notice, kind of the way a pilot files a flight plan before taking off, but I haven't submitted one of those bullshit notices in months. Since my sister disappeared, I give less of a damn each day about following rules made up by a bunch of old perverts intent on controlling everything and everyone to favor their selfish interests.

Speaking of who I'm fucking... I'm waiting for Faye Marin to arrive, so I can finally show her how we do it on Valmont Island. We've been meeting once a month to do this exchange since she took over running drugs from her brother Rafe. It's been a good exercise in restraint for me, I have to say. Faye's made it pretty clear that she wants my cock, but I've been a good boy, loyal to my girlfriend Lindsey—until now. That little Cum Thief, as I've affectionately started calling her, doesn't get one lick of my loyalty, or my tongue on her pussy, ever again. Tonight I'm going to fuck Faye, and then I'm going to tell Lindsey all about it, in vivid detail, while she's sucking my dick. I probably won't shower in between. Let Lindsey taste the pussy I've been fucking and the cum she won't get to steal. I snicker at the thought of her disgust when Faye's speed boat docks beside mine....

...And Rafe Marin appears at the side, wearing a suit and tie, a discreet bubble mailer in one hand. I scowl, and Rafe must see the disappointment written across my face.

He looks ever-so-slightly bemused. "Not as pretty as you remember, huh? Or maybe I'm just not your type."

Down, boy. My dick deflates, along with my mood. Looks like the only thing Lindsey will be tasting tomorrow morning is regret as I pound her throat. Oh well. I smile at Rafe,

holding my own bubble mailer full of cash, as we meet at the edges of our respective vessels.

“It’s been a while, that’s all,” I say smoothly. “I was expecting your sister.” I shrug, extending my parcel for Rafe to take. His smile fades as he gestures for me to wait.

“What? Prices increasing again? Come on, Marin.”

He shakes his head, shifting from foot to foot. “No, it’s not that. I need to talk to you about something. Can I come aboard?”

I snort. “No offense, but you’re definitely not my type.”

“It’s about your sister,” Rafe’s expression is grave. “It’s about Davina.”

I almost drop my bubble mailer of cash in the ocean.

A few minutes later Rafe sits across from me, as I digest what he’s just told me. As I try to process the short video of surveillance footage he’s just played on his smartphone, his arm outstretched so I can watch the grainy image play on the screen.

Davina. And some guy wearing a mask. Entering The Riverwood’s sex club. A moment later, slightly better quality footage of a girl who resembles my sister waiting patiently as she’s laid down on her back and tied to a narrow bench, blindfolded, and then fucked by several men, all wearing different Halloween masks. Davina, my dear sister, used to have to cover her eyes if we were watching a zombie movie and it got too violent. I would very much like to do the same right now, especially when the third guy in line is wearing a zombie mask as he fucks the shit out of my sister. Unfortunately, I can’t look away. I need to know who these men are.

But I want to look away.

I want to smash this phone and drop it into the ocean.

I want to erase the last five minutes from my mind forever.

The footage makes me want to vomit.

“It was definitely her?” I repeat.

Rafe nods. “It was definitely your sister.”

“Who’s the guy with her?”

Rafe shrugs. “I don’t know.”

Yeah, fucking right.

“And it was the week she disappeared?”

Rafe pushes the smartphone toward me again. “I don’t want to watch that shit again,” I protest.

“The time stamp,” Rafe points to the top corner of the screen, dragging the paused video with his thumb and forefinger to zoom into the date. Two nights before Davina and Heath took off on their ill-fated romantic cruise around Valmont Island’s more secluded bays. “The boat. It disappeared two days after that, right?”

I rub my fingers across my chin as I size up Rafe Marin. Videos are horrifyingly easy to doctor. He could be making this whole thing up.

“What do you want?” I ask finally. “Why are you showing me this?”

“I don’t want anything—other than your assurance we never had this discussion.”

“What discussion?” I reply quickly.

Rafe’s a smart guy, he catches my drift. “Exactly.”

“You didn’t tell me why you’re showing me this. If it’s legit, you know I’m going to have to find out who those guys are. Especially the one she arrived with. That could fuck with your family’s business dealings. So why risk it?”

Rafe nods, taking the phone and sliding it into his jacket pocket. “Because if my sister went missing and someone knew something, I’d want to be told.”

Huh. “That’s interesting.”

“What? That I care about my sister?”

“Oh please, we both know how much you care for your sister. Almost as much as your father cares for her, right?” I knew Rafe and Faye had some twisted thing going the moment I met them both, and my suspicions were only amplified when I had the misfortune of meeting their father at the beginning of our business relationship. That family is beyond weird. “But that’s not what’s interesting. What’s interesting is that you referred to my sister as missing. Most people refer to her as dead. Including the coroner, who issued her death certificate.”

“Well, there’s no body, right?” Rafe asks, completely ignoring my pointed jab at his incestuous little family. “No washed-up remains? A femur? A skull? A dismembered foot?”

I shake my head. “Nothing. Not even a single fucking strand of her hair.”

“Then she’s still missing,” Rafe states. “Especially in the world you and I live in. No remains, no proof of death.”

He regards me silently for a moment. And then, finally: “Do *you* think she’s dead?”

“Not for a single fucking millisecond have I ever thought she was dead,” I reply confidently. “Who’s the guy with her in the video?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you know something. What are you leaving out?”

Rafe struggles to articulate the next part. “There, ah... there might be somebody who knows who he is. She hasn’t told me, but for the right price, she might tell you.”

“She won’t tell you, and she might tell me. Sounds like a great fucking lead, Marin.”

“For the right price,” Rafe clarifies. “Question is, how much is your sister worth to you?”

It takes every bit of strength and self-control I possess not to stand and rip his larynx out of his throat with my bare hands. “She’s worth every penny I have. She’s worth the entire ocean. You understand. You have a sister you love. Maybe even more than I love mine.”

Rafe snorts, but he won't bite. He won't address his fucked up relationship with Faye, no matter how much shit I give him about it. *Oh, well.*

"This mystery woman got a name?" I ask.

Rafe smirks. "You know I can't tell you that." He glances at my balled fists. "I can arrange a meeting. Okay? It'll be on the mainland, most likely, somewhere public. This woman, she's paranoid. And rightly so, by the sounds of it. She's got people looking for her."

"If she's got people looking for her, toss her on your boat and bring her to me. I'll come unarmed, by myself, and she can name her price. If she's worried about retribution, I'll take her to Valmont Island and give her asylum."

Rafe immediately looks worried. "No island. She can't go there."

"But I can keep her safe there!" I explode. I'm frowning so hard, trying to figure out Rafe's reluctance, when it smashes into me like a wall of bricks.

"She's from the island," I whisper. "Your informant. Isn't she?"

Rafe pales. "You shut your fucking mouth," he jabs his finger into the table. "I find out you breathed a word of this to anyone, I'll have your goddamn head, Prince."

I fall back in my seat, stunned. "She's from the fucking island." My mind is going a million miles an hour as I try to think of who this mystery woman could be, who's from Valmont Island who just might know the guy my sister was fucking two nights before she disappeared?

"Nobody gets away," I whisper. "Nobody."

"You know that's not true," Rafe says pointedly.

"What, your father?" I reply. "He didn't get away. He was banished."

Rafe shrugs. "Being banished isn't common, but it happens."

I shake my head, my skull burning with the start of a blinding headache. “The only reason Javier’s not dead in a hole somewhere is because of his seat at the Empyrean Table. I’ve never heard of another person being granted the same. Ever. Have you?”

“Sometimes the dead don’t die,” Rafe says cryptically. “Like your sister, maybe.”

Hopefully. *Shit.*

More silence.

“Why the fuck did you wait so long to show me this?” I ask finally.

Rafe looks sheepish. “Well, that’s the thing. You have to promise no harm comes to her.”

“To who?” Oh. *Shit.*

“I thought you’d already been told,” Rafe adds. “I was assured that you’d been shown this video months ago.”

“Your dumb ass sister,” I guess, irritation and rage rising in my chest. “She was meant to tell me, wasn’t she?”

“I have your word you’ll not harm her?”

I sigh, rolling my eyes. “I would like to hurt her a little bit, Rafe, yeah. Just to find out why she didn’t tell me this extremely pertinent information regarding my missing sister.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. “But I won’t. For your sake. Since you brought me this. She’d better not show her fucking face here again, though.”

Rafe produces a gun and places it on the table between us, his finger on the trigger. A warning. “She’ll be here next week for the exchange,” he says, cold as fucking ice. “And the next week, and the week after that. And you’ll say nothing about this. You won’t hurt her. You won’t even touch her.”

I stare at the gun Rafael Marin dared to bring onto my fucking boat, gritting my teeth as I try to stay calm. “I might have to hatefuck her, just to get this out of my system. You know what I mean, right?”

Rafe smirks, his eyes simmering with rage as he brings the barrel of the gun up under my chin in one swift motion. Pressing it into my flesh, he cocks the hammer, the sound deafening when it's my fucking neck about to get a bullet. "We're not friends, but I'll do anything I can to help you find your sister, Darius. In exchange, you'll stay the fuck away from mine. Are we clear?"

You cheeky motherfucker, putting a gun to me on my own boat.

"Crystal," I reply. Rafe eases the gun from my skin, releasing the hammer before holstering it inside his jacket. I massage my neck, venom in my gaze as I think about hatefucking his sister anyway. I need to hatefuck *someone*, after the week from hell I've had, and Rafe was right—he's not really my type. My girlfriend's pussy is no longer open for business, per my rules. Maybe I'll have to keep fucking her ass instead, a little painful as punishment, but I'm afraid she'd start to like it, the twisted little sociopath. Maybe I'll just fuck nobody, keep all of this hate and rage festering inside me, and use it to find my sister and the person—or people—who stole her away.

"Can I trouble you for a copy of that video, friend?"

Rafe nods, tapping his fingers on the table as he stands. "I just texted it to you. I mean it, dude. Keep this between us. And stay away from Faye. Or I'll let her slit your throat. You know she'd Basic Instinct you in the chest with an icepick if I let her have half a chance."

I pull my phone out of my jeans pocket and open the message Rafe has just sent me, pressing play to make sure the video works. Satisfied, I hit stop and toss my phone on the table, standing as Rafe holds out the bubble mailer of drugs. I take it, handing him the cash in exchange.

"I'll see you 'round, Darius," Rafe says, climbing from my boat to his in one swift motion.

Not if I see you first. He guns his engine and takes off, leaving me with a cloud of gasoline fumes, a bunch of party drugs, and a new lead to find Davina.

I stare down at my phone uneasily.

What the fuck have you gotten yourself into, dear sister?

But my discomfort is joined by something else—hope.

This might be the way I find her.

This might be how I bring Davina home.

CHAPTER 3



BIRDIE

NOW

*T*ry not to look out of sorts when I emerge from my trashed bedroom. I'm going to be late for the school bus if I don't haul ass, and I've got zero time for anyone's bullshit this morning. I only have two weeks left of school, and I can't miss any more classes.

The coast seems to be clear. I tiptoe into the tiny kitchen that takes pride of place in the double-wide trailer my family calls home. My stomach growls insistently as I open our narrow pantry, hoping something of substance has miraculously appeared since the last time I looked.

A single bulb of garlic, covered in fluorescent green and blue mold. A package of plain ramen noodles. And a giant black roach—its antennae twitching as we stare off in the gloom of another Monday morning in the shithole known as Santo Christo, California. *Great.*

Vegetable, carbohydrate, and a little bit of protein, I think to myself. All the ingredients for a five-star meal.

If my mood was bad before, it's in the goddamned gutter now.

"Morning," a familiar voice cuts through my brain fog.

Startled, I turn so quickly I stub my big toe on the bottom of the pantry door. "Fuck," I mutter.

Across the island countertop, my stepfather raises his brows. "A dollar for the swear jar," he says, his green eyes

taunting me as he holds his hand out in front of my face. The place where his pinky finger used to reside is mostly healed now, the crooked angle a stump of bone and thin tissue, but I still haven't gotten used to it. If he notices my revulsion at his missing digit, he doesn't show it.

I roll my eyes. "If I *had* a dollar, don't you think you would've found it when you ransacked my bedroom last night?"

Justin shrugs, pulling his hand away. His eyes are bloodshot. "You remember that?" he yawns.

"I wasn't drunk," I remind him.

"I wasn't, either," Justin argues, clearly offended.

I throw him a knowing look.

Justin frowns. "Okay, I was drunk. Sue me."

I choke on a strangled laugh. "Oh, yeah? What should I sue you for? This palace of yours? All those bars of gold you've got tucked away somewhere?"

"Who pissed in your cereal this morning?"

A snide remark about *piss being the only thing to put on cereal in this house* dies in my throat. I watch, instead, as Justin pulls a cigarette from behind his ear and squeezes past me on his way to the small gas-powered oven, turning one of the burners on and leaning over. The roof slopes sharply over the stovetop, though, and Justin is too uncoordinated to get his head in the right position to allow the end to meet the open flame. He growls, irritation pouring off him.

"Here," I say, snatching it from Justin's mouth. Pushing him aside, I lean over the burner. I make sure my hair is safely away from the fire, put the cigarette between my lips, and suck, drawing dirty smoke into my mouth without letting it get down into my lungs. In seconds, it's lit, the end burning brightly. Before I can turn around, I hear Justin make a weird choking noise.

"Jesus, Birdie," he says. "You *cannot* wear those shorts to school."

Blood pools in my cheeks as I whirl around, flicking the cigarette at Justin. It lands on the counter in front of him, still alight. “Thanks,” he says tonelessly, picking it up and taking a long drag.

He looks at me a few moments longer. “Find something in your Mom’s closet to wear.”

I don’t respond. I don’t need to. I just watch Justin, my eyebrows raised slightly, waiting for him to realize what he just suggested. The only items of clothing in my Mom’s closet that would fit me are far worse than the shorts situation I’m rocking right now. Because her clothes are *meant* to draw attention from men.

And *there it is*. I see the flash of understanding in Justin’s eyes as he eventually gets that his suggestion is a fucking terrible idea.

“There’s nothing wrong with these shorts,” I protest, looking down at what I’m wearing. A black t-shirt I found at goodwill, still relatively new, and a pair of cutoff denim shorts I’ve practically lived in for the past three summers.

Justin shakes his head. “Go and look in the mirror,” he says. “You look like some boy’s gonna rape you at the bus stop. Then again, your outfit is an open invitation. It wouldn’t even *be* rape.”

A quiet rage builds inside my chest. Yeah, my clothes don’t fit as well as they used to. I’m a late bloomer. I didn’t have hips and an ass when I shoplifted these shorts years ago. Back then, I was fourteen and I could make my eyes go really wide and cry and apologize and the cops would take pity on me. *Just don’t do it again, okay, sweetheart?* Now that I’m eighteen—and one warning away from being charged with a misdemeanor—I can’t really steal myself a new pair of threads without the risk of drawing a *different* kind of attention.

“How much money did you lose last night at The Riverwood?” I ask Justin pointedly. He looks at the ground, shrugging his shoulders. Alarm bells go off in my head. Usually, he’d have a snarky comeback, or on really bad days,

an open palm cracking against my cheek. When Justin is silent, that means he lost *a lot*.

“How much?” I ask, hearing the emptiness in my voice.

I sound so much older than I am. So much more broken.

“Five,” Justin mumbles.

“Five hundred dollars?” I exclaim. The last time Justin lost that much, we were so late on rent we almost ended up on the street.

He pales in front of me. I try to talk, but all that comes out is a keening noise. The taste of the cigarette is like poison on my lips, and my clothes suddenly feel so tight they’re suffocating me.

“Justin,” I say gravely. “Five ... *thousand* dollars?”

I wish he would have lied to me. I place my palms on the counter and take three panicked, shallow breaths. Can’t get a full breath. *Fuck*.

“You fucking *idiot*,” I whisper. I’m looking at his hand again, at the place where his little finger used to be. That was for less money than this. What are they going to take this time? What is his idiotic addiction to losing money he doesn’t have in the first place going to cost us today?

“Why would you take a risk like that? What is *wrong* with you?”

I feel like I’m drowning. And for a girl who couldn’t swim to save her life in a kid’s blow-up paddling pool, that feeling is completely and utterly consuming.

“Oh, don’t act like you’re all high and mighty,” Justin says, exhaling a cloud of smoke in my direction. “I see your judgy fuckin’ eyes, Birdie Moore. You think you’re so good? Where’s the money you earn for this family? What do *you* risk?”

He stubs the cigarette out violently, reaching for the packet of Marlboros in front of him and realizing he has to find a way to light the next one. “Jesus Christ,” he spits, throwing the

packet across the room. It lands on the battered sofa a few feet away.

It's not like this place is big enough to throw anything very far.

"Where'd you get the money?" I ask, trying to keep the trembling out of my voice. Justin puts his head in his hands, pressing his fingertips against his eyelids.

"Where did you get the money, Justin?" I ask again, louder this time. I'm going to be late. I'm going to miss the bus. I'm going to have to walk the thirty-five minutes it takes to get to Santo Christo High on foot. And when I get home this afternoon, Justin's probably going to be down a kidney, or another finger, or whatever body part it is that the loan sharks will take this time.

That's when it hits me. The cold truth, like being thrown face-first into a bathtub full of ice.

That's the moment I know we're all doomed. Because there's only one man I know of who would loan so much money to someone who could never pay it back. The kind of man who *relies* on the fact that you're perpetually broke because even with the outrageous interest he charges, it's not the financial profit he's after. It's using an impossible debt as leverage to get things from you that are much more precious than money.

"Javier Marin," I whisper. "He gave you the cash, didn't he?"

Justin whips his head up to meet my gaze, cold fury in his eyes. "I'll make it back," he snaps, and I'm not sure who he's trying harder to convince: me, or himself.

No, you won't.

"How can you keep doing this to her?" I blurt out. "How do you live with yourself? You know she's going to have to pay him back when you can't."

Justin looks at the floor, his brave facade crumbling. He knows what I'm asking. He knows *exactly* what kind of fate he

condemns my mother to every time he gambles away money that was never his to play with.

I hate him. I hate this trailer. I hate my *life*. And the worst part of all of those things is knowing I'll never escape any of them. The acceptance of this is almost more tragic than the stubborn belief I used to possess that one day, I might actually get out of Santo Christo alive.

I miss my bus. It whips by, a blur of peeling yellow paint and scratched-up windows. I'm so pissed—with myself, with Justin, with Javier Marin. *Who lends five thousand dollars to a guy who sucks at poker as hard as Justin does?* It's as if they know he'll lose. As if they bank on it.

It's true what they say—*The house always wins.*

I've seen the girls with blank expressions and shorts tighter than mine, girls who *owe* Javier. Men with bloodied knuckles and tight jaws who work off debts they'll never fully repay.

Hell, I live with two of these debt-ridden humans. My stepfather, a shitty gambler with a penchant for loan sharks, and my mother, still empty-eyed and subservient to the vices she pays for in ways I try so hard not to imagine.

I swallow back acid bile that keeps rising in my throat, and my hands don't stop shaking until I get to my first class thirty-five sweat-soaked minutes later. I'm late, but Santo Christo High is its usual chaotic and frenzied self. Nobody even notices me slip into homeroom and find an empty seat. I float from class to class, not really hearing anything in my lessons over the annoying buzz in my ears.

My stepfather borrowed five thousand dollars from the worst kind of man, and there's no way we'll be able to pay it back.

And truth be told, I don't know what will happen to Justin. I'm more worried about what this means for my mother. She's loyal to absolutely nobody, but when it comes to Justin, she has this giant blind spot. I guess he *has* got a good heart when his gambling addiction isn't calling the shots. But my God.

The things she has done for him in the name of love would make a hardened criminal wince.

Maybe we could run away. Just me and Mom. Go to a woman's shelter or find a place to hide until Javier has taken his pound of Justin's flesh. While I'd actually somewhat care if he killed him, it would almost be natural selection. *Don't be so fucking stupid, and loan-sharking drug lords won't want to hunt you down and kill you.*

I find my usual spot in the cafeteria during lunch period and examine the tray I absentmindedly filled with food. When I woke up this morning, I was ravenous, yet somehow I still haven't eaten. My stomach growls insistently, and I tense my muscles, hoping nobody hears. But despite my body's desire for sustenance, my appetite is completely gone. I push unidentifiable minced meat around on my tray when suddenly, out of nowhere, a giant Starbucks cup is shoved in front of my face, two muscled arms hugging around my shoulders tightly.

"Hey, pretty lady," a rough voice murmurs against my ear.

I almost leap out of my seat. "Bryce!" I squeal, standing up so fast I almost knock the coffee and both of us over. I move it to a safe distance away in the middle of the table, before turning to properly greet my boyfriend. His arms are still around me. I lift onto my tiptoes, kissing him on the mouth. It's meant to be a quick *I missed you* kiss, but Bryce turns it into an *I'd like to fuck you on this table* kind of kiss. I indulge him for a moment, until I hear people at the table beside us start to cheer, at which point I pull away. Bryce groans at the sudden loss of contact, but he doesn't push it. He knows how much I dislike PDA.

He knows how much I dislike most things sexual, for that matter. I'm not going to be like my mother, and the easiest way to avoid her fate is to never give a man more than I can afford. My body. My soul. My existence. They're all mine, and Bryce knows why our relationship has remained PG-13 for as long as it has.

I take a moment to lean back and drink him in. His blue eyes are full of mischief—as per usual. There's a fresh bruise

blossoming against his cheek, and his nose looks like it's seen better days. I'm guessing his dad wasn't too pleased with his sudden return home.

"I thought you were still in juvie?" I ask, my smile fading a little as I remember why we've been apart for so long in the first place. Bryce likes to steal cars, and a couple of months ago, he was caught speeding down Pacific Coast Highway, behind the wheel of a very rare, very valuable Mustang. I visited him as much as I could over spring break, but the juvenile facility he was in was four hours away by bus. I had to save every penny from my waitressing job to make the round trip, and hope that Justin didn't find my meager stash of cash in-between visits.

Bryce grins, tipping his head forward so his forehead rests on mine. I breathe him in, the familiar mixture of engine oil and chlorine. He's a champion swimmer, which is always hilarious when I think about us, together. I'm not sure how we've been a couple this long when I can't even take a bath without worrying that I'll drown.

"They dropped the charges," Bryce says, placing his hands on my hips and pulling me into him. "Somebody fucked up and they lost the evidence."

That almost sounds too good to be true, but maybe our luck is changing. Wouldn't that be nice?

I spend the rest of lunch period sitting in Bryce's lap, drinking my vanilla latte and listening to his stories about his past eight weeks in an overcrowded juvenile prison. Part of me is sad as I hear what he's been living through. It might be the first time he's done a stint behind bars, but it's not going to be the last. This is the reality of life here. Bryce is almost a year younger than me, and he's already had scholarship offers from every half-decent university in the country that has a swimming program. I'm planning to go to a local community college if I can scrape up enough money to pay for my tuition. *Ha.* I've barely saved \$350, and it's taken me well over a year.

Bryce is talented and smart, but he's loyal to his family. *Too* loyal. He burned all the scholarship offers so that his Mom

wouldn't find them because he knows he needs to get a job and help support the family once he graduates. And as much as I want to scream at him for being so stupid, for condemning himself to the kind of future neither of us wants to live, I know that I'd give everything up for my Mom, too.

Full of caffeine and sugary syrup, my last two classes pass by much faster. I'm studiously avoiding the thought of Justin and his fucked money situation, at least until I get home this afternoon. I wonder if my Mom will be at the school gates to meet me today. She almost always takes a late lunch break from the bar where she works days to meet me after school. Sometimes our walk home is the only time I see her before she heads off to her second job. The one I beg her to stop doing, the one that pays for the stuff she takes to ease the burden of life a little. *The oldest profession going*, as Bryce puts it delicately.

I've been worried about her lately, and I hope she's there to meet me so I can check in with her, make sure she's OK. Maybe I can break the news about Justin's gambling loss in a better way than he would.

When the final bell rings, I head straight for the main gates of Santo Christo High and the freedom that lies beyond. A steady wave of hundreds of students propels me along; we're like a swarm of ants, marching away from the nest in search of food before the rain comes. In the distance, I get a glimpse of my Mom's old red Buick parked in the lot, the mismatched hood a bright electric blue. One of the doors doesn't work, and there's no heating or cooling in the ancient thing, but I still like the sight of the car. If Mom is well enough to drive, that usually means she's having a good day.

I pick up my pace, smiling as I spot her lounging under a large Oak tree that casts shade across the schoolyard. It must be hundreds of years old, this tree, and it's been my favorite part of the school since I first started here. There's not exactly an abundance of large, shady trees in a place like Santo Christo, so I take what I can get. Mom knows this, and she often sits under it and reads obscure literary novels while she waits for me to be let out. She might be trailer trash now, but I

like to think her life wasn't always so bad. She rarely speaks about the past or her childhood, but I have a feeling she wasn't born into the life we live in now. Every time I see Proust or Dickens in her hands, it's like a stab to the heart. My mom was smart, she had the world at her feet, and then she ended up a drug addict married to a gambling addict. I've done the math. I'm fairly sure finding out she was pregnant with me erased any future that involved using her intelligence.

Today there's no book in her hand. She's leaning against the thick tree trunk, her wide-brimmed straw hat partly obscuring her face. She used to embarrass me, half lying about like this, but that was before when I gave a shit what people thought. Now, when I see her under the tree, I'm happy. Because as horrible as it sounds—it means she's still alive.

“Mom,” I call out when I'm five feet away. I hear someone yell my name and turn around, searching countless faces and finally seeing Bryce in the crowd. He jogs to catch up with me, and we cover the last few feet to my mother side-by-side.

“Hey, Mia,” Bryce says to my mother, but she doesn't reply. She doesn't react at all. A tiny sliver of panic wedges itself painfully into my mind, and I kneel beside her, patting her leg. She's wearing a denim skirt that falls to just above her knee. I don't know how long she's been sitting in the shade, but when I touch her leg, she's freezing cold. And that's strange, but then again, my mother *is* strange. I don't panic at the coolness of her skin. I just file it away under: *Huh, that's odd.*

“Mom?” I say louder this time. “Look, Bryce is back.”

Mom loves Bryce. I think mostly because she trusts he's one of the good guys and because she knows he's never tried to do anything with me that I'm not ready for. The irony of having a mother like mine. She'll make sure nobody is hassling me for sex while she earns money by spending most evenings on her back.

I exchange a look with Bryce. He seems concerned, too.

“Mia?” he says, squatting down next to my Mom and gently removing the straw hat from her face. “Oh, shit,” he

mumbles, recoiling as though a rattlesnake is gearing up to strike him.

There's no snake, though. No danger. Just my beautiful, drug-addicted mother, leaning against the bark of an old oak tree, her long, dark hair framing her face—her face, which is now blue and lifeless. Her hand, lying upturned on the grass, totally still. Beside it, for the first time, I notice a worn copy of *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. Why is she reading the most depressing fucking book in history on a beautiful day like this? Why is she reading it at all? Doesn't she have enough misery for one lifetime?

I put my hand on her bare arm as the irony of what she was reading slams into me full force. Because she's fucking freezing in the middle of July.

I'm so stupid. How did I not realize sooner?

No living person is ever *that* cold.

CHAPTER 4



BIRDIE

The world around me lurches violently, a sickening, endless spin, as I focus on my mother's lifeless body. The ground won't stop rolling, and I hope this is some terrible nightmare that I'll wake from.

No. *No*. My biggest fear is now my reality.

"Mom?" I choke out. The word is followed by acidic bile rising in my throat, and I think I might be sick. Bryce's warm hands gently land on my shoulders, and he tries to pull me away.

I shake him off, crawling closer to her on my hands and knees. I reach out to touch her again, and she's like ice. And somewhere inside my chest, my heart freezes over.

"Birdie," Bryce whispers.

"Call an ambulance!" I cry.

I have to save her. I have to fix her. That's always been my job.

"Mommy?" I whisper, reaching out once I'm close enough to see her clammy skin. She's slumped over, and when I lift her head, fresh panic courses through me. If I had some Narcan to counteract the heroin... *maybe* she'd wake up. We'd laugh about it, then go home, and she'd rest, just like before. But the last time she coded, she was on an ambulance stretcher. Two paramedics jammed a Pulp-Fiction-sized syringe right into her chest, and within seconds, she was brought back to life.

My fear—my knowing, deep inside—is that this time I’ve found her too late.

No. This cannot be how it ends.

I shake her violently, trying to get her to wake up.

I tear my eyes away from Mom for long enough to see Bryce on his cell phone, making animated gestures as he repeats the school’s address several times.

Bryce holds his hand over the phone’s speaker, looking at me like he’s seen a ghost. “They’re asking if she has a pulse,” he says, his words almost robotic.

With trembling fingers, I press against her slender neck. I’m shaking so much I can’t tell if there’s actually a faint sign of life coming from her carotid artery or if it’s me. “I don’t know,” I whisper, pressing harder. Maybe. No. “I don’t fucking know.”

My classmates fill in around the periphery of my vision as I panic.

Do something, Birdie. Do anything.

With all my strength, I move her onto her back.

“Come on, Mom,” I mutter under my breath, starting chest compressions that helped bring her to another time she overdosed. I keep calling her name, over and over, a sort of chanted sob.

Mom. Mom. Mom?

I tilt her head back like they showed us in our first aid seminar, just as my fifth-period science teacher, Mr. Vayner, dumps a large first-aid kit beside me. He throws the box open, grabs a Pocket Mask, and rips it from its sterile plastic packaging. I watch, transfixed, as he places it over my mother’s nose and mouth, delivering two breaths in quick succession.

This is the part where she’s going to come back to life, I think.

But she doesn’t.

A second teacher pushes me out of the way, and my arms are so tired that I don't protest. The more time that passes, the more of my hope bleeds away. Somehow I manage to stand, and Bryce's strong hands move me away from the action. Somebody asks if there's a defibrillator in the school. *Ha*. This school is lucky to have a couple of bandaids to rub together. A three thousand dollar defib machine to shock the rhythm back into a student's heart is definitely outside of this shitty school's budget.

Bryce pulls me into his broad chest and holds me against him. He's still talking to the dispatchers, the phone tucked between his ear and shoulder as he protects me from the horrors at our feet. He's too hot, too stifling. I shrug him away, noticing his glassy eyes and his pale cheeks. He's barely holding his shit together. And if he looks this bad, I must look fucking terrible.

Still. Nobody looks as bad as my mother.

The faint wail of sirens turns to a steady scream. I stand back, utterly helpless, and watch the scene unfold.

Deep down, I know there is nothing more anyone can do to save her—not CPR, not an ambulance crew, not even five doses of Narcan. As Bryce squeezes my hands in his, promising me she'll be okay, I know how this ends.

She won't be okay. She will *never* be okay.

Dread slowly inches its way up my spine as I watch Mr. Vaynor move away, wiping beads of sweat from his forehead. It's not easy breathing for someone else, especially when you're forcing air into lungs that aren't working. He meets my gaze with a sorrowful expression.

I wonder what he sees in me as he whispers he's sorry. Is this my fate as well? Am I just another dead girl walking, a statistic waiting to happen? No one has to tell me what's going on. I know there's no coming back from the level of dead my Mother is.

Too much time has passed. She's too cold.

Sirens pierce the panicked chatter amongst the teachers trying to help, my ears buzzing angrily as flashing red and white lights pulse on top of the ambulance. *Druggie trash*, a voice says casually, as if it's any other day at Santo Christo High.

I turn around, and the world moves in slow motion. I'd know that voice anywhere. Sure enough, I'm looking at the smug face of the bitch who's done nothing but bully me my entire school life as she mocks my dead mother.

Candy Wilson. The bane of my fucking existence.

Rage erupts inside of me; a red haze overtakes my vision as I take three steps forward, closing the space between us.

"What did you say?" I ask, my voice calm. *Too calm*.

I'm the eye of the goddamn storm, and she has no idea.

Candy smirks knowingly at me, shrugging her delicate shoulders. She thinks she's hot shit, but she'll be all used up soon enough, just like the rest of the girls in this town. Just like my mother, the druggie trash she's so casually shit-talking.

"Nothing," she says sweetly, brushing blond curls from her face. "Nothing at all."

Then I hear her whisper *stupid whore* under her breath.

It happens so fast.

My fist connects with her perfect nose, and her head snaps back violently. Hair falls into her face as she staggers onto her feet, her hands covering her nose as she cries out in pain. The crowd behind her parts as she pulls her hands away to reveal bright blood dripping down her face.

"You hit me!" She screams, wiping her nose, freaking out as she notices the blood.

"Say it again," I warn. "I dare you. I fucking double dare you." The need to continue my attack urges me forward. As I reach down to grab a fistful of her hair, Bryce captures me from behind. As he pulls me away, I keep hold of her hair, strands ripping from her scalp as she screams in protest.

“Let me go!” I growl, digging my nails into Bryce’s arms. He doesn’t even flinch as he hauls me away from Candy.

That’s when I see it. The stillness where there was a flurry of activity. The paramedics have stopped working on my mother. Jesus, did they even try? She’s cold, I remind myself. She’s been cold since before you found her. What miracle, exactly, are the paramedics supposed to produce? I’m watching one paramedic lay a sheet over mom as a second one comes over to speak to me.

A strangled wail exits my throat as the sheet drops over her face. They’ve already given up the ghost. They’re not even going to pretend there’s any hope left.

“Are you Birdie Moore?” the paramedic beside me asks. I nod, dazed. “I’m so sorry. You guys did a great job starting CPR, but sometimes the person is just too far gone. We’re waiting for the coroner to arrive, and then we’ll have some paperwork for you to sign.”

“Okay,” I whisper hoarsely, her words barely registering.

I sit on the sidewalk, clenching and unclenching my bloody knuckles as I stare at the white sheet, at the outline of my mother’s corpse underneath it. They say your life flashes before your eyes just before you die, but I didn’t realize it does the same when you’re the survivor, and the person you love is dead in front of you. Everything hits me at once, and I can barely separate the memories; they come so close together. The way Mom would laugh when she knew I’d busted her lying, or how she’d sing at the top of her lungs with the windows down in the old Buick, not giving a fuck who heard her off-key warble. Mom was a mess, but she was a free spirit, too. A free spirit who never really had the chance at freedom.

I sit silently for I don’t even know how long. At some point, I blink, and Bryce is sitting beside me, holding me tight.

“It’s going to be okay, Birdie,” he tells me. “I promise.”

“Is it?” I ask, knowing he’s just trying to say the right thing. It won’t be okay. There’s a sob lodged in my throat,

begging to come out, but I keep it tamped down. If I start crying now, I might never stop.

I stand, the sudden need to see her one last time overwhelming me as my feet carry me back to the scene of the crime—the place where she died. Where she is dead. Bryce follows, sticking close to my side. Ever my protector. Thank fuck he's here, today, of all days. Peeling the sheet back, I look at my mother's hands and see her perfectly manicured, bright pink nails that are a stark contrast from the rest of her. Her scarred arms and busted veins tell another story. The different hues of purple bruises and track marks almost remind me of the sky after a summer storm—a macabre watercolor painting of death and despair, of life and longing. Each one a different hue in the kaleidoscope of her addiction. She always wore long sleeves to cover up her shameful vices. I don't know who took her cardigan off and exposed her like this. Maybe it was me. I don't remember.

God. Reality slams into me, thick and fast, a constant barrage of intrusive thoughts. Where does she go now? I don't mean her soul—I'm not a believer—I mean her body, her vessel. I can't even imagine how much a funeral will cost. It doesn't matter; all I know is I'll never be able to afford it. Even if I handed over all the money I saved for my community college tuition. Even if I pulled double shifts at the diner for the rest of my life. In my pockets, I possess three crumpled dollars and a few quarters. Not even enough to get me a cab ride back to the trailer park.

The coroner finally arrives, and the paramedics leave, the smell of stale nicotine and swabbing alcohol filling my nostrils as the paramedics pass me with brief condolences uttered in their wake. Everything is moving so slowly. I'm drowning in treacle. Sinking in soup. It's so fucking hot. The thick, humid afternoon air nearly suffocates me. Hurry. Please, hurry. For what? I'm not sure. She's already dead, and it's not as if I have anywhere better to be. The urge to flee presses in on me anyway, but I resist. No matter how far I ran, I'd never be able to escape this moment.

My stomach cramps up with anxiety. Squeezing my eyes shut, I try in vain to focus on something—*anything*—else as my mother is pronounced deceased.

She's really, truly, officially dead. And I can't seem to wake up from this nightmare.

A panic attack grips me, the world suddenly closing in on me. Squeezing the air from my chest. Suffocating me. I dry heave, stumbling behind a bush beside the sidewalk, and my body rejects the free school lunch and coffee I had earlier.

“You okay?” Bryce asks, his hand on the small of my back as I stay bent over, waiting to see if another wave of nausea will hit. I don't answer. Am I okay? I don't know if I'll ever be okay again.

Eventually, I stand straight, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

“I'm sorry about your mom,” Bryce says in a low tone, his hand finding mine and giving it a squeeze. I don't answer. I can't remember how to talk.

The coroner tries to speak with me. I'm hanging on to my sanity by a single, fraying thread as they explain my Mom will be taken to the county morgue. I'm told what will happen next, but nothing absorbs. Words like *autopsy*, *funeral home*, and *arrangements* float past me, barely reaching my ears. The roaring tide of my blood pressure pulses relentlessly against the inside of my skull. How can I be numb and in agony all at once?

They give me paperwork to sign and essentially just... release me to the wild. I want to ride with my Mom, but a coroner's van isn't like an ambulance. It doesn't work that way. The best they can offer is for me to call their front desk in an hour and see if my Mom has been delivered yet.

Delivered. Like a pizza. Like furniture. *Delivered.*

I look out at the crumbling parking lot with faded paint lines. Most of the students got bored and left already. I guess a dead junkie isn't exactly the most riveting scene to watch.

I watch, numb, as they load my mother's body and her personal items into the back of the coroners' van. There are no windows in the rear compartment. It must be dark in there. The double doors slam shut, and my chest squeezes painfully as I think of my Mom in there, all alone, in the darkness.

My vision blurs as fragments of memories come to me. Flashing before my eyes again, but I'm not dying. I'm not dead. I'm the one left behind.

I'm five years old, dragging a dining chair up to the stove to cook my own dinner while my mother sprawls on the sofa, a glazed look in her eyes, heroin bubbling in her veins.

I'm six, walking to school alone because none of the adults in my house get up in time to come with me.

I'm seven, stealing money from strangers to buy food while my mother distracts them with a dazzling smile and her infectious brand of charming. I never get to keep the money, though. It's for groceries. We still never have any of those in the house.

With a mother who'd either sleep for days or be gone all night, I was forced to grow up fast. From the outside, it might have looked terrible, but it's all I've ever known. It's mine—or it was. I take comfort in the predictable. I find calm inside the chaos. There's always been a roof over my head, even if it leaks when it rains. I've always been able to count on my mother to be there, to come home, to do a shitty job of parenting but still turn up to do it anyway.

Mom's always been a fucking mess, but she's always loved me, even if she never loved herself.

I even thought she was getting better recently. I feel so stupid now. I've been googling low-cost rehab centers and picturing what it might look like if she actually got clean. I can't believe I actually let myself hope things might change for the better.

I could've never predicted this. Not like *this*. Not when things seemed to be getting better.

Mom was having more good days than bad ones. She seemed... stable. She was excited about my graduation ceremony coming up in a few weeks. She even promised to take me to dinner at Cheesecake Factory when I got accepted into the local community college.

And now.

Now.

She's just... fucking dead.

A tap on the shoulder pulls me from my thoughts. One of the guys from the coroner's office approaches me.

"I can't remove your mother's silver bracelet. It will be taken care of, though. Oh, these were in her pockets." He hands me the keys to the Buick.

I nod, and moments later I'm watching as the white coroner's van pulls away, no sirens, no fanfare, nothing.

My mind goes back to the silver bracelet the guy mentioned. Mom wore that thing for as long as I can remember. One time, when I was barely in grade school, I asked her where she'd gotten it.

It was a gift, little Birdie, she'd explained. One that represents a forever promise.

I'd always imagined it was something my father gave her before he was deployed. The mysterious man I've heard about in snippets, in passing. I've never even seen a photo of the guy. It didn't matter before. Now, in the wake of becoming an orphan—unreliable stepfather excluded—my biggest regret is not learning more about my real father.

What I know is brief.

Iraq. Two hellish deployments. While he was gone, my mother learned she was pregnant with me. Oh, and she found out that he was married. She left him, devastated, and decided to keep me.

I'm not sure if he even knows I exist. Pretty sure he doesn't. Mom is—oh God, *was*—the best grudge holder I've ever met.

However, it probably wouldn't make a difference either way. *Hey, Daddy—who doesn't know of my existence—can you pretty please pay for Mommy Dearest's funeral? Tack on my college tuition while we're at it.*

Right.

The brisk early summer breeze brushes against my cheeks and I shiver, wishing I had a jacket or some goddamn jeans that fit. Damn Justin for being right about my short shorts.

Justin. This will destroy him. I wonder where he is and if he's okay. I'm almost envious of him and hope he enjoys the last fleeting moments of a reality he believes is unchanged. He's all I have now. He may not be my real dad, but he's the only man who's ever cared about me. And he's tried to raise me as his own.

"What are you going to do now?" Bryce asks me as the parking lot clears.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Panic fills my chest, panic that I'm alone. Panic that I'll have to go home and tell Justin. Panic at the unknown as I charter new territory. "I want to go home."

He nods and offers to drive mom's car home for me. I'm in no shape to be behind the wheel. So I accept his offer, knowing he'll have to walk thirty minutes home. The car is old and clunky, but the seats are clean. The light hint of my mom's perfume still lingers inside. This is the last place she was before she laid down under that tree and died. How can she just be gone?

"Do you want me to stay with you tonight?" Bryce asks as he turns down the gravel road of the trailer park.

"No. It's okay," I reply, wanting to be alone.

He parks in front of the dilapidated, rotting front porch, and we sit there in silence.

I have to tell Justin. I don't want to tell Justin. The two thoughts chase each other around my head in an endless loop.

Bryce gets out and offers to walk me inside.

“I’m fine,” I say, not wanting to seem weak. “I just want to go and lie down.”

“No problem,” Bryce says. “I’ll wait for you to go inside and lock the door before I go.”

“Thank you,” I say, my voice small, almost unrecognizable to me. He wraps me in a bear hug, his lips grazing my forehead, before letting me go.

I meet his eyes one last time before I leave him. Then I walk inside and lock the door, just like he said. I move the dirty blinds out of the way to watch him leave. Every inch of me is begging to break down, but I’m too numb to cry.

This isn’t real, is it? It feels so final. Like the end.

Mom.

I stand in the darkening evening. The porch light is long burnt out and the silence makes my ears ring. I suck in stale air, flicking on the kitchen light to find my cockroach friend on the counter, poised as if to greet me. When I get too close, it scuttles away. Even a fucking cockroach doesn’t want my company.

I brace myself against the empty, worn-out husk of a kitchen counter. For a brief moment, I wonder if this emptiness, this pit in my stomach, this utter desolation—is this what my mother was trying to chase away every time she slid a needle into her veins? And did it work? It must have because she kept going back for more. It worked the last time, that’s for sure. She won’t feel anything ever again.

I shuffle to my bedroom and lie on the narrow bed, holding my pillow tight. I have no idea what I’ll do, but I only have one option. The only option I’ve *ever* had.

Survive.

CHAPTER 5



“*H*ey, Rafael,” I bark down the line, as I stare at the deceased woman on the gurney in front of me. “We have a bit of a problem.”

He sounds busy. The reception isn’t that great; it’s a steady crackle of static in the background, and movement.

“What? Hang on, I’ve got my hands full.”

“Take your dick out of your sister’s mouth and focus, Marin. I’m standing in a funeral home refrigerator with your lovely informant. She doesn’t look too great.”

There’s a whole bunch of rustling, and then Rafe’s back on the line. “Jesus, Darius, I’m dropping groceries off to my senile grandmother. You were on speakerphone. You’re lucky she’s batshit fucking crazy. Can you never talk about my dick again, please? Or my sister’s mouth?”

I’m fucking boiling, even in this freezing room. Boiling over with rage and frustration. “Rafe. Your informant?” I spit. “She’s dead.”

Rafe makes a choking sound. “You killed her?”

“No, I didn’t kill her. Why the fuck would I do that? She was already dead when I got to the meeting spot. A goddamn drug overdose. You failed to mention I was supposed to trust a heroin junkie with life and death.” I shake my head, glancing at the toe tag attached to the dead woman. “Mia Moore. Sounds like a porn star. What’s her real name?”

“Darius...”

“I’ll find out. You know I will.” I slide Mia Moore back into her dark little hole in the wall and slam the morgue drawer shut, slapping two more crisp hundreds down on the vacant front desk. Thumbing through a stack of papers, I soon find the information I need.

Next of Kin: Birdie Moore.

And an address, at the Shady Pines RV Park. Splendid.

“Birdie, huh? Cute name.”

“Darius,” Rafe warns. “Leave the kid alone.”

“Nah, I think I’ll pay little Birdie Moore a visit, actually. She must know something, surely.”

“Don’t touch her,” Rafe’s tone is sharp. “I’ll think of another way to help you find your sister.”

He cares about the daughter. Interesting. “She your friend? This Birdie girl?”

“No. I’ve never met her. I just know of her.”

I can’t tell if he’s lying or not.

I was so close. So fucking close to finding out who might be involved in Davina’s disappearance. And now I’m back to square one.

“Oh, I’m going to do a lot more than touch her,” I grind out. “I’m going to take that little bitch and torture her until she tells me something useful. And when I’m done with her, I’m coming for your sister. I’m coming for every single motherfucker on that boat—including your father—until someone gives me the information I want.”

“Careful, Prince,” Rafe says, his tone frosty. “Don’t go around declaring war when we’re on the same side. Your little crew of Valmont Academy pals are no match for an entire cartel.”

“Who said anything about war? I just want my sister back.” I walk toward the exit, still marveling at how deserted this place is. If I ever need a dead body, this is where I’ll come.

“Oh, speaking of sisters, give yours a kiss for me, will you? With tongue. And tell your grandma I say hi,” I tell Rafe.

“Fuck y-.”

I hang up on him. *Oops.*

Shoving my phone in my pocket, I head straight for the parking lot. The wind is cold, straight off the ocean, and fierce. I unlock my car with a click of my key fob, wondering what secrets this little bird might whisper in my ear.

What I might have to do to her to draw them out.

I wonder, as I check to make sure the trunk holds a shovel and duct tape, if I’m going to be burying any bodies tonight.

CHAPTER 6



BIRDIE

The next morning comes too quickly. I'm abruptly woken by the sound of someone knocking at the front door. I startle awake, blissfully unaware for a split-second, and then the reality of what happened yesterday hits me like a knife straight to the gut.

Death. Loss. Devastation.

I wish I'd died in my sleep.

The pounding at the door gets louder, breaking my wave of remembered grief.

Could it be Javier Marin's men, already searching for the money Justin borrowed? Surely not this soon.

I'm too hollowed out to even panic. Truthfully, getting a bullet between my eyes would be a relief right now.

I stagger through the tiny living room, glancing through the peephole. I'm greeted with an extreme close-up view of Justin's ruddy face, the curved peephole glass making him look like he's in a fishbowl. He brings his eye up to the peephole as if he'd be able to see something from that side, his movements slow and clumsy. I open the door, sidestepping just in time for him to fall face-first into the trailer.

Great.

He's so drunk, he can barely stand.

I cross my arms, watching with a detached sort of boredom as he army-crawls to the kitchen, pulls himself onto a wobbly old bar stool we found dumpster diving, and he empties his

pockets onto the counter. Random coins and wads of singles he didn't spend last night fall into a small pile. He grunts, finding a crumpled pack of cigarettes among the mess, then stumbles back to the sofa, sinking down into the worn cushions.

After he pulls off his boots, he lies back. "Where's your mother?" His eyes are bloodshot, unfocused.

"Dead." The word comes out harsher than I intended it to.

He blinks hard, laughing. "Seriously. Where is she? I saw her car outside. I need some fucking breakfast. You want some food?" He points to his money. "Count those up for me, little bird. I think we got enough for pancakes, or..."

My jaw clenches tight. He must see the truth in my eyes because the rest of his sentence dies in his throat. He swallows awkwardly. "Don't fuck with me, Birdie."

I want to *strangle* him.

I don't have the strength to speak, to scream—and here he is, crawling home drunk. It should've been him dealing with the coroner signing paperwork. Not me.

But it's *always* me.

"I'm not fucking with you. She's at the county morgue. Overdose, they think."

"*Birdie Moore*," he stresses, his voice breaking as he stares at me in disbelief. "Don't tell lies like that. C'mon. Where is she?"

"I'm not fucking lying!" I scream, finding my voice.

The red rage returns, tendrils of a poisonous vine creeping around my veins and pulling tight. I shouldn't be this angry at him, but I am. I feel like I could take a knife from the kitchen drawer and slit both of my wrists, wanting him to feel as desperate as I did yesterday. Or maybe I could stab him in the heart instead, make him feel the pain I'm feeling right now.

I don't do either of those things, though. Instead, I rush to my room, slamming the door behind me.

“Birdie!” Justin slurs. “Get your ass out here!”

I lock the door with the deadbolt I installed years ago—a necessary addition so I could sleep peacefully at night with all the weirdos Mom would bring home. None of them ever hurt me, but a few came close.

My heart hammers as I lean my forehead against the cool wood.

“I’m going to the fucking morgue. Do you hear me? And if you’re lying, when I get back home, you’d better watch out.” I hear stumbling, the jangling of keys, then the front door of the trailer slamming shut.

He’s in no condition to drive, but I’m not about to try and stop him.

I have to pull myself together. Deep breaths. In and out. *Fuuuck.*

I wish I could take a shower and wash the death from me, but that would require hot water, and we don’t have any. I tear my shirt off and ball it up, throwing it in the corner. Then I wiggle out of my shorts—Justin was right, they are too tight. Whatever. *Too late now.* Falling backward on my bed in only my bra and panties, I wish I could burn those clothes. But then I’d have nothing to wear.

The rest of the day I sleep, grief and devastation knocking me the fuck out. It’s so much better than being awake.

Sunrise wakes me, and with it, comes the familiar dread of death’s aftermath, creeping up on me. I have far too much shit to do today—*thanks, Mom.*

Being inside the trailer is too much. I need fresh air. I find an old t-shirt and jeans stuffed in a laundry basket in the corner. Then I crack open my window and carefully climb out.

I don’t even know if Justin came home last night, but I’m not taking my chances by using the front door. I can’t face him right now. It’s all too much.

I walk to the gas station on the corner. It’s a school day, but there’s no way in hell I’m going back there. They can refuse to

give me my diploma, but I'm never stepping foot on that property again. What happened yesterday is already going to haunt me for the rest of my life. I don't need the added torture of having to walk past the patch of grass where my mother expired every morning and afternoon.

An electronic chime sounds as I enter the gas station. It's a pitiful little place with half-empty shelves and cracked linoleum floors that make a sticky noise when you walk over it. The woman who runs this place used to sneak me candy and chips when I was little. Her name is Sandra, she smokes like a chimney and has skin that looks like leather, but she's an angel. When I meet her eyes, she gives me a giant smile, her nicotine-stained teeth beaming yellow like headlights in the dark.

"Birdie!" She greets me from behind the counter. "Shouldn't you be in school, young lady?"

If I answer, I might finally break, so I just nod instead.

"Everything okay?" Sandra's forehead creases with worry, and that's when I notice her red hair is extra tall today. *The higher the hair, the closer to Jesus* as she likes to tell anyone who'll listen.

There's a rock in my throat that I can't talk around.

Concern flashes in Sandra's eyes. She knows something's wrong.

"Can I use your phone?" I finally manage to croak out. I can't afford a cell phone because every spare penny is being saved for college, and we could never keep a landline active.

I place a couple of quarters that Justin emptied from his pockets last night on the counter. "*Please.*"

Sandra pushes the coins toward me. "Come on back."

I follow her to the office. The ancient desktop computer takes up most of the desk space, and there's an ashtray full of cigarette butts with bright red lipstick on each filter. She moves an old cup of coffee out of the way, and I notice several flies floating on the top. *Gross.* Still, I have a pet cockroach currently chilling in my pantry at home. Who am I to judge?

“I’ll let you use the phone if you tell me what’s going on,” she says sternly. “You’re not yourself, Birdie.”

I feel myself stiffen. *I don’t want to say it.*

“Mom’s dead,” I whisper, not able to meet Sandra’s gaze. I pull the papers the coroner gave me from my back pocket, and set them on the desk with shaking hands.

When I finally look her way, Sandra’s eyes are wide with concern. She doesn’t look surprised, though. “Oh, sweetheart,” she says. “Drugs?”

I shrug. I don’t want to say yes, even though it’s 99.9% certain that it was indeed drugs.

Sandra hugs me forcefully. Her cheap perfume burns my nostrils as she nearly suffocates me with her sympathy.

“You take care of whatever business you need to in here, okay? And don’t go leaving any money for using the phone or I’ll chase you home.”

I nod, swallowing tears away. “Thank you.”

She gives me some privacy. I google *affordable funeral homes in Santo Christo* and set up an appointment with the cheapest for tomorrow. After I’ve hung up, I wonder why I’m even bothering. It’s not like I can afford anything. Last I heard, funerals weren’t exactly free. Even death is a money-making business.

One thing at a time, I tell myself. *I’ll figure something out.*

I call Bryce while I’ve got access to a phone, but he doesn’t answer. I leave a message, letting him know I’m okay and that I’ll catch up with him later. Sometimes I wish the two of us could run away from all of this. From our lives. From this place. If only we had somewhere to go.

As I sit at the desk, I think about my mother. I wonder who else, other than me and Justin, will even care that she’s dead. She didn’t have many friends. Not real ones.

I wonder if Javier Marin knows yet. And what he’ll do to Justin now that my mother is no longer around to save his ass.

The thought has me gasping for air.

I have to get away from this shit hole of a town. I only really have one option.

I need to find my father.

After shaking the mouse and waking the ancient computer, I google *his* name: *Derek Whitiker*.

I try to remember the little details mom divulged to me over the years. After twenty fruitless minutes of typing random facts about this man alongside his name, I'm exactly where I started.

Sandra stands at the doorway, and my eyes are glued to the computer as I frantically search for something, anything that will lead me to my father.

“Did you ever hear Mom talk about my father?” I ask.

Sandra frowns. “Once. He was a war hero or something?”

Knowing she heard the same story as me is cold comfort. But just because my mother repeated it to more than one person, doesn't mean it's the truth.

“I can't find anything about him online,” I admit. “It's like he doesn't exist.”

Please exist. I need you to pay for a funeral.

“Have you tried different spellings?”

I shake my head. For a street-smart girl, it's a rookie error. I type a few different combinations, and finally, *Derek Whitticker*, with two t's holds some promise.

Until I notice the first thing that pops up is an obituary. I hover above the hyperlink, unable to click it.

What if this *is* him?

Did my absent father just become my second dead parent in twenty-four hours?

Sandra watches as I finally open the page. I let out a frustrated groan as the internet takes its sweet time loading the

picture of the man. He's the right age, though slightly older than I expected. And he's dead.

Sandra studies the man's photo and then glances at me. "I don't see much of a resemblance. But then again, you're the spitting image of your mama. Doesn't matter who your daddy is or was. He didn't get a look in."

I read every word. Derek was in the military. Died five years ago in an accident. I look up his hometown and scour the local news sites to find whatever I can, but the obituary and cemetery details are about all I get.

Why didn't I ask more questions when my mother was alive?

Two dead parents.

A funeral to plan.

And no money to pay for it.

Fuck.

An hour later, I'm trudging back to the trailer. As I draw closer, I hear commotion inside.

There are things breaking. Smashing. *Shattering.*

All to the chorus of Justin's rage-filled yells.

The door is ajar. Ready for a fight, I push it open.

My stomach twists painfully as I see the destruction within.

The TV is broken. A window that allows the warm summer breeze to enter is smashed. Ripped floral curtains flap in the wind. An ashtray that was full of cigarette butts is in a million pieces, scattered on the threadbare carpet that lines the tiny living room. And as I glance toward the kitchen, I see Justin has started destroying the few chipped dining plates we own.

"Stop," I bark.

Justin turns toward me, tossing a saucer at my head. I duck, and it crashes against the wall beside me and shatters.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Justin roars. The accusation in his voice is undeniable, and I can’t really blame him. I told him his wife was dead. And then I disappeared.

“Trying to find my father,” I reply.

“I’m right here!” he yells.

“My real father,” I snap. The *idiot* is inferred.

The rage drains from Justin’s expression. He’s using every ounce of energy he still possesses to calm down. The mention of *my real father* seems to have scared him straight. “Your father?” he echoes.

“Yes,” I confirm. “My father. Somebody has to pay for this funeral because neither of the people standing here right now can afford it.”

“You’re right,” he says, his voice breaking as the fight flees from him. I look around at the path of destruction he’s carved through and realize he’s been doing this to keep himself busy. Rage-filled avoidance of reality. He’s not a vicious man. He’s scared.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, swallowing back tears. *I can’t do this. Not now.*

“This can’t be real,” he cries, turning and slamming his palms down on the kitchen counter. I hover beside him, not knowing whether to comfort him or scream at him.

“Did *he* do this?” Justin breathes out, holding the bridge of his nose. “Did he finally find her? Did that bastard kill her?”

“Did who—Who are you talking about?”

Justin’s expression darkens. He starts to pace. “This is payback for the past, isn’t it? It finally caught up to her. To us. This is my fault. *Fuck!*” He’s acting like he’s possessed, talking nonsense. I’ve never seen him like this before.

“What do you mean, payback?” I ask, confused, needing an explanation. But I also know he’s not thinking straight. “Payback for what?”

“Where did it happen?” Justin demands, ignoring my question.

“*What?*” I’m not following him.

Something flashes in his eyes, almost as if he’s remembering something. “Where did she... where did he kill her?”

“You think someone killed her. Who? Who are you talking about?”

Justin freezes. He opens his mouth to say something. Closes it again. “No one,” he says finally. “You said you were looking for your father?”

I take the folded pages I printed at Sandra’s from my back pocket. After I straighten them, I hand them over for him to see.

“Yes, and I found his obituary online.” I stare at Justin for a long while and notice how pale he is. “Mom wasn’t killed by anyone. It was the drugs, Justin. She overdosed. Under the oak tree next to the school gates.”

“What school?” Justin asks dumbly.

“My school! Santo Christo High School. I found her lying on the grass, cold as ice when school let out. In front of three hundred of my very *best* friends.”

Justin snatches the printed pages from my hand and scans them. “Who the hell is Derek Whitticker?” he demands.

“My dead fucking father! Are you still drunk?” I explode. I’m so confused, and Justin is acting like he’s lost his mind.

“I’m not drunk,” Justin says, rifling through the papers before he returns them to me. Then he walks to the living room and collapses into the threadbare sofa, patting the cushion next to him. “Sit. I want you to tell me what happened, from the top, and don’t leave anything out.”

So I do exactly that.

I tell him all about finding Mom. About how it was too late.

As I talk, he takes slugs of whiskey straight from the bottle. When I look over at him, his green eyes glisten with tears.

“You don’t think this was an accident,” I ask Justin, “do you?”

He shakes his head. “Your mother is too fucking smart to put bad shit in her arms.” He chokes on the next word. “*Was.*”

That’s what I was afraid of. An accident is an accident. Tragic, but done. Concluded. If it wasn’t an accident—if somebody killed my mother—it’s more than just a tragedy. It’s murder.

“Do you think Javier is responsible for this?” I whisper. As far as I know, he’s the only dangerous person my mother is connected with.

“I’m not sure, Birdie. But you have to stay away from him. Don’t go searching for answers. Just drop it. Promise me.”

“I’m not promising you anything,” I tell him.

“You can’t trust anyone,” he snaps, and I stand.

Before walking away, I turn and look him dead in the eyes. “You think I don’t know that? I learned that a long time ago. The only person I can ever trust is myself.”

What if this wasn’t an accident?

It may be the beginning of summer, but a chill runs down my spine. I step outside, suck in warm air, and dry heave until my throat is raw.

CHAPTER 7



*S*kip school again.

If something were to happen to me, no one would come searching. The teachers probably won't even notice I ditched class. They're overworked, underpaid, and used to kids going MIA without explanation. The system is designed to shuffle us through classes like cattle—no one will notice the poor girl is gone. I'm nothing but another nameless face, from the wrong side of town. It was probably expected that I'd either get pregnant, drop out or die a long time ago, but considering I've completed all of my exams and graduation is next weekend, I'm reasonably confident they'll give me a pity pass.

Sadness weighs heavy on my chest, holding me against the hard springs of my mattress.

I let out a breath and struggle to take in another. I can't handle the jokes about my mom right now. The last thing I want is their side glances, the same ones I'd get when I'd wear dirty clothes in elementary because my mother was too high or drunk to help me. The same ones I'd get when I turned up every day with no lunch and no pencils.

I had to grow up fast. I was *forced* to.

I may be barely eighteen, but I feel like I've already lived a lifetime.

Dragging myself out of bed, I pull on the same clothes I wore yesterday. I'm shaky and unsteady as I stand. I find my backpack and pull out a stale bag of chips I've been saving. I

try not to inhale them. I can't afford to waste a crumb. These might be the only calories I'll eat today since I won't get my free lunch at school. I grab my pocket knife, then open my closet door. Tucked behind old books is a shoebox with little mementos from my childhood. It's where I've hidden the meager wad of money I've saved for my community college tuition. I pull out a few twenties, and shove them in my pocket, then try to sneak out of the trailer.

Beer cans litter the dirty floor and cigarette butts overflow from a mug on the coffee table. It's a mess in here, but I'm not cleaning. Justin destroyed the place, and he can take care of it. Speaking of. He's snoring on the couch. His legs hang off the end and he doesn't look comfortable. In his pocket, are the keys to mom's car. It's a small mercy that he's asleep and stealing those keys would wake him. He'll ask too many questions and where I'm going today is none of his goddamn business.

I take a brief moment to study him. His mouth's open and he's wearing the same clothes he had on when I learned he'd gambled away a fortune. He's a fucking mess, but he doesn't mean to be, and at the end of the day, I don't want anything bad to happen to him.

Mom ignored his gambling addiction, but how he put up with her antics is beyond me. They were perfect for one another. I look at him one last time, knowing trouble will find him.

He owes an impossible debt to Javier, and there's no one to bail him out this time. No Mia to fix things with her boss.

I don't want to be here when bullets start to fly.

The pungent smell of Santo Christo wafts through the air as I make my way down the driveway. I glance inside the car when I pass it and see Mom's cell phone blinking. It's a shitty prepaid phone, but it's got internet access and a few games. One thing about it, she always had it on her.

Opening the door, I grab it, thumbing straight to the text messages inbox. Of course, all of her texts are deleted. She

had a way of always covering her tracks like she had something to hide.

I text Bryce.

Birdie: Hey. I have my mom's phone. I'm okay.

It buzzes almost immediately with his reply.

Bryce: Thank fuck. I was worried when I didn't hear from you.

Thunder rumbles, low and loud, and I look up at the dark sky. It will take me an hour to walk to the funeral home, so I try to pick up my pace.

Maybe I should've checked on her more? Searched for her sooner? Tried harder to get her into rehab?

Shame hums through me like an electrical current.

I know it's selfish to think about myself right now, but what does the future hold? It's not safe here.

I'm not safe.

Justin's debts and Mom's lifestyle were a cycle that self-perpetuated.

Score. Use. Gamble. Lose.

How many drug dealers did my Mom owe?

She had a rolling list of guys—and girls—she bought her fixes from. Always behind. Always asking for credit. Inevitably having to pay them back in other ways because there was never enough money to get out from under it all.

What's going to happen when those people come looking for what they're owed?

I don't see a light at the end of the tunnel.

Not when I was born into the pits of Santo Christo.

Growing up among trailer trash and stray dogs is all I've ever known. Everyone knows their place in this world—you either live in filth, struggling to survive, you're part of the elite who live on Valmont island, or you're sandwiched somewhere in the middle—a middle class that is still wildly out of reach to someone like me. I used to dream of visiting the fancy island everyone always revered when they'd give tours to the public, but mom refused. She told me to be realistic, told me to stay away from there, and reminded me where I belonged—here.

As I take a shortcut through an alleyway, I pull out my switchblade. It's dangerous in the shadows, and a girl like me can never be too careful. When you're born into danger, you usually die in it, too.

When I try to imagine where I'll be in five years, I can't.

College seems further and further out of my grasp, especially now that I have a funeral to pay for. That first semester's tuition seems like an impossible dream I'll never be able to catch up to.

Maybe I'll end up dead, just like the rest of my family.

I don't want to think about the alternative. I don't want to follow in my mother's fumbling footsteps. Whoring the only asset I have—my body.

Addictive personalities run in the family. I thought I was better than that, but maybe I just haven't found my vice yet. The thought of shooting up makes me sick, but the escape of taking something to numb myself is becoming more appealing with each passing hour. I've been too apprehensive to try any drugs, too scared to lose myself, too afraid to turn into my mother. But in a sick way, I understand why she had to take something to make the bleakness of her existence a little easier to bear.

By the time the funeral home comes into view, my feet are aching. My shoes are too small, and I'm wet from walking in the rain. I step inside the building, going in search of the

bathroom. I'm parched. I lower my head under the tap, then drink clean water until my stomach hurts. It's cool and clear and doesn't taste like it was filtered through tree roots and rusty pipes, like at home. After wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I glance at myself in the small mirror. I look like shit. I pull my tangled, wet hair up with the elastic band I keep around my wrist and attempt to flatten the frizzy flyaways with my palms.

As soon as I enter the reception area, I'm ushered down the hall into an office. A middle-aged woman with a smile as fake as a Walmart Christmas tree greets me.

"Miss Moore. Please, take a seat." She points at the metal chair in front of her desk.

A bouquet of last week's flowers wilts on her desk. They still have their color, but the petals are beginning to shrivel and the sweet, decaying smell makes my stomach roll.

"Are you a minor?" She studies me. Her name tag reads BARBARA. There's something cold in her tone, but I'm used to being talked to this way.

"I'm eighteen," I tell her, knowing I look younger than I am.

She looks over the paperwork. "I'm sorry for your loss. Was she your—"

"My mother," I state, already finished with the small talk.

She nods, putting a hand to her chest as if this pains her, but I can tell it's a rehearsed act.

"We have several different burial plans available." She slides a thick binder across the desk and I open it, scanning over the options. The lowest price I see is five *thousand* dollars. The water I drank threatens to come back up, but I swallow it down.

While I expected a funeral to be expensive, there's no way I could ever afford this, even if I picked up extra shifts at the diner. Right now, the money I make barely feeds me for a week. I make twenty dollars on a good day, less than two

hundred dollars a month. The only money I have to my name is what I've saved for my tuition.

Shit. Work. I make a mental note to call them later and let them know what's going on. I'm sure they already know. Word spreads fast on our side of town.

I suck in a ragged breath. "Are there any *other* options?"

Barbara frowns with sad eyes, and I'm sure she was able to read between the lines. I don't want anyone's sympathy.

Not now, not ever, and not hers.

She deals with death every day and my mother's just another number. Just as I'm another poor kid with no options.

"We could cremate her," she explains. "It's a little cheaper."

"No. I can't do that," I tell her. Mom, a christened Catholic, always made us promise to bury her upon her death. Yeah. The same woman who was a drug-addicted prostitute wanted to make sure she was laid to rest the Catholic way.

"You have any other family?" She asks.

I shake my head. "It was just us."

Her fake sympathetic persona melts away. The real Barb is here now. And she looks like she wants me to fuck off already so she can get on with her day.

"You can sign a release form and the county will...*take care of it*," she says, ripping open a drawer and pulling out a packet of papers.

My stomach lurches as she slides them toward me and I read the first paragraph. "She wouldn't be buried in a grave of her own?"

I already know the answer. She'll be burnt to ash or buried with no marker to designate her final resting place, amongst the rest of the homeless and unclaimed dead. There would be no headstone to put flowers on. No place to visit. Nothing that would prove my mother ever existed.

“I can’t let that happen,” I whisper. *She deserves better than an unmarked grave.*

“It’s not so bad,” she says unconvincingly. “It happens more often than not. What’s a young girl like you going to do to get five thousand dollars?”

I shrug.

“Nothing good,” Barbara continues. “I’ve got a daughter about your age, and I damn sure wouldn’t want her to do anything stupid to bury me. I’d rather be thrown in the bay than for her to take out one of those sketchy payday loans.” She looks me up and down, pausing for a moment. “And I wouldn’t want her to do *anything* else that would put her in harm’s way.”

I can read between the lines. Too many men would take advantage of a desperate, young girl like me. I understand that, but sometimes a person does things they’re not proud of to get by. Barbara understands, but that doesn’t mean she can do anything to help me.

“How long do I have to make a decision?” I ask.

“We can hold the body for forty-eight hours. You’ll need to figure it out by then.”

The body. I stand. “Okay.”

I’m moving on autopilot.

I need five thousand dollars in forty-eight hours or my mom will end up in the land fill.

Another five thousand dollars or Justin will end up being beaten to death by Javier’s men. Then they’ll come for me while *his* body is still warm. There’s a golden rule that stretches from Santo Christo to Valmont Island and all along the ocean between—no debt goes unpaid.

I’ve got no one. Nothing. I’m *fucked*.

Well, that’s not entirely true. I do have one option.

The last person I should be running to is the man who might be responsible for all of this—Javier Marin.

My mother warned me about him. Demanded I stay away.

Justin gave me the same warning, but at the same time, he continues crawling back to Javier's revolving door of debt.

Maybe this—owing Javier Marin something—is my destiny, too.

CHAPTER 8



BIRDIE

I head toward the closest bus stop so I can catch a ride across town to the dock. It'd take me five hours of walking, and my feet couldn't handle it. Plus, too many teenage girls go missing around here. I'm too fucking busy to get kidnapped right now.

When the bus rolls around, my heart pounds. I don't know what the hell I'm doing, but at this point, I have nothing to lose. I've already lost it all.

I step onto and find a seat in the middle. Wanting to check in with Bryce, I pull my mom's phone from my pocket and realize it's dead. Shit. I guess it's probably a good thing. He'd try to talk me out of what I'm about to do.

If Justin can borrow five grand to gamble away in the devil's casino, maybe I can get the same amount. I'm not sure what I'd offer or what he'd even want, but I have to try.

The bus's brakes squeal, and eventually, it comes to a stop. The driver gives me a warning look, but I ignore him and step off. The bus rumbles off, down the road until it's a tiny speck in the distance, and that's when I realize it's too late to turn back.

I'm only a few blocks away from the docks. I walk the rest of the way. With each step I take forward, I can hear my mother's voice yelling for me to turn around. Barbara's words come to mind, too.

The sun hangs lazily in the distance, casting rays across the still, dark water of the harbor. When my feet hit the pier, an

obscenely large yacht that's the size of a cruise ship comes into view. A *superyacht*. It's three gleaming stories high, an object of sheer opulence in direct contrast to my poverty-riddled existence.

Before moving toward the onboarding deck, I take a moment to stare at the vast ocean beyond that seems to stretch out for eternity. Then I glance back at the floating oversized mansion in front of me. I'm in awe, even though I know of the terrible things that happen on board.

Drugs. Gambling. Prostitution. And worse things. Trafficking. Rape. Murder. Those things are only whispers, rumors at best. But I believe every word.

Javier Marin runs his business on this boat without boundaries. What happens at sea, stays at sea. This is a place where powerful men step away from their lives and enter a new world. Criminals dressed as businessmen, however here, they're all the same.

The sparkling white siding and mirrored tinted windows hide the horrors of the multi-million dollar fortress. I'm not fooled, though. I see through the glitz and glamor. I know blood and misery paid for it all.

Crossing the threshold and going to Javier reeks of weakness, and I've never felt more insignificant than I do now. I find the last sliver of courage I still have left, and board the small water taxi that will deliver me to the man I've been told to avoid at all costs.

In a way, it's almost as if I knew this would happen eventually.

The super yacht looks ominous the closer we get, and I suddenly want to turn back. If I could swim, I'd jump into the harbor and kick my way back to shore.

I'm met by a man who looks like he works for the secret service. He even has an earpiece. When he lifts his arm, I see a gun attached to his hip. His gaze snaps toward me when I step on board. I look into his eyes and he glares at me like I've lost my mind—and I think I have.

“I’m here to see Javier.” I stand confidently, my words ringing false in my ears. Adrenaline pumps through me, helping me to stay upright when I feel as if I’ll faint.

The guy lifts one eyebrow. “Name?”

“Birdie.”

He grunts noncommittally, looking beyond me as if I bore him.

“Birdie Moore?” I try again. His gaze snaps back to me as if I’ve just told him I’m the fucking Queen of England, and he drops the attitude immediately.

“This way,” he barks like it’s a command, then turns around. He strides away so quickly, I almost have to run to keep up. We take an elevator down to the bottom floor, and I’m led to the far end of a long, dark hallway.

Outside of it hangs a golden anchor that’s bolted to the door and it’s encrusted with diamonds that sparkle in the low light. The guard knocks, and I hear a man’s gruff on the other side. I swallow hard, the knot from my empty stomach feels caught in my raw throat. The man gives me one last look before throwing me into the pit.

“You sure about this?” he questions and I firmly nod. I wonder how many other young girls he’s escorted to these chambers. Without a second glance, he walks away, leaving me.

“Come,” I hear, and with a racing heart, I obey, crossing the threshold.

The room is dimly lit, and bigger than our entire trailer. Warm light glows from a lamp in the corner. Tendrils of smoke swirl around the room, coaxing me forward. The red cherry of a cigar brightens, and I see *him* in the darkness. I try to speak, but my voice vanishes. This is the man I’ve been conditioned to fear, a man I’ve never met before in my life, and here I am begging like my poor mother.

He takes a step forward, and I lay eyes on the archangel of doom, the crossroads demon who will inevitably take my life, too.

Javier Marin.

The tailored designer suit hugs him in all the right places, and if he weren't glaring at me like he wants me dead, I'd say he was attractive in a cruel sort of way. I can see why my mother seemed to owe him so many favors. I'm sure he's charming when he wants to be.

When the door slams shut behind me, I practically jump out of my skin. It's just me and him, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't afraid. Sometimes people come here and vanish forever. Women, mostly. Young women. Girls.

Girls like me.

"Well?" he asks. His voice is deep and baritone, and it scares the living shit out of me. The sound that vibrates from his throat—it isn't just a sound. It's a *feeling*. It grates against my bones. I'm so spooked by his presence that I can't form words. He fixes his dark eyes on me, his silence is more deafening than if he were yelling in my face. He moves with confidence, an air of don't *'fuck with me'* following him as he sits in the chair behind the mahogany desk. He motions for me to sit across from him.

I position myself on the edge of the seat, not letting my body touch the velvet adorning its high back. Javier tilts his head a fraction, narrowing his eyes as they rake over me. Searching, searching. For what? I don't think I want to know.

"What do you want, *little girl*?" He asks, finally.

I suck in a deep breath. Something flashes across his face and he raises a brow.

Is it recognition? Is he recalling a memory? *Or something else?*

"I need to make some money," I choke out. The fleeting words feel like poison on my tongue.

"A tale as old as time isn't it." Javier leans back and crosses his arms over his broad chest. He's waiting for me to continue as the silence stretches on. I swear he's getting off on my fear. As he scrubs his hand against the stubble of his strong

jaw, he studies me the way a wolf might approach a helpless lamb. His cold eyes pierce through me, and when he smirks?

That's when I realize that I'm royally fucked.

CHAPTER 9



*D*avina always liked to play dead.

It became a running joke in our house. My twin sister, ever the prankster, would get on the floor and wedge herself against my door in the morning, waiting for me to emerge from my bedroom to her limp body. Or she'd float face-down in our pool for longer than I thought anyone could hold their breath, waiting for me to jump in and save her. She was never actually dead. She was just a little shit who wanted attention. Especially after the car accident that got our mother hooked on pain pills and completely emotionally detached from her own life. We were three when our high-functioning alcoholic mother bundled us into her car, totally wasted, and attempted to drive us to kindergarten, smashing head-on into a large oak tree halfway there.

Davina's car seat was buckled correctly, but drunk Mommy hadn't made sure the two clips that held my five-point harness in place were clicked in properly. I flew straight through the front windshield, narrowly missing the tree, landing on a strip of dirt beside the road.

My injuries were life-threatening—I spent a month in an induced coma, part of it on cooling pads to keep my brain from swelling and my temperature low enough for my body to attempt to repair itself. I don't remember a single thing from the accident, but Davina did. She would talk about it often. How she watched me fly out of my car seat. The hospital visits with our father. The way the doctors encouraged my parents to bring Davina to sit with me, the way my vital signs were

always better when she was there. Twins. We've been bonded since the moment we began existence, sharing our mother's womb, our first crib, our entire childhood.

It used to scare me when she played dead. She was so goddamn convincing at it that my disbelief would always break before she had to take a breath. I'd fall to my knees and shake her, or dive into the pool to rescue her. Every single time, I'd get laughter in return.

"Did you really think I was dead?" she'd giggle, parrying the slaps and pushes I'd dole out in protest at her ridiculous pranks.

"Don't worry, Dar," she'd say, her big, hazel-colored eyes full of mischief. "We're twins. We're connected. You'll feel it if I'm ever really gone. You were dead for fifteen minutes after the car accident. Nobody told me, but I knew. I felt it. I wanted to die until they brought you back."

So when Davina and her boyfriend Heath went out on his parent's yacht during spring break, I didn't worry when they didn't come back that night.

I didn't worry when they didn't come back the next day.

I didn't worry when they found Heath's parent's yacht gliding silently through the water, nobody on board, a ghost ship with two red party cups full of warm beer still sitting on the table.

I did start to worry when they pulled Heath's bloated body from the ocean after an extensive sea and land search that lasted five days. But I wasn't worried that Davina was dead.

I was worried about what other cruel fate had befallen my sister.

Everyone on the island immediately assumed the worst for Davina, once Heath's body was recovered. How could she not be dead, as well? Most likely the sharks had gotten her, or her body had drifted off into the endless ocean somewhere nobody would ever find her. The police called off the search. The volunteer rescue crew stopped searching, too. It was just me, on my dead father's speedboat, cruising the seas surrounding

our private Island day after day after day. I'm not even sure what I was looking for. Not a body. But something—an answer. A clue. A smoking gun.

Where was my sister?

My searches turned up nothing. Until last week. A lead. A dead woman, wearing a bracelet with an anchor carved into the side. And her daughter, an oblivious little bird unaware that I'm about to snatch her up and crush her.

My sister has been missing for nearly three months, and I've never once believed that she's dead.

And if Birdie Moore has any information, I will take pleasure in torturing it from her.

CHAPTER 10



BIRDIE

Javier leans back in his chair. Well, I say chair, but really it's more of a throne. It matches mine, but the arms are more ornate, the delicate gold inlay more pronounced. I suppose the King should sit on a throne, but really, there's no need with a man like this. The air around him hums with power—with *danger*—that immediately makes me regret my hasty decision to step foot on his boat.

“So,” Javier says, eyeing me with a savage curiosity. I feel like a specimen under his unblinking gaze, something caught in a net and pinned underneath a microscope to study this way and that. Suddenly I'm too aware of what I decided to wear in the bleak dawn I woke up to this morning. The same cutoff jean shorts I've been wearing for days. A black sleeveless bodysuit that zips at the front, that I stole from my mom when she lost weight and I outgrew my clothes. And over the bodysuit, a baggy, canary-yellow t-shirt that I've knotted at the waist, Bryce's old shirt, with a faded picture of *Itchy and Scratchy* on the front.

“So,” I echo, shifting uncomfortably in my seat.

“You know, I've been expecting a little Birdie to land on my boat. I just didn't think you'd arrive so quickly.”

His words are like a punch to my stomach. It's as if every bit of wind is knocked out of me.

He knew I was coming? He's been *expecting* me?

“You know who I am,” I say flatly. I'm surprised at how even my voice sounds because I'm fairly sure if Javier leaned

over this desk and pressed his thick fingers to my throat, he'd feel a hummingbird's wings beating frantically in place of where my pulse should be.

"Don't sound so disappointed," Javier waves his hand dismissively. "Any family of Mia Moore's is family of mine."

Really? I somehow doubt he'd extend the family welcome to Justin.

A blood-red ruby ring adorns Javier's middle finger, the lone piece of jewelry on him. It's probably worth a hundred funerals. Two hundred. *Maybe I could kill him and steal it.*

"I like your shirt," Javier says, a deep dimple appearing in his stubbled cheek as he smirks. "Of course, in reality, the cat would kill the mouse the first chance it got. It's the cat's nature. You can't fight nature." His eyes drift from my face, down to my chest. I'm acutely aware of how my nipples poke through the fabric of my shirt in this cold room, and how the only bra I own is currently slung over the end of my bed, drying after I washed it in the bathroom sink last night. His eyes travel further, to the place where my thighs meet, icy dread churning in my stomach.

A hot blush creeps up my neck and settles in. I desperately want to cross my legs, but the chair I'm sitting in is so close to the low desk, my knees are rammed up against the sleek mahogany. Instead, I squeeze my thighs together, trying to look as young and unassuming as I can with a man like Javier staring at me like he's starving and I'm dinner.

"Maybe the cat and the mouse could be friends," I force out. I don't even know why I say it—I don't want to be the mouse. But I know damn well I'm not the cat. And whatever I am, there's no way in hell I want to be friends with Javier.

He tips his head to the side as if considering my suggestion. "Have you ever read the Grimm fairytales?" he asks.

I nod. "Some."

"*Katze und Maus in Gesellschaft*," Javier says, in a flawless German accent. "Cat and Mouse in Partnership. Have

you read that one?”

“No,” I reply. Something tells me I’m not going to like it.

“A cat and mouse become friends. They live together, and they buy a teeny little pot of food to store away for lean times. But the cat eats the food while the mouse is away, and when the mouse confronts him, what do you think happens?”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes at this child’s fable. “I don’t know. The cat apologizes?”

Javier bursts into a maniacal laugh, banging his fist on the desk. “Oh, Birdie, I like you. If that’s not an optimist’s guess, I don’t know what is.” He abruptly stops laughing, his features become frigid once more. I’ve been in this man’s presence for approximately two minutes, and I’ve already given him my amateur diagnosis: Complete Fucking Sociopath. You don’t find that condition listed in the DSM-5 or any other manual of mental disorders, but you do find it aboard the largest yacht in the Santo Christo marina.

“So. Mommy finally took a bad batch and bit the big one. I have to say, I’m surprised it took this long. That woman would put just about anything in her arm. I mean, to be fair, she’d put just about anything anywhere.”

Gross. I swallow thickly, nodding. I want to argue, to defend her—but he’s right. When you live so close to the fire, eventually, you’re going to burn. But his words have raised a different kind of alarm in my mind—one that demands an answer.

“How did you know she was dead?” I blurt out.

Javier leans forward, his words blunt. “It’s my job to know where my employees are at all times. Especially an employee as ... *special* as Mia.”

Employee. That’s a generous term. I can think of more accurate ones. *Servant. Whore. Chattel. Property.*

Javier glances at his watch. “As much as I’m enjoying you barging in unannounced, I need to move things along. I assume you’re here because someone has told you I buy and sell things.”

I nod again.

“You’re awfully quiet, Birdie. Cat got your tongue?” And now he’s grinning again.

“Yes,” I say quietly. “I need money to pay for my mother’s burial.”

“And what is it you have to offer as collateral?”

Don’t make me say it. Jesus.

“My... self,” I say finally.

He studies me for a long moment.

“I assume you brought along some paperwork?”

I have to stand to dig into my pocket for the folded wad of paper with the quote that fucking *Barbara* printed for me. As I reach for it, my fingers close around my switch knife. A macabre fantasy floats in front of my eyes for a split second as I imagine stabbing Javier, stealing his ring, selling it, and getting my mother the best casket money can buy. But Javier’s knowing stare shocks me out of my bloody daydream.

“You would be dead before you even opened the blade, little girl.” Javier’s words hold no menace, just a certainty that is as gentle as it is cruel. I fish the wadded-up paperwork from my pocket, unfold it, and lay it on the desk in front of him.

Javier uses the tip of one finger to drag the creased stack closer. Out of nowhere, a pair of reading glasses appear, and he pushes them onto his face, studying the quote carefully.

Now that I’m standing, I don’t want to sit again. I feel better being taller than him, even though he could probably kill me in three seconds, whether I’m sitting, standing, or begging for my life on the floor.

“Five thousand dollars,” he says. “That’s all?”

I nod tightly. “That’s all.”

What does he mean, that’s all? That’s *everything*.

Maybe I should have splashed out for the second cheapest coffin.

“It’s a sad state of affairs when you can’t rustle up five thousand dollars without visiting a man like me,” Javier says. He actually sounds sincere. I’d almost feel comforted by those words, if it were anyone else saying them.

“No kidding,” I mutter. “Five thousand dollars is basically impossible to come by where I’m from.”

“And yet, your stepdaddy managed to find it just fine two days ago in one of my esteemed casinos.”

My stomach drops. *Justin*. “He lost it,” I say. “He thinks he can play cards, but he obviously can’t.”

Javier leans back on his throne, steepling his fingers on the desk. “And now you think I should give your family more money. Even knowing that the one person in said family who worked to pay off her debts is now lying dead in a steel drawer at ...” he glances down at the funeral paperwork with distaste, “... *Budget Funerals*.”

The image of my mother, bruised and dead in some dark metal drawer, seizes me. For a moment, I feel like I can’t breathe. Like I’m drowning. *Fuck*.

“It wouldn’t be giving,” I protest quickly. “It would be a loan. With interest. And I’d pay back every penny.”

Javier pushes the Budget Funerals paperwork back to me. I don’t take it. Taking it will mean admitting defeat. Taking it means this is over. My eyes fill with tears, humiliation, and anger making my cheeks flush as I stubbornly stay standing in front of the devil incarnate.

“Do you believe in an afterlife, Birdie?” Javier asks seriously. “Do you think your mother is in a better place?”

I narrow my eyes at his presumptuous tone. As if he thinks he can ask questions like this, just because of the dichotomy of power and weakness being played in his favor. I could leave, I think. Right now. At the moment, I don’t owe Javier Marin a damn thing except for my middle finger as I walk away from this godforsaken place and never see him again.

But of course, his question is the reason I can’t leave. “Do I think my mother is in a better place?” I echo his question.

“That depends. Is being flat on her back in a steel drawer *better* than being flat on her back screwing strangers for money to buy drugs?”

Javier appears deep in thought. “It is an interesting question, philosophically speaking.”

“Forgive my bluntness,” I mutter, “but you don’t exactly look like a fucking philosopher, Mr. Marin.”

He laughs, a big, booming noise that rattles in my chest. At least I haven’t offended him. “I’ll have you know I was a philosophy major in college, young lady.” Then his smile is gone, just like that, *snap, poof, gone*. The way his mood changes in a split-second is unnerving. The way his eyes roam over me makes me feel naked despite my clothes. Out of nowhere, I think of the book Mom was reading when she died. Delusional bitch made me read *The Road* when I was twelve and said I was smart enough to actually go to college so I should get a head start. Well, I’m not at college, am I, Mia? I’m standing in front of a man who might as well be one of the cannibals from that godforsaken story, letting his eyes roam over me as he chooses which part of me to roast over a fire and eat first.

I shift from foot to foot, trying not to show my growing panic. My impatience. My sheer fucking desperation. “I don’t believe in an afterlife,” I say finally. “I don’t believe in anything. I wish I did. If I thought my mother was in a better place right now, maybe I could live with her body being buried in a mass grave without a funeral. But I don’t believe in fairytales. There is no better place. There’s just a dead body I need to put somewhere. So I need five thousand dollars to make sure I can sleep at night, knowing she’s at least in a half-decent place where I can leave flowers while the worms come for her corpse.”

Javier seems momentarily sobered by my admission. No doubt he’s thinking of that lovely image that’s been haunting me since the moment I realized she could actually end up in an unmarked landfill for the dead. Mia, dead and breaking down, worms and bugs and dirt slowly finding their way into her sealed coffin, feasting on her flesh.

“You might be lying in a bed every night, but you won’t be getting much sleep if you’re paying me back,” Javier finally states. “But of course, I have plenty of fairytale potions that can help a pretty girl like you stay awake.”

And plenty of things that can kill me.

I shudder. Once again, he’s right. “I guess I’ll sleep when I’m dead,” I grind out.

A slow grin floats across Javier’s face. “You know, your mother used to say that *very* thing.”

CHAPTER 11



BIRDIE

Javier steps out of the room for a few minutes, leaving me in his office. A surveillance camera is bolted to the ceiling, glaring down at me, so I don't dare go snooping.

When he returns, he gestures for me to follow him into the hallway. With growing concern that I may never get off this boat—not alive, at least—I follow Javier deeper into the yacht. We go down a flight of stairs, and as the hallways get narrower, darker, the atmosphere is suffocating. Down here, I can feel the slight rock of the vessel, and it turns my empty stomach into nauseous knots.

Finally, just as I'm about to turn and start running for my fucking life, Javier opens a door and gestures for me to enter. "Ladies first."

Swallowing back bile and screams, I take a tentative step into the darkened room. It smells like perfume and rubbing alcohol, a heady mix that confuses my anxious brain as my eyes adjust to the dim light. Javier reaches for a panel on the wall, and suddenly the small room is lit up like fireworks on the Fourth of July weekend. My eyes throb, as I blink rapidly. I take a quick scan of my surroundings; I was imagining some kind of torture room, but this is just a nurse's station. There's a first aid kit bolted to a table, which is in turn bolted to the floor. In the corner, a metal bed is bolted to the wall. It's all very ... normal and *boring*.

I breathe out in relief as Javier turns to me, frowning. "If I was going to kill you, I wouldn't bring you all the way down

here. Do you have any idea how hard it is to carry a dead body out of a room this far down in a ship?"

"*Phew,*" I say, my words barbed with sarcasm. "That makes me feel *so* much better."

Javier chuckles. "We're going to have some fun, Birdie Moore. Up on the table, pants off."

I freeze. "I'm not taking anything off."

Javier clicks his tongue, chiding me. "You are aware that you need to be undressed for a man to fuck you, don't you, Birdie? I mean, surely you've done this plenty of times with your little prison-happy boyfriend?"

More alarm bells. He knows about Bryce. He knows about *everything*.

"You want to fuck me in here?" I say incredulously.

Javier presses his lips together. "I don't want to fuck you at all, little girl. You're not my type. I need to check out the *product* before I okay it for sale. That means an examination, drawing some blood, and making sure you're not infested with fucking bed bugs or STDs. Customers tend to like their pussy clean." He shakes his head. "You ask a lot of questions for a girl who wants my money. Like *a lot* a lot."

I can't believe I'm doing this. It's like I'm not even me, like I'm watching this from outside of my body. Dissociation, is that what it's called? It's not like I've ever been able to afford a therapist to tell me what happens to me when I zone out.

I can see myself. I'm one of those empty-eyed girls. I was always too busy side-eyeing them with judgment to think about how they felt. Because on the outside, with their blank stares and hands by their sides, those girls looked like they were choosing to be what they were. I'm one of those empty-eyed girls and I haven't even been touched yet. Haven't even been hurt yet.

My heart's hurting, though. Breaking. Shattering into a million pieces, along with everything I thought I was. I always

thought I was better than this. That I would make better choices.

I can't breathe.

I'm not making a choice.

I'm not making a choice at all.

There are no choices.

Not in this lifetime.

Not for me.

"Shhh," Javier says, wiping a tear from my cheek and licking it off his thumb. He takes the hem of my shirt and lifts it up over my head, dropping it to the floor, forgotten. Next, my shorts. He gently undoes the button, sliding the tight denim over my hips, down my thighs, crouching as he lifts my feet one by one out of the frayed shorts. Now I'm just wearing the black bodysuit, my last bit of armor protecting me from the wolf readying to attack.

With shaking hands, I grasp the zipper, even though everything inside me is screaming to *run*. "You're not going to rape me?" I ask stupidly.

"It wouldn't be rape if I gave you five thousand dollars," Javier says, pushing my hands away as he unzips the bodysuit himself, tugging the zipper open right down to my belly button and parting the material to bare my breasts. Almost clinically, he rubs his thumbs over my nipples, bringing them to stiff peaks with a satisfied grunt. "Very nice. Here I was, assuming you'd had sex in exchange for money before."

To my eternal mortification, I start to cry. "I've never had sex at all before," I whisper.

Javier's casual manner evaporates, along with the last shred of my dignity.

"*What?*" he snaps.

"I've nev—"

Javier holds up a hand. "I heard what you said," he says. "I don't believe you."

“Fine.” I make a beeline for the door. “Don’t believe me. I’ll get Justin to help me find someone who does.”

Javier sidesteps at alarming speed, blocking the only exit. “I don’t like being lied to, little girl,” he says through his teeth, one hand darting out to grab a fistful of my hair. He yanks me roughly, and I yelp as he backs me toward the metal bed, crowding me with his body. I have to keep moving away as he steps forward, a chilling dance of domination where he’s leading and I just have to follow the steps. My hip hits the sharp edge of the bed, and I let out a hiss of pain.

Javier is strong. So strong that he picks me up like I weigh nothing, dumping me onto the hard metal table and holding me still with one meaty palm against my sternum. I try to fight him off, but it’s like trying to swim to the surface of the ocean when you’re handcuffed to the sea floor. As I’m struggling, my fingers brush against something. Denim. My shorts. They’re on the table beside me, and they’re still holding something that might help.

I reach for my knife, still tucked away in my pocket, but Javier gets to it first. He continues to hold me in place with one hand, using the other to press the switchblade open. It’s sharp and clean, and deadly. Javier brings the sharp tip of the blade to my neck. My skin feels as weak as tissue paper under the threat of a knife I’ve watched Justin sharpen methodically every month since I was old enough to leave the house alone.

“That’s the second time you’ve gone for your knife in my home,” Javier seethes. “Threatening me with a weapon of any kind again would be very unwise.”

He tosses it across the room, where it lands loudly, metal on metal. “Now. Where were we? I was about to see what else is hiding under here.” His hand rubs at the spot between my legs.

I try to fight him off, but it’s no use. My energy wanes, and he’s a patient sociopath. After all the fight has drained out of me, I lie there panting, trying desperately to catch my breath. Needing to summon some energy for round two.

“You done?” Javier asks.

I nod, dazed. I *am* done.

I'm out of money, out of options, and not a single soul outside of this room knows where I am. So, when Javier uses one hand to push my thighs apart and wrench my bodysuit to the side, I don't fight. I just lie there, humiliation burning in the tears that blind me momentarily. My cheeks burn with shame as I feel the sting of Javier Marin's eyes on the naked juncture between my thighs, the most private place, the spot where nobody except me has ever touched. Not even Bryce has gotten his hands in my pants.

And now a criminal mastermind is studying me *down there*, his fingers digging into my thighs hard enough to leave bruises.

Javier brushes his fingertips against my sensitive bundle of nerves, and I jerk back as if I've been electrocuted, trying to close my thighs against his iron grip.

He lets go of the thin bodysuit material he'd pulled to the side, and my decency is thankfully restored, at least momentarily. My tits are still on display, but I don't even care about that anymore. Javier peers at me from his spot between my thighs, looking almost bored. "I'm going to check your pussy. It will only hurt if you struggle. Do you understand?"

The word *pussy* in his mouth sounds fucking filthy. I can't breathe. I want to go home.

"Birdie...?" Javier drawls, glancing at the expensive watch on his wrist. "Words. Use them. Do you understand?"

"I..." I almost tell him to call it off. I'll just leave, and he won't have to touch me or look at me or give me five thousand dollars for some man to fuck me. Or is it *men*, plural?

But then the cold steel of the table bites at my back, and I remember my dead mother is lying on a metal table of her own, ready to be buried.

I can't let her be thrown away like garbage. Buried where nobody will ever know. Like she never existed. She may not have been a great mother, but I owe her this much, at least. I *have* to do this for her. Or the guilt will destroy me.

“I’m not going to put my fingers in your pussy without your consent,” Javier’s voice cuts through my whirring thoughts. *Oh my God, he’s loving this.* He doesn’t give a fuck about my consent. He just wants to hear me say the words.

“Do you have to use that word?” I snap.

Amusement flashes in his eyes. “Do you prefer the word *cunt*? Okay.”

I just glare at him.

“Say it,” he instructs. “Say, ‘Yes, you can put your fingers in my cunt.’”

“No.”

“No?”

“Forget it. Forget all of this.” I start to sit up, hoisting myself onto my elbows, and then my head is slammed back down onto the hard metal table.

“I think you lied to me, little Birdie,” Javier says. “If you were telling the truth, you’d have no problem with me verifying your... innocence.” He chuckles. “I haven’t met a virgin older than thirteen in all my years taking in poor, defenseless girls from Santo Christo. Unless we’re talking anal, and even then...”

I shake my head in disbelief, rage pulsing in my veins as I choke on the age he’s so casually thrown out. Thirteen? *Poor, defenseless girls.* His wet dream, no doubt. I’ve seen plenty of predators in my lifetime, but none as terrifying as this one.

“Put your fingers in my *cunt*, Mr. Marin,” I seethe, “and I’m sure you’ll be able to verify my fucking innocence.” I’m so mad, I’m shaking, and my chest is rising and falling with each aggrieved breath. My vision is tunneled. My teeth are clenched. I want to jump off this table and rip Javier’s fucking eyes out of his head.

“Whoa, whoa, hey,” Javier says, his eyes glinting with what looks like satisfaction. He ever so gently rests his hands on my already spread knees and slowly, *agonizingly slowly*, pushes them apart until my legs are wide open. It’s the same

way I have to lay for a gynecological exam, but this isn't the free clinic down by the highway, and Javier isn't an underpaid nurse taking a swab of my cervix.

I can't watch; I cover my face with my hands, squeezing my eyes shut as tight as I can. I force myself to stay still as Javier presses a finger against my opening, meeting with immediate resistance. It's as if my body is so traumatized by the thought of him touching me, that it's actively trying to push him out.

"Huh," Javier says. "You know, Birdie, some girls who come to me are dripping wet by this stage. They say they don't want it, but their bodies betray them. Not you, though." He stops talking for a second, and something tells me I should look. I open my eyes, propping myself up on my elbows just in time to watch—and hear—and *feel*—Javier spit on me. Right there, from his mouth, onto my *cunt*, as he so obviously enjoys calling it. I gasp. His saliva is warm as it slides down me, and I think I'm more offended than if he'd just put his dick in me. He spit on me. *He fucking spit on me.*

"That's better," he remarks, sliding one finger inside. It hurts. His fingers are big, and like I've told him several times now—I'm a fucking *virgin*.

I take deep breaths, avoiding eye contact, pretending I'm having a boring, regular exam at the boring, regular doctor. It helps, at first. I hold that image in my mind: the crinkly paper gown, the smell of antiseptic. I can almost pretend that I'm okay, that this is okay, that I'm not being fingered by a crazy drug lord.

Until he uses the thumb of his other hand to press against my sensitive spot, the tight bundle of nerves that nobody else has ever touched, and starts to make lazy, lingering circles with the pad of his thumb. I gasp, meeting his eyes, seeing the open challenge in his gaze.

"Does your boyfriend make you come like this?"

I shake my head.

"*Girlfriend?*"

“No,” I whisper.

He raises his eyebrows as he continues touching me. “Your stepdaddy?”

I almost choke. “No! Nobody!”

One edge of his mouth tugs up in a smirk at my reaction. He was looking to shock me, and I took the damn bait.

“So just you, then,” he breathes. “And soon, me.”

I swallow, feeling my cheeks redden with embarrassment.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of, Birdie,” he says. “I know your type. You resist so hard. You see how cruel the world is, and you think if you just stay away from men like me, you’ll be safe. But you’re not safe. Because you want it. You feel how wet you are now? Your cunt is dripping.”

I blink back tears as Javier takes his finger from my cunt and holds it up, showing me my wetness glistening on his skin. He brings the finger to his mouth and sucks greedily, his features relaxing momentarily. “The things I would do to you under different circumstances,” he murmurs, pressing the same finger back inside me. “I’d make you sit on my cock in front of an audience, legs spread, so they could watch me break this little pussy until it bled. I’d make you come so hard around my cock. You’d cry for mercy and be begging me to fuck you harder at the same time. I’d cum inside your broken cunt, and then I’d hold you down while other men lined up and took their turn fucking your cum-filled holes.”

Holy hell, the visual Javier delivers is brutal, and vivid. His skillful hands pin me to the metal bed, a steady heat building inside me even as I listen to the devil himself describe a nightmarish fantasy I have no doubt he would actually carry out.

“Next time you touch yourself, on your bare mattress in your sad little trailer, I want you to think about that.”

“Fuck you,” I mutter. I hate him. But I’m not fighting him anymore.

“Men who pay you money will want to do all sorts of things to you, Birdie,” Javier says, staring me down until I feel like I’m drowning in his dark eyes. “For some men, your pain is an aphrodisiac. But for others—your pleasure is their reward.”

I never should have come here. I know that now.

Who am I kidding? I knew that the moment I stepped foot onto the dock. My breathing quickens as Javier continues to touch me.

“I didn’t finish my story,” he murmurs, applying more pressure to my clit as he starts moving his finger, fucking in and out. I’m too terrified to move, frozen in place, a scream locked inside my chest that begs to be let free. It’s a scream of fear. But the longer he touches me, the more the fear becomes something else.

The more my frozen body begins to fill with heat. I blink away more tears, twin trails of salt water spilling over the outer edges of my eyes, running down my temples, and disappearing into my hairline.

Javier pushes my thighs further apart with his elbows, studying me intensely down there. Does he like what he sees? I don’t know. His expression is blank, now.

“At the end of the story, after realizing the cat—her friend—has eaten all of the food and left none for her, the mouse confronts the cat.” Javier suddenly touches me more insistently, and a sob catches in my throat. I grip the sides of the metal bed, wanting it to be over. *Please let this be over.*

“Do you think he apologizes to his friend the mouse?” Javier muses.

A terrible spark begins to grow deep inside me. A tragic bliss. It races across every fiber of my being, every nerve, and there is something beautiful in the brutality a man like Javier Marin doles out.

“No,” I moan. My back starts to lift from the table. I could push him away, there’s still time—but I know if I do, he will banish me from his floating kingdom, with no money. It’s not

just proof of my virginity he wants from me in this exchange —if it were, he'd already be finished.

No, he wants more. My shame. My pleasure.

“No, indeed he doesn’t,” Javier agrees. “It is not in his nature. Just as it’s your nature to be a whore, it is a cat’s nature to hunt. What do you think the cat does to his friend the mouse?”

Between my thighs, it gets even wetter. Hotter.

Javier forces my knees as wide as they’ll go, his expression merciless as he leans over me, his next sentence the thing of nightmares.

“He eats her,” Javier murmurs.

Fireworks explode behind my eyelids as I come against Javier’s touch, my pussy clenching around the finger he’s still fucking me with as an anguished, electric moan escapes my mouth.

Shame burns bright in my cheeks as I struggle to catch my breath. There’s an odd heaviness in my stomach that wasn’t there before, a weighted stone to replace the fear. I know this feeling. Resignation. *I am resigned to my fate.*

I just let a man bring me to orgasm as a business transaction. And as much as I hate to admit it, it was the best, most intense orgasm of my entire fucking life.

Javier pats my thigh, drawing my knees together again. “Very good. Let’s get the business squared away, shall we?” He offers me a hand and I take it, letting him pull me to a sitting position on the edge of the metal bed. A wry smile touches his lips as he hands me my shorts and t-shirt. “You look like you’ve just been fucked. It suits you.”

I want to sob as I pull my clothes on, but I refuse to do that in front of him.

“Come,” he snaps his fingers impatiently as he gestures for me to follow him into the hallway. “We have much to discuss.”

I stare at the back of Javier's head, following as he strides purposefully down hallways and up flights of stairs, and I'm filled with hatred for him. He does move like a panther, and I'm beginning to think he would've told me the story of the cat and the mouse regardless of what I was wearing. It seems like the sick kind of parable a man like Javier would share with all his female visitors before he finger-fucked them.

Back in his office, time seems to crawl. I'm suddenly exhausted. All I want is to get home as quickly as possible, bury myself under my duvet, and sleep for a thousand years. After I've had a scalding hot shower and scrubbed every inch of my body that Javier touched, of course.

"Sit," Javier orders.

I do as he says, the fight gone from me. Nothing he asks in here can be worse than what's just transpired downstairs, so for now, I'm compliant. Instead of moving opposite me, Javier sits beside me. For the first time since we reentered this room, I notice a stack of paperwork in the middle of his desk that wasn't there when we left. My eyes dart over, and I manage to scan over the first few lines before Javier pulls the pages away.

The words *VIRGIN* and *AUCTION* jump out at me like flashing red danger signs, but I'm much too close to the edge of this cliff to steer away now.

"An auction?" My words sound hollow.

Javier nods, checking over the thin pile before he passes it to me. I read the first page, and words immediately blur together as my eyes tear up.

Pull yourself the fuck together, I tell myself sternly. You can cry later.

I read over the entire ten-page document, wanting to ask Javier how he had this pulled together so quickly. We were barely gone ten minutes.

But in my heart, I already know.

This is what a man like Javier does. Buys, sells, and trades in pleasures of the flesh.

He does it so often, it would seem, that he has a standardized fucking template ready for the occasion.

It uses words like *profit* and *possession* and *deliverables*. It lays out my payment terms, stipulates what the highest bidder will receive, and states in clear terms that I will remain in possession of the buyer until my virginity has been taken. It's that last sentence—so cruel, so casual—that makes me want to scream. I can't agree to something so horrible. So cold and clinical.

My vision blurs. I can't read the rest.

I put the contract back onto the desk with shaking hands and look at Javier. "I can't sign this." My voice breaks as a flood of tears streaks down my face.

He looks at me, all traces of cunning gone from his eyes. It's replaced by something weightier. Not quite sadness. But something weary.

It's almost as if he's grown tired of using desperate girls like me.

"You and I both know you don't have a choice," he says. I'm shaking so violently, I couldn't sign anything even if I wanted to.

"I'll forget about the funeral," I lie. I won't, but he doesn't know that. I'll do anything else. Steal a car with Bryce and strip it for parts. Rob a bank wearing one of my old Halloween masks. Anything. I'll do *anything* else.

Javier takes one of my hands and squeezes it as if to comfort me. "Birdie."

I keep shaking my head. "I can't," I whisper. "What if someone horrible buys me? What if they hurt me?" I draw in an anguished sob. "What if they kill me?"

Javier nods emphatically. "Whoever buys you will hurt you, my dear girl. It's the way of the wild. But you won't die. Not if you make this deal."

I try to draw my hand back, but his gentle grip is instantly like a vise.

“And what if I don’t?” I ask, my eyes blazing with indignation, my mind struggling with the sudden assertion that he’s been waiting for me.

He knew I would come to him for help. And he knows I’m not leaving here without signing my freedom over to him.

“You’re a clever girl, Birdie Moore,” Javier says slowly. “You know this is about *more* than just burying your mother.”

“You mean Justin and his fucking gambling?” I blurt out. “I didn’t borrow that money. I’m not selling my soul to repay his debts!”

“It’s *more* than that,” he says gravely. “Think carefully, little Bird. I was the only one who would help your mother when she had no one else. Me, a man who most people run from, and she came to me seeking shelter. She paid a price for me to protect her. For me to protect *you*. And I did protect you both, from the moment she stepped foot on this ship, with you in her womb. Birdie, If that protection disappears ... people will come for you. And when they break you, they won’t make it sweet.”

My heart sinks in my chest, a pitiful anchor in a vast ocean. “You’re lying.”

“I’m so many deplorable things, little Bird,” Javier says. “A liar is not one of them.”

I meet his cold gaze. I *despise* him. But more than that, *I believe him*.

The worst part of this isn’t being touched by a man like Javier. The worst part is shaking his hand after, his fingers still slippery from being inside me, as we finalize our deal.

My virginity in exchange for five thousand paltry dollars.

My dignity for a hole in the ground.

My soul, in exchange for a wooden casket.

It’s not until Javier leaves me in the small room to find my own way off the boat that I realize I forgot to get a quote for the headstone. It wasn’t in the total. *Damn it*.

When I finally stumble down the gangplank and onto the dry dock, I could kiss the asphalt under my feet. I don't have time, though. I've taken less than five steps toward the bus stop when hands close around my shoulders and jerk me to a stop. Without thinking, without even looking to see who's grabbed me, I instinctively throw my head back, hearing a loud crunch as my skull connects with someone's face.

An angry growl sounds behind me—not Javier's, because he's too tall for me to have hit his face with the back of my head. A balled-up fist slams into the side of my ribcage, stealing my breath, forcing me to my knees. I can't even take a breath in to scream. Are some of my ribs broken? I feel like I'm suffocating.

"You dumb bitch," the guy says, holding his broken nose. "Javier told me to drive you home. Maybe I'll dump you in the fucking ocean instead."

I can't move as rough hands lift me to my feet. I'm dragged across the parking lot, toward a shiny black limousine. For some reason, the sleek vehicle is more terrifying than the boat that looms behind me, casting a heavy shadow across the parking lot.

I try to scream.

The side door opens. And before I can even make a mouse-like squeak, I'm dumped inside the dark interior.

The cat eats the mouse. Javier's the cat, but I don't want to be the mouse.

When the limo pulls up outside my trailer, I brace myself. My underwear is still damp from Javier's saliva and my pleasure, and nausea settles into my stomach at the thought of what I've just done. What I've just agreed to give.

I don't say anything to the guy who opens the door and pulls me out. I glance at his face, seeing traces of blood from where I probably broke his nose. It takes a ton of self-restraint not to laugh maniacally. That'll teach him to grab teenage girls in parking lots in the middle of the afternoon.

Our front door isn't locked. I walk into the small space, curiosity enveloping me as I notice the distinct lack of mess that was here earlier. I take two steps into the tiny living room, big enough for just a two-person sofa and chipped coffee table, and frown.

"Am I in the right house?" I say aloud to nobody in particular. Justin clears his throat, and I whirl around to look at him in the kitchen. He's sobered up and has a coffee cup in his hand. The countertop gleams, devoid of the usual trash and old food cartons that he leaves in his wake, and all of the smashed plates and things are gone.

"What happened to you?" Justin asks, taking in my disheveled appearance.

I must look like shit. I've just been finger-fucked by a drug kingpin, beaten up by a limo driver thug, and oh yeah, my mom's still dead.

"I went to see Javier Marin," I say quietly.

Justin's face falls. He abandons the coffee cup and approaches me tentatively.

"Oh, Birdie." He reaches out gingerly, taking my chin between his thumb and forefinger and turning my head to the side to study the bruises I can feel blossoming across my cheekbone.

"He did this to you?"

I shrug. "This was his driver. Javier was more interested in what was under the clothes."

Justin's face transforms into a mask of wild fury. I'm oddly moved by his reaction. I'm not his daughter, but he's the only man who's ever been around. He's a shitty role model, but he still chased away my grade school bullies and gave me a knife when I started walking around town alone.

He's a fuck up, but he cares about me like I'm his own.

He might be the only person in the world who does.

"Birdie," Justin presses. "What did he do to you?"

I shrug. “He didn’t rape me. That’s what you’re asking, right?”

Justin looks visibly relieved. He steps closer to hug me, but he squeezes too hard. The spot where the idiot limo driver punched me, in my ribs, screams with pain. I think I do, too. Justin immediately lets go, stepping back, alarmed.

“What?” He studies me, probably looking for an injury.

With great effort, I pull up the side of my canary yellow t-shirt, peel the side of my black bodysuit from my skin and let Justin see the real damage that feels like it’s slowly killing me.

“Oh, shit,” he says. “You have to go to the hospital.”

I laugh. “We don’t go to the hospital in this family, Justin.”

He frowns again, a deep line appearing between his green eyes. “We have Medicaid. And who cares if we get a hospital bill? Add it to the pile. At least you’ll be okay.”

Jesus. He’s never spoken this many words to me before that weren’t *Can I borrow some money* or *Do any of your friends have some coke I can buy?* Not since I was a little girl, anyway. He was better then. Everything was better then.

“How did you get home?” He eyes me warily, then stalks over to the window. Slowly, he parts the old, stained curtains with his hands, peering outside before snapping the material tightly shut again.

“They’re still out there,” he confirms.

“Yeah. Pretty sure they’re going to be out there until I pay up.”

Justin sinks down into the sofa, his face a mixture of grief and worry. It’s in that moment that I remember what he’s lost, too: a wife. A partner. Maybe the only real friend he’s had. My mom was a fucking flake, but she and Justin were a match made in drug-fuelled heaven. Or hell. Whatever.

“What did you do, Birdie?” He asks tiredly, his eyes welling up.

“Are those tears for me?” My empathy for him is suddenly trumped by bitter regret. He lost more money in one night at the Riverwood casino than I got from selling my soul to Javier Marin. He could have paid for Mom’s burial. But I know he wouldn’t. He’d borrow five thousand from Marin, take it to the casino with ridiculous hopes of doubling it, and end up with nothing. Less than nothing.

“Tell me.” Justin snaps. His tears are still there, but they’ve been joined by anger. “Are you trying to say you’ve somehow made a deal with the devil?”

I shrug, sitting beside him on the threadbare sofa. “I guess.”

“And what did you give him in return?” he asks.

I look up at the nicotine-stained ceiling to stop the tears from rolling down my cheeks.

“You know what I had to give him,” I mutter angrily.

Justin lets out the breath he’s been holding, putting his head in his hands and making a low sound of agitation. “It wasn’t meant to be like this,” he says. “I thought if we just kept you safe, that everything would be okay.”

“Yeah, well. You didn’t keep me safe. And everything’s not okay.”

Justin shakes his head emphatically. “You used to call me Dad, y’know.”

“Well, yeah, *Justin*. I thought you *were* my dad until I was nine.” What a head trip that was, to overhear a drunken argument between my Mom and Justin where it was revealed he wasn’t actually my Dad at all.

Justin shrugs. “I was. I am. More than the bastard who donated some sperm to make you. Birdie, you’re not mine, but I loved you anyway. It’s why I wanted you to have my last name, just like your mother. The three of us. A real family.”

I swallow thickly. “There are photos of you holding me in the hospital the day I was born. Why did you look so happy if I wasn’t even your kid?”

Justin puts his head in his hands again. “You were so small. So defenseless. But you were so pure, you know? So unaffected by the way the world had brought you to be. And I always knew you weren’t my daughter. Mia never lied to me. But I loved you anyway. I loved her so much, I wanted you to be mine. Does that make sense?”

I nod, sobbing ugly tears now, tears that fall down into my lap, onto my bare thighs, bleeding into the frayed hem of my denim cutoffs. I’m going to burn these shorts, I’ve decided. I’m going to burn everything that Javier Marin touched.

Justin wipes his eyes. “I love... *loved* your mother so much. And you. You gave me hope.”

I look around the tiny trailer; my gaze falling upon the stack of clothes I’m supposed to take to the funeral home. It’s the most respectable outfit I could find for mom to be buried in.

How does life turn out like this? Why can’t we turn back the clock? And why do I suddenly feel such a crushing guilt that Justin gave up another life to be in this one with us?

“I’m sorry I let you down,” I whisper.

The sun fades away outside. The trailer is dark now. It’s cold tonight, despite it being the middle of summer. We don’t have money to heat the place. We never have. I start to think of all the other things I wish I’d included in the deal I made with Javier.

“You didn’t let me down,” Justin protests. He grabs my hand, squeezing it so hard it hurts. But I don’t pull away. We take comfort where we can in this world, and the warmth of knowing he’s here outweighs the fact that he’s crushing my fingers.

“Where is she?” Justin asks, after a bout of silence.

“Where is who?” I reply, confused.

“Mia. Where is her b— where did they take her?”

“Oh,” I say, sniffing. “She’s at a funeral home. In town. I’m supposed to take a change of clothes for her to wear

when... you know.”

Justin nods. “I’m so sorry you had to deal with this.”

He has no idea. “I couldn’t just let them toss her in some unmarked grave. She had people who loved her. She doesn’t deserve to be thrown out like garbage.”

Guilt flashes across Justin’s features. “I didn’t know, Birdie,” he murmurs. “If I knew, I never would’ve spent that money on a stupid fucking bet. I would’ve paid for her funeral. I swear.”

The saddest part of his words is that he actually believes them. He believes he would’ve been strong enough to resist the pull of gambling it all for the chance to win more.

“I want...” Justin can’t finish his sentence. “I want to see her. For myself.”

Horror washes over me. “Justin, she’s been dead for days. She won’t look like herself.” She already didn’t look like her when I found her under that tree, cold and lifeless. “You don’t want to remember her like that.”

“I need to see her. I need to see her with my own eyes.”

“It’ll haunt you forever,” I whisper.

“Good,” he replies. “That’s what I fucking deserve.”

I nod vacantly. “If that’s what you really want, I’m going there in the morning. You can come with me.”

Justin nods. Then he starts to cry real tears, like a lost little kid who’s been forgotten by the world, left to fend for himself.

Just like me.

CHAPTER 12



BIRDIE

I sleep *terribly*.

I have nightmares of my mother, trapped and alive in a morgue drawer, slowly smothering to death from lack of air with dead people all around her. The nightmare shakes me so badly, I don't even try to drift off again after I jolt awake. I lay there, my head a mess of jumbled thoughts, as I see three am slip by, then four, then five.

The cheap digital clock on my bedside table tells me it's a little after 6 a.m. when I finally give up on the illusion of sleeping. I tiptoe to the kitchen, my throat dry, making sure I avoid all of the known creaky boards that line the floor of the trailer. Outside, I can hear the hum of the neighborhood coming to life with the sun about to rise—dogs barking, TVs blaring, babies crying, a couple fighting. The buzz of the trailer park noise is all I've ever known, and usually, I sleep through it. But this morning, there's something about the hopelessness of this place that drags me down even further, a desperation that feeds from the people who call this place home.

I'm filling a glass of water when a giant roach strolls by; half asleep and pulsing with adrenalin, I drop the glass. It shatters in the bottom of the sink; a terrible omen of what's to come. Somehow I slice my finger open on the sharp pieces of glass as I'm cleaning up the mess, praying I haven't woken Justin. He's a chronic insomniac, and I can imagine our current situation is only making him worse. One time he went so long without sleep that he started hallucinating, seeing

people who weren't there, and my mother had to take him to the emergency room and beg them to sedate him long enough to rid the exhaustion. I had almost forgotten about that night until now. It strikes me as ironic that Justin was paranoid that people would come and take mom and me.

Now it makes me think there was truth to it. That just maybe there really were men here trying to take us.

The kind of men who park their limousines in front of people's trailers and stare at their windows all night.

"Hey," a low voice says behind me.

I jump. "Justin? What are you still doing awake?"

He's sitting upright on the sofa, dressed in the same jeans and shirt he was wearing when I arrived home earlier.

"Have you even been to bed?" I ask.

"Can't sleep," Justin says. "I just keep seeing her face."

I nod. "Yeah. Me too."

Justin notices my finger. "Are you ... bleeding?"

The cut is deeper than I realized. Fresh, wet blood drips from the tips of my fingers into the sink, making a plink sound every time the thick fluid hits the metal basin. I grab an old tea towel and wrap it around my hand. "Yeah."

The blood makes me think of what will happen when whoever Javier sells me to has sex with me for the first time. I've always wondered how much it would hurt when Bryce and I finally did the deed. Now, I don't have to wonder. A man who would buy a teenage girl from Javier Marin to deflower is going to make it hurt, no matter what. That's his pleasure, to watch other people in pain.

Bastard.

Still. Without that bastard's money, I'd be signing away my mother's grave and condemning her to an eternity tossed into a mass plot with all of the other nameless dead who had nobody left to love them or hold their memory dear. I can't bear that.

This is the lesser of evils.

“Those motherfuckers are still parked outside,” Justin seethes, peering through the threadbare curtains. I look past him, to the shiny black car that’s totally out of place in our trailer park world.

I’m surprised someone hasn’t scratched up the car or slashed the tires. Then I realize the hubcaps each have an anchor engraved into them. *Of course.*

Everyone knows this car belongs to Javier Marin.

No wonder it was so quiet last night. Everyone knows to stay off the radar with the presence of such an ominous threat. After all, nobody wants it to be their front door that Javier’s men knock on.

“What time can we go to the funeral home?” Justin lights a cigarette. Miraculously, he’s found a lighter since we last spoke. It’s amazing what sobering up for 24 hours can do to a person. Come to think of it, I can’t even remember the last time I saw Justin not drunk or high or hungover.

“It opens at nine,” I explain. I peel back the dishcloth and study my cut. It probably needs stitches, but I don’t have access to those right now, and besides, I’m kind of busy thinking about other things.

“Is it bad?” Justin asks, coming over to assess the damage.

The smoke from the cigarette clenched between his teeth wafts about my face, but I don’t complain. Justin grunts when he sees the damage, disappearing into the bedroom he shares—shared—with my mother. A moment later he emerges with a bottle of superglue and some gauze. I shudder inwardly at the sight of the gauze; a byproduct of Mom’s freaky little habit, something to filter the heroin before she would inject it into herself. In some other world, it would be gauze from a fully stocked first-aid kit, and in that fantasy world, my mother would be doctoring my cut.

Justin peers down at the sliced flesh, carefully applying superglue with hands that tremble ever-so-slightly. With his

other hand, he clutches my finger, pinching the sides of my wound together until the liquid dries.

“Birdie,” he says in a hushed tone. “You should run. Try to escape all of this. You know your Mom wouldn’t have wanted you to go to Javier.”

“I can’t run,” I say, meeting his sad eyes. “No one ever escapes him. You know that better than anyone.”

Justin does say anything else because he knows it’s the truth.

As we literally watch the glue dry, a knock on the door makes us both jump. Justin drops the small bottle, and clear, thick glue oozes from the tip, immediately beginning to harden against the crappy old carpet.

“Who is it?” he asks in a fake casual tone, backing into the kitchen where he silently retrieves the baseball bat we keep for unknown visitors.

I glance out of the window. “It’s our pumpkin coach,” I say, dread knotting in my stomach. Justin stares at the bat in his hands, trying to make a decision.

“Well, come on then Cinderella,” he says, reluctantly setting the bat on the kitchen counter. “I guess we’d better not keep them waiting.”



MY FINGER THROBS as Javier’s limo pulls us deeper into Santo Christo’s industrial area. The funeral home we can afford isn’t in the manicured business district nearby Grausam, the next town over. It’s in the slums, among chicken processing factories and beer distribution facilities. Justin sits across from me, his eyes everywhere, his discomfort as obvious as the sun beating down outside.

“I still don’t see why we had to come in this fucking thing,” he grinds out, shifting in his seat. He can’t sit still, and I have to wonder if he’s just nervous or actually starting to experience the effects of an epic comedown. He never injected anything—he has a phobia of needles, how ironic—but Justin has abused oxy and alcohol for as long as I can remember.

“Are you okay?” I ask pointedly.

“Are *you*?” he snaps back.

I shrug. “Not really, no. But as I said, these guys aren’t going to let me out of their sight until I’ve repaid Javier.”

Justin nods tightly. I can tell he wants to ask me more about what I’ve put up as collateral, but at the same time, he probably assumes we’re being listened to. That’s what I’d bet my money on if I had any.

“Birdie,” Justin whispers, sitting forward so only I can hear him. “I need to know what you promised this guy. How much did he loan you?”

I glare at Justin. “Five grand.” I remember the conversation we had the night after he ransacked my room in search of money, and I’ll never forget the shame in his voice as he told me he’d lost five thousand dollars that weren’t even his to begin with.

Justin nods. “When we get home, you’re going to tell me what you promised him in exchange. And what kind of interest he’s charging.”

I narrow my gaze. “Did you take stupid pills this morning? What do you think I had to promise him?”

Justin pales.

I shake my head, looking out the window as Santo Cristo whips by. We’re definitely going above the speed limit, but I guess when you own half the police force in a town, you can drive as fast as you want.

“Justin,” I say. “Have you ever seen a dead person before? Someone who’s been dead for days, I mean.”

I'm asking because I want him to prepare me. I saw Mom when she'd just died. This... will be different.

"Once," he mutters. "I was working at a boat rental place on Valmont island. Some girl crashed her parent's yacht into the marina, and the whole thing went up in flames. A kid jumped overboard to get away from the fire and drowned. I tried to give her CPR, but she'd been underwater too long. She was already dead by the time I found her on the bottom of the bay."

I sit back, stunned. "That's horrible."

"Yeah, it was," he says. "But she'd only been dead a matter of minutes. This will be ... *different*."

At the thought of having to look at my mother after days of being chilled in a refrigerator, I almost hurl. Unless Javier is an early bird and has already settled the bill, I very much doubt the funeral home has bothered to make her look presentable. What do three days in a morgue drawer do to a dead junkie?

Justin must see the distress on my face.

"Hey, Birdie." He reaches out to pat my knee. "You don't have to go in, okay? This is something I have to do for myself. Everyone says their goodbyes differently."

I nod, relieved. "I might come in. I-I don't know," I admit. I remember seeing her lifeless on the gurney as they were taking her away. One thing that sticks out in that memory was her arm hanging off the side, and catching a glimpse of the bracelet on her wrist. I wrack my mind trying to remember the last time I saw her alive.

When was the last time I felt her warm arms around me?

When was the last time we had eye contact, for fucks sake?

I don't know. And that *kills* me.

"Do you remember the last thing you said to her?" I ask Justin.

He rubs his red eyes angrily, before returning his gaze to me. “Yeah,” he says slowly. “I told her that if she kept it up, that stuff was going to kill her.”

“Well, you weren’t wrong.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t even know when I last told her I loved her.”

That makes two of us.

“She knew, right?” Justin wrings his hands as he stares at me.

“She knew,” I confirm, reaching out to stop him from fidgeting, but it’s a lie. How the fuck would I know what she knew? What she felt? Why she couldn’t ever, ever dig herself out of her addiction for either of us?

When we finally arrive and park, I can tell Justin is trying to stall.

“It’s okay,” I say. “You can change your mind. Nobody’s going to judge you for not going in there.”

Justin shrugs. “I just need a smoke first.”

I can tell he’s about *this close* to losing his shit and leaving this place, walking away and never looking back. His anguish is compounded by the fact that two of Javier’s men are escorting us toward the double doors of the funeral home. Justin stops before entering, fishes out a crumpled pack of cigarettes, and puts one to his lips, lighting it and drawing in a deep breath. I watch him for a moment, almost jealous. What I’d give to have some kind of stress relief like a fucking cigarette. It looks like it does the trick in calming him down, but I know if I asked for one, I’d just end up coughing up a lung.

If only I could press rewind and make this madness stop. Bring my mother back. If only there was something else I could sell to Javier in exchange for her resurrection, something more powerful.

I don’t believe in supernatural things, or the afterlife, but damn, I wish I did right now. I’d take a time machine or a

portal or whatever it would take to make my Mom whole and healthy and happy.

Who am I kidding? She was never any of those things, not in my lifetime, at least.

She deserved better. *I* deserved better.

“Miss Moore?” Barbara says, surprise in her voice as she sits behind the front counter.

I don’t like the face she’s making. She hurriedly shuffles papers in front of me as I approach, a sickening lurch in my stomach. I don’t know what’s happening, only that something is *very* wrong.

“I’m here to drop off some clothes for my mother,” I say tightly. “Mia Moore. For the burial.”

I see the same crooked B on her name tag. Feels like a lifetime has passed since I saw her last. Barbara looks away. *Guilt?* Is that what I see behind her anxious eyes?

“What’s going on?” I ask slowly. I don’t think I want to know the answer.

“Your mother’s body was moved this morning.” She says it like I should know this.

“By *who?*” I spit.

Barbara swallows. “He said he was your uncle.”

Briefly, I consider jumping over the tall counter and scratching her fucking eyes out. “I don’t have an uncle.”

“Oh dear,” she says, holding a hand up to her mouth as pale as a bedsheet. “Oh, my.”

“Moved where?” I demand. “You said we had time. You told me forty-eight hours!”

Barbara stands so we’re eye-to-eye, the desk providing a false sense of security for her. I don’t think she understands that girls like me—girls who grow up in the finest trailer park Santo Christo offers—learn to fight young. I could smash her face in before she could even pick up the phone and dial security.

I won't. I'd be thrown into jail, left to rot for weeks, only starting the same trajectory Bryce has already embarked on. And Justin. And Mom. Then how will I repay Javier Marin?

The interest owed would be far too great by the time I got out.

"It's okay," Barbara says, making a downward motion with her palm. "Calm down. You don't understand."

"Catch me up," I say through gritted teeth.

She's growing more flustered with each passing second. I take a step back, angry tears burning in my eyes. Justin, who's been lingering in the parking lot, smoking one last procrastinating cigarette before he's to see his dead wife laid out on a cold viewing table, suddenly materializes beside me. It won't be good for this woman if she can't explain where my mother is very quickly.

"Your unc—a *man*—paid for her burial, casket, and transport this morning," Barbara rushes. She searches through piles of receipts and paperwork, finally locating the one she's after. "Here!" she exclaims, probably relieved that she won't get hurt because she has proof.

I take the papers from her more gently than I'd like to, breathing slowly, forcing myself to stay calm. Rage burns thick and fierce in my veins, the noise a thundering *crash crash crash* inside my temples, as I see the name *MARIN HOLDINGS* at the top of the paperwork.

It's as if my anger has rendered me incapable of comprehending simple words. I hand the papers to Justin and place my palms face down on the countertop, eyeing the woman. "Where. Is. My. Mother?" I ask, the saccharine sweetness in my voice as fake as it is deadly.

She looks terrified. "I don't know," she admits, backing away.

I slam my hands against the counter. Suddenly, somewhere deep in the recesses of my mind, it occurs to me that I shouldn't be harassing her—she was just doing her job. Barbara has a daughter around my age at home. Maybe Javier

slipped her a little extra to not ask questions. It becomes abundantly clear that I can't rely on her for any more information. But it occurs to me that there is someone here who will know more.

I turn, charging the limo driver. "Where is she?" I cry. I grab at his lapels, shaking him.

The guy, whose nose looks even worse in the light of a new day, smiles as if amused by my sudden rage. "I wouldn't do that," he warns. I quickly reach up, trying to rake my fingernails down his cheeks, wanting to rip off his skin.

The next part happens in a blur.

CHAPTER 13



BIRDIE

He pushes something hot into my side. A bright SNAP sounds, three clicks in all, and it feels like fire is licking at my skin, eviscerating me. The pain is blinding. I'm surprised I don't piss my pants.

"Birdie?" A voice floats through my consciousness, as I'm trapped in my own body, stuck to something hard, my side burning with remnants of pain.

I blink slowly. What. The fuck. I'm flat on my back, staring at the ceiling. *What the hell just happened?*

Justin's expression is anguished as he stands over me.

"What th—?" I say, rubbing the back of my head. Justin grits his teeth, squares his shoulders—and attacks like he's a fucking linebacker.

Broken nose dude doesn't even blink. He just holds out the same thing he shocked me with—it looks like a cattle prod—and it sparks to life again. But Justin is wilier than I'd picked. Maybe it's because he hasn't been drunk or high in the last twenty-four hours. Whatever it is, my degenerate stepfather is suddenly a fucking badass on a mission.

"That's my daughter!" he roars, side-stepping the electric attack and punching the guy in the side of the head. Dude goes down like a sack of potatoes, only to be replaced by his offside, the one whose nose isn't broken. He's taller and thinner but looks just as strong.

Justin charges him next, going for the eyes, but the guy deflects Justin's fists and neatly trips him. Landing heavily beside me, Justin mutters expletives the whole time, as the jackass stands over the both of us, brandishing a gun like he's a trained fucking assassin or something.

Broken Nose Guy steps up beside him. His ego is wounded more than anything else, as far as I can tell. I can see the two of us and I are going to have some problems if I don't fall into line.

Which I *won't*.

Especially if they kill Justin, which they might just do.

"I'm calling the police!" Barbara cries out from behind the front counter, clutching the receiver in her hand. I frown as I prop myself up on my elbows, looking at her. Way to announce that before you dial, I think to myself, as the Skinny one calmly takes the phone from her hand and hangs it in its cradle. He puts a finger to his lips to quiet her, and the woman bursts into tears.

"I have kids," she babbles, holding her palms out in a gesture of surrender.

"Get up," Broken Nose says to me. Fuming, still buzzing from the jolt he gave me, I accept Justin's outstretched hand and let him pull me to my feet.

The other dude talks softly to the woman behind the desk. She nods, sitting down, staring straight ahead with a glazed focus. He's given her some kind of warning, I suppose. I wonder if most people react to threats with frozen terror instead of unbridled rage. My mother always said I was too quick to spring into action before I thought something through.

I suppose she was right.

Going to see Javier and selling him my virginity is a fine example of acting before thinking. Now that I'm drowning in the aftermath, I can think of so many other things that would have been potentially less painful.

Robbing a store. Stealing a car. Thieving jewelry from somebody.

But I'd never be able to bring myself to do any of those things, would I? It pisses me off that I have morals because everyone else I'm dealing with doesn't. I won't commit an armed robbery or steal a car because it could hurt somebody else. At least with the deal I've made, the only person hurting ... will be me.

"Get in the car," Broken Nose Guy orders. I decide to pick my battles, and for now, I do as he says. Justin puts a hand on my shoulder as we hobble outside, our collective injuries meaning we end up leaning on one another.

Back in the limousine, nobody speaks.

The shiny black car glides across town, a silent vessel of doom.

"Where are we going?" I ask over the loudspeaker that connects the back with the driver.

They don't answer me.

There is a slimline telephone on the side wall of the limo. I don't even notice it until it rings, startling me out of my daydream. Justin and I lock eyes, and I don't have to wonder what he's thinking. It's written across his face, plain as day. *Sorrow. Regret. Anger.* And some animalistic need to try and protect me, the girl who doesn't even belong to him.

The phone rings twice.

Three times.

I reach to pick up the call, but Justin's hand covers mine. He shakes his head imperceptibly.

Let me, he mouths.

I nod, easing my grip. I let my hands fall into my lap, nervously twisting the hem of my shirt as I watch Justin lift the phone to his ear.

"Where is my *wife*?" he grinds out.

For a few moments he listens, then his eyes widen slightly.

Without saying anything, he passes the phone to me.

“Who is it?” I ask. Justin frowns, one eyebrow raised, as if to say—*who do you think?*

My heart sinks as I put the receiver to my ear. “Hello?”

“Birdie,” Javier states. His devilish tone causes a chill to rush over my skin. “I hear you’ve got quite a set of self-defense skills. Rafe says you broke his nose.”

I steel myself, unclenching my jaw to speak. “A girl’s gotta know how to handle herself around Santo Cristo,” I reply, trying to make the words sound casual when really they’re deadly accurate. Especially when speaking to Javier.

“Where is my mother?” I continue.

Javier chuckles. The sound makes me nauseous. “In hell, I imagine,” he bites back. “But if you’re referring to her body, it’s in a safe place. Consider her collateral.”

“Collateral for what?” I choke.

“Oh come on, Birdie, you’re not *that* stupid,” Javier says, and I can tell he’s enjoying this. “I know Mia didn’t raise a damn fool. Plus, I looked at your school transcripts. You’re a *very* clever girl. To be honest, I’m shocked your intelligence didn’t serve you better in this situation. I mean, you’re practically a genius trying to blend in with the poor, stupid kids, and yet the very first thing you offer for sale is your body?” I feel my cheeks turn scarlet red, blood rising to the surface of my skin all over my body.

His words hurt.

Mostly because he’s *right*.

I *am* a smart girl.

And I did something so fucking stupid, it’s going to ruin me.

Justin stares at me, the muscles in his neck and jaw tense, his agitation obvious. The questions in his eyes are ones I don’t want to answer.

“Just tell me what you want,” I say flatly, the fight leaving me. I don’t want to have to talk about what I’ve promised

Javier in front of Justin. He's done plenty of fucked-up shit in his time, but I'm not him. I always stupidly thought I'd escape this life one day. I never thought I'd enter into it willingly, a pawn in my own stupid game.

Well. Now I'm a pawn in Javier's cruel game.

"Get yourself a pretty evening dress to wear," Javier says. "Classy. Not trashy. Silk would be nice, but surprise me."

I want to throw up. "*Why?*"

"When I buy a gift, I always get it wrapped," he says.

"I'm not a gift," I snap. "I'm a *girl*."

Javier makes a tsk sound. "There really is no difference," he says, and then the line goes dead.

As I'm hanging the phone back in its cradle, Rafe stops at a mall somewhere in Orange County. It's upscale, fancy, one of those places where it costs more for a pair of shoes than I'll earn in a lifetime. It strikes me as ironic that the dress Javier wants me to buy will probably cost almost as much as it will to bury my mother.

"Where is she?" Justin asks.

I watch nervously as Rafe circles the limo, coming around and opening my door. "He put her somewhere as collateral," I say quickly, finishing my sentence just as Rafe reaches for my arm.

"Collateral!?" Justin echoes, horrified.

"To make sure I pay up," I clarify.

Rafe hauls me out of my seat as Justin starts to yell. "Hey! Don't you dare touch her! Get your hands off her! "

Rafe stares Justin down, moving his suit jacket slightly to remind Justin of the gun holstered at his hip. Justin looks utterly defeated.

I shrug out of Rafe's grip, stepping onto the sidewalk beside the other guy. I'm waiting for Justin to get out, but Rafe slams the door in his face. "Wait—" I protest, hurrying to the door. "Let him out!"

He shakes his head. “No can do, babe,” he tells me, roughly forcing me toward the entrance of the mall. I struggle against his grip, twisting my body so I can maintain a visual on the car to make sure Justin’s safe. But before I can do anything, it speeds off, with Justin bashing frantically against the back windows with his fists. I can hear the muffled sound of him screaming my name.

“If you hurt me, I’ll scream,” I say to Rafe, shoving him away from me as I right myself and stalk into Highland Galleria.

“And if you scream, I’ll shoot you,” he replies, sounding more bored than threatening. Still, after the shock he gave me earlier, I’m not willing to push him too far. I don’t want to end up in the same morgue drawer my mother called home before Javier decided to steal her dead body and hold it for ransom.

With a tight grip on my shoulder, he urges me through the center of the mall like he’s scared I’ll run for it. We pass an ornate water fountain where rich people toss spare coins as they sip their outrageously overpriced coffee and talk about ... fuck, I don’t even know what rich people discuss. Rescheduling their gardeners? Not fucking their pool boys? Grooming their tiny, yappy dogs? I don’t have a clue, and I don’t care to find out. I’m only too aware of my *Pretty Woman* moment as Rafe steers me into the first store, a high-end boutique full of gorgeous designer dresses and delicate accessories. I shake my head. The woman at the cash register looks like we’re here to murder her, and if I misbehave, who knows? She might actually, legitimately get caught in the crossfire of me getting shot for my transgression.

We walk past a few more stores. As we move forward, I notice my hands are shaking. At first, it’s just a little, but pretty soon I’m trembling like someone who’s been—well, someone who’s just been shocked with several jolts of electricity designed to keep cows complicit. Rafe notices my odd behavior and grabs my wrist, pulling me over to a Parisian-themed cafe with tiny, gold-flecked macaroons and miniature cups of espresso that cost enough to make me almost forget my problems.

He pushes my shoulders with force until I'm sitting in an uncomfortable, wrought iron chair. I start freaking the fuck out while he orders a plate of macarons and two milkshakes. They don't even make milkshakes at this place, but I wouldn't say no to this guy, either. Within a few minutes, the food and drinks materialize in front of us, along with a basket of french fries, and Rafe motions for me to eat.

"I can't," I whisper, my hands shaking so violently, I'm worried I'm going to knock something over and cause a scene.

Ha. I don't know why I'm so concerned, though. Just our presence is enough to cause alarm to anyone who's aware of their surroundings. There's Rafe—who looks like an assassin, the bulge in his jacket is clearly not because he's excited to see you, And then there's me, a girl who has holes in her Skechers and an oversized Pulp Fiction shirt that says, 'It's a Chopper, baby.' .

"Eat." he commands, pushing the bowl of fries in front of me. My stomach flips at the sight of the oily, delicious stalks of fried potato in front of me, begging to be devoured.

"I can't," I firmly repeat. I hold up my hand to show him how shaky I am. Rafe shrugs, swiping a couple, dipping them into his shake—strawberry, like mine—and shoving them in his mouth, his eyes on mine the entire time.

He grabs at the fries again, taking the best-looking one, dipping it into my milkshake, and holding it out to me—a peace offering soaked in strawberry-flavored milk and extended as a gift. Without thinking, I lean forward, taking it between my teeth and pulling it from his grasp.

As far as fries go, it's fucking *phenomenal*. My stomach growls hungrily as I look at the basket, then at my shaking hands.

Rafe smirks and licks salt from his fingers. "Forget buying girls flowers. You just gotta feed them french fries dipped in a strawberry milkshake."

I narrow my eyes at him, wondering if I should bite his fingers off as he offers me another. I would, but I'm too

hungry.

“Sorry I tased you, by the way,” he says casually. “You’re small, but damn, girl. You nearly broke my nose yesterday. You’re kind of a volatile bitch.”

Is he trying to be nice to me?

“Uh... *thank you?*” I reply, confused and still fucking famished. Would anyone stop me if I just stuck my face in the basket of fries and went to town?

I finally stop shaking enough that I can feed myself.

When was the last time I ate?

Suddenly, I’m ravenous.

“Where is Justin?” I ask Rafe, as I finish the basket of fries and unceremoniously wipe my greasy fingers on my jeans.

He offers me a napkin; too late. A brief flicker of disgust crosses his features before he returns his face to that stony, cocky expression I’m sure I’ll wipe off again at some point in the near future. The guy electrocuted me, for fucks sake.

Though, I suppose he did also order me food and feed me so I didn’t faint.

“I’m sorry about your nose,” I mumble with great reluctance. Mia always told me to treat other people the way I want to be treated, and it’s not exactly this guy’s fault we’re here. I mean, it *kind of* is. Homeboy is the one who won’t let me out of his sight longer than it takes me to pee.

Let’s see if we can change that.

I feel like I’m going to have a panic attack every time I think of what comes after this.

Is Javier going to sell me tonight? Tomorrow? When does my debt become due? How can I get out of what I’ve promised him in exchange for my mother’s funeral?

And where the hell has he hidden her body in the meantime?

I study Rafe surreptitiously, wondering if there's some way to endear myself to him so that he might be a source of information for me. Apologizing was the first test.

And it seems he's going to fail with flying colors.

"You didn't break my nose," he says coldly, narrowing his eyes at me as he leans over and sucks the remnants of my milkshake from its frosted glass. "And I'm not telling you shit about shit. Your stepfather's alive. That's all you need to know." He's so close, I can see the little red veins that map his eyeballs, the faint lines around his eyes. He looks older than he is. I can tell because his hands are those of someone around my age. He's twenty-five at most. But his eyes are old enough to tell a different story.

I glance at his hands again. I wonder how many people he's murdered with them.

"Are you going to kill me?" I whisper suddenly before I can stop the words from leaving my mouth. Rafe tilts his head to the side, a smirk cracking along his face.

"Maybe," he says, noisily finishing the last drops of the liquid then sits back to look at me. "Depends. Are you going to be a good girl and behave?"

I'm *not* going to behave myself.

There's no way in hell. But I don't believe him when he says he'll kill me. Then how would Javier get what he's purchased from me?

It's a pitiful threat, but it doesn't mean I'm safe. I'm not.

"Time to go, little girl," Rafe says, tossing a fifty on the table and motioning for me to stand. I look at the note for a beat too long, sickened at the way these pieces of paper dictate our entire lives.

He kills people for it. I fuck criminals for it. Or at least, I will.

But first, I have to buy some goddamn clothes so I'm pretty enough for those criminals to want to fuck. *Ugh.*

We venture into stores that I've shoplifted from once or twice.

As I look around at the racks, an idea comes to me—maybe if I get myself arrested, I'll be taken away by the police, and I can tell them everything.

Then I remember who I am. Who my mom was. How nobody gives a fuck if my mother is buried in a potter's field aside from me, and possibly Justin.

Justin. I wonder where he is right now. Is he safe? Have they hurt him?

All questions I need to ask the right person. This smirking, sociopathic criminal in front of me won't be the person who'll tell me either, it seems.

His expression darkens as he watches me. "What's your endgame, Birdie? Trying to trick my father?"

I almost choke. "Your f-father?"

I suddenly see the resemblance. Maybe I missed it because his nose is still swollen. Maybe I missed it because I wasn't looking in the right places.

"Javier is your—you're his *son*?"

Rafe tilts his head back and laughs, but the sound isn't gentle. It's savage. Almost feral. "Technically, I'm his sister's son," he corrects. "But since that bitch got herself killed and Javier adopted me, I guess you and I both call him Daddy, now.

"I'm fucking stunned, both by the knowledge that Rafe is Javier's son and by the casual Daddy joke.

"I wouldn't call Javier *Daddy* if it were the one word stopping him from slitting my throat," I grind out.

"You should be careful, making statements like that. He'd make you say it and then slit your throat just to prove you wrong."

He hands me two dresses. One is a red glitter number that looks like it won't even cover my underwear. I hesitate before

taking it from his outstretched grasp. Rafe leads me to the dressing room and steps inside after me.

“A little privacy?” I snap.

“No can do, I’m afraid,” Rafe shrugs. “Don’t worry. I’m a gentleman.”

I roll my eyes, stripping down to my underwear. I don’t even fucking care anymore. A bra and panties are practically an entire outfit compared to what I’ll be wearing by the end of whatever Javier has planned for me. *Might as well get used to it.*

“Lose the bra,” Rafe says, reaching out and unhooking the clasp before I can protest. I hold the material against my chest, mortified and enraged. “What happened to being a gentleman?”

“If I weren’t a gentleman, I’d have a gun to your head right now and all of your clothes would be off. I’m not going to look. But the dress won’t sit right over your Goodwill sports bra.” He says *Goodwill sports bra* as if he’s describing literal dog shit.

“Besides, you’re not my type.”

I snicker, cupping my breasts protectively with my arm as I toss my bra at Rafe. “Funny, that’s what your dad said.”

Rafe catches the bra, looking pained as he meets my eyes in the mirror. “He said you’re not his type?”

I grab the black dress. “Right as he was finger-raping me to check my virginity status. Oh, he spat on me, too. Told me all the things he’d like to do to me under different circumstances. He’s quite the visual storyteller. But it’s okay because I’m not his type.”

Rafe shakes his head, looking pissed. “You’re exactly his type,” he says quietly. “You should be careful around him.”

No shit. “I’ll keep that in mind, thanks.”

Rafe notices my hesitation to put the dress on and gives me a look, turning his back to me.

I hurry to pull on the black silk dress, looking at myself in the mirror with a frown. It's flattering in all the right places but far too demure to be called sexy. I look like I'm going to a funeral, and by the expression on Rafe's face, he feels the same. He shakes his head, knowing this won't please Javier.

"Have you got someone you can trust?" He asks suddenly, as he unzips the silk and pushes it over my shoulders, tugging so that it puddles on the floor around my feet.

I quickly cover my chest again. "I had my mother. But she's dead now. So, I'd say no."

He nods in understanding, passing me the second dress. "My mother died, too. Some cartel bitch shot her sixteen times. Big bullets, too, fifty calibers. From a Desert Eagle. You ever see a gun that big? Her body was so destroyed; we couldn't use dental records to identify her. I had to get my cheek swabbed for DNA to prove it was a match."

I swallow thickly, slipping the second dress over my head and pulling it into place as the horror of what he says reaches down deep into my gut and holds tight. For a moment, I think I might throw up the food I just ate on these expensive clothes. Then I'd owe even more than I do now.

But I don't. I swallow it all down—the sadness and the terror and death—and I smooth down the dress, waiting for him to zip me up. I was wrong. It *just* covers my underwear. Let's hope I don't drop anything while I'm wearing it.

"How old were you?" I ask suddenly, as his warm fingers zip the dress up along my spine.

"Four," he states, his voice emotionless.

He has the same dark eyes as Javier.

I breathe in sharply, meeting his gaze in the mirror.

"This is the one," Rafe says, not even looking at the price tag. He tugs at the zipper, exposing my back. "Put your clothes on."

I nod, waiting for him to leave the changing room. When he doesn't move, I raise my eyebrows. "Can I have a little

privacy now?”

He snorts as if I've said something hilarious. “Sure. Might as well enjoy it while you can.”

My cheeks burn as I think about what we're doing here, why I'm trying on this fuck-me dress in the first place. He's right. Soon, every last shred of my dignity will be on the floor of Javier's yacht, along with this dress.

He rolls his eyes, stepping out and tugging the curtain closed. “Pass the dress out when you've got it off,” he says. I wriggle out of the sequined sheath, cupping my breasts protectively as I extend my arm out, the dress in my outstretched grip. Rafe grabs onto it.

“I'm gonna go pay for this,” he says, sounding bored. “Stay here. And hey. Don't think we're friends. You try anything, and I'll shoot you where you fucking stand.”

“Got it,” I reply, pulling my t-shirt and shorts on.

I watch through a crack in the curtain as Rafe goes to pay. There's a woman in line ahead of him, and the cashier scans her purchases in between chatting, in no hurry at all. Rafe stands patiently, not once glancing back at me. *Arrogant dick*. I suppose he thinks he's got me cornered. I'm in the back of a store, and there's only one exit which would force me to pass him if I tried to leave.

I wouldn't be *that* stupid.

He's not that much older than me, but something inside me senses the violence in him. The last thing I want is to make things worse for myself.

My resolve crumbles as I glance at myself in the mirror. I'm shocked the sales assistant even let me into this store, much less allowed me to try on the expensive clothing. She didn't even flinch when she saw me with Rafe, though.

I guess I'm not the first girl he's been tasked with *gift wrapping* for Javier.

Javier. I look at the rack of clothing that sits right outside the dressing room. It's an overflow rack, away from the eyes

of customers, designed to leave items that you've decided not to purchase. It's bulging with cast-off items—designer jeans, a couple of large fur jackets. A thought begins to take form in my frazzled brain, a tiny seed of hope. I look at Rafe again—he hasn't even been served yet.

Can I get away?

I might not have much, but I've got my wits.

The small knife Justin gave me is burning a hole in my pocket, begging to be used. And I have almost eighteen years as the daughter of a professional thief.

Always look for a second exit, Baby Bird. That wasn't some prophetic phrase my mother taught me. It was a lesson in diversion tactics, for the times she stole from places just like this, and I was the distraction.

It's now or never.

I snake my arm out from the dressing room curtain, easily reaching the front of the overflow clothes rack. Luckily, this snooty store only caters to a narrow selection of sizes, so whatever I grab, it's likely to fit, even if I have to roll a pair of pants up over my ankles.

Quickly, I snatch a pair of distressed dark blue denim jeans, a white t-shirt with french calligraphy writing scrawled across the chest, and a brown leather jacket. Everything has security tags and dye packs, but those don't concern me. With my pocket knife, I carefully whittle away every security tag, every little dye pack, and every errant price tag until the clothes are free of anything that could get me in trouble. With my eyes still on Rafe, who's still waiting, I slide my clothes off and put the new ones on. I look at myself in the mirror as I shrug the leather jacket over my shoulders. My eyes have gone from frightened and meek to steely and determined. It might all be adrenaline, but I'll take it just to feel like I can at least try to reclaim my fate.

I haven't stolen anything in years, but I still remember the thrill of risking capture for a new outfit, a toy, or a candy bar. When I was younger, I didn't have the crushing guilt around

stealing that I have now. But today, I don't feel anything. I just feel the soaring possibility that I might get away from all of this. I put my crappy shoes back on, wincing at the way they stand out against my new outfit. *Whatever.*

I plan to be fast enough that people won't have time to look at my feet.

Silly Rafe, leaving me back here. Doesn't he know places like this usually have a rear exit? My eyes lock firmly on the back of his head. I glance at the cashier, who's deep in conversation with the first customer. As she hands her several large bags, I know this is it. This is my only chance.

See ya, Babe, I think, as I steal one last glance at Javier's son.

I slide out of the changing area, knowing instinctively where to head. In a store like this, there's usually a door at the rear. When it comes into view, I let out a relieved breath. I'm in luck, for once.

Thanks, Mom, I think wryly as I slip into the storage room and pray to fuck that there's no other staff around.

The back room is deserted, bulging with designer dresses and boxes stacked to the ceiling. Half the boxes are covered in foreign writing and look like they've seen better days. The jeans I'm wearing cost five hundred dollars, but I'd bet they cost a few bucks to make. I look around the small area, alarm rising inside me.

Where's the rear exit? Not all stores have one.

I rummage around a bit, finally seeing it in the corner past some large racks. It's a fire exit, but somebody has covered the glowing FIRE EXIT sign with a fucking sunglasses poster. I roll my eyes and snatch a pair of sunglasses from the small shelf beside the fire exit.

There's an overflowing box of leopard-print hair scrunchies as well. I gather my long hair and fashion it into a messy top-knot. The fire escape beckons me like a beacon in the gloom. I step forward, moving the poster to the side to gain

better access to the door. After sucking in a deep breath, I push tentatively—will the alarm sound?

It doesn't. The door opens onto a multi-level parking lot, my sneakers soft against the cement floors as I power-walk away as quickly as I can. Looking around, I don't see the black limo around. Skinny dude didn't come back for us yet, then.

Neither of Javier's men would have predicted *this* happening.

I know I've only got mere moments before he notices I'm gone. I have to get as far away from here as I can before he notices I'm missing. I cross the parking lot, keeping my head down, looking around to see if a getaway will miraculously present itself. Bryce taught me to hot-wire a car once, but the car has to be old, and I'd need tools. I don't have a screwdriver, and I don't have time. New cars have immobilizers and sophisticated anti-theft technology. I can't get past that.

It's a shame we're in such a high-end place. I bet at the shitty mall in Santo Christo I'd have my pick of old, crappy cars to steal. Here? It's a sea of Range Rovers, Rolls Royces, and BMWs.

I'm just starting to panic when another beacon of hope presents itself in the form of a valet car wash toward the rear of the parking structure. There are guys busily washing, polishing, and vacuuming out vehicles.

Hello, there.

In the end, it's absurdly easy to steal a car.

Who knew you could get your hands on a two-hundred-thousand dollar matte black Range Rover just by slinking around and sneaking into the unmanned reception area? I mean, it's so ridiculously easy, I feel sorry for the guys who work here. Somebody's going to get in a lot of trouble when they realize I've boosted this pretty car.

There are several sets of keys hanging on a wall, but I don't go for those. Instead, I swipe the ones off the counter, attached to a receipt that is stamped "COMPLETED".

Just like taking candy from a baby, I think, making my way to the Range Rover that matches the registration number on the receipt in my hand. I take one last look at the guys still polishing and vacuuming away, feeling a pang of guilt.

One of them, at least, will lose their job for this. Because of me. I'm sorry. If there were any other way, I'd take it.

I slip into the unlocked SUV, reverse-parked at the edge of the car wash in a bay marked PICK UP AREA. The keys slide into the ignition like a hot knife through butter, and the car purrs to life. I wince as I wait to see if the noise will give me away, but the guys from the carwash don't even notice, lost in their work, the vacuum likely drowning out the noise of my deceit.

As far as stealing cars goes, this has got to be the smoothest scenario I could have imagined. I make a mental note to leave the place a glowing Yelp review once I've stopped running for my life. Five stars, guys, really. Releasing the parking brake, I pull forward.

And then, I'm gone.

CHAPTER 14



BIRDIE

I white-knuckle the steering wheel as I zip out of the parking garage. For the first time in days, I feel *alive*.

The smell of new leather permeates through the SUV, and I inhale deeply. I check the rearview, knowing I don't have much time.

Once Rafe paid for the dress that would rule my fate, then realized I wasn't in the dressing room, I'm sure he regretted being a gentleman. I'm sure he wants to fucking murder me on sight right about now.

I take a left on Sunset and head toward Bryce's house. Other than Justin, he might be the only one who cares these days. If I can just make it to his house, maybe we can run away together. Forget all of this. Forget Javier, my mother's stolen body, and even Justin. Maybe we can drive to the outskirts, ditch the Range Rover, and hike one of the trails that will lead us out of California.

My heart sinks. That's an awful lot of maybes for a girl like me.

Mexico might be a viable option, but I know Javier's name is revered from sea to mother fucking shining sea.

I swallow down the anxious bile that threatens to take over. The sweet, burning taste of the strawberry-flavored milkshake mixed with fries comes up my throat, and I gulp hard.

With fervor, I increase my speed, allowing the soft leather seat to hug my sore body. In the quiet moments, as the Range

Rover's rubber tires roll effortlessly along the asphalt, I realize I'll never have anything as nice as this. Then, I stupidly take a curb too closely and hear the rim scrape against the concrete. *Damn.*

I almost feel bad, knowing the owner is going to have to make an insurance claim to get that fix. There's no way the metal isn't damaged. But then I remember how much this vehicle cost. Whoever owns it can afford to patch up the fucking rim.

Ten minutes pass with agonizing slowness. Soon, I'll be pulling up to Bryce's house. Come on. I'm so close to freedom. Guilt stabs me as I remember Justin screaming my name in the back of the limo, but I can't think about him now. He told me to run if I had the chance. I'm a piece of shit for leaving him like this, but I know he'd wholeheartedly approve.

My thoughts and my mind take over, and for once, I think things might actually work in my favor. Maybe Bryce won't run away with me, but I can at least give him the option to join me.

Juvi changes people, and I don't know where his head is these days. We haven't had much time to hang out and talk since he was released because my life changed in a snap. If he says no, then I'm prepared to go alone. Take my chances.

It's called self-preservation, little bird—a voice in my head says that sounds strangely like my mother's. I don't have many childhood memories, but one of my mom pushing me on a swing set comes to mind. The sun felt warm, and I remember the way her brown hair blew in the summer breeze. An ice cream truck was coming, and she told me to jump out of the swing, fly like a little bird. I was fearless as I did it, and mom rewarded me with a blue popsicle. We couldn't afford the fancy soft serve with sprinkles all the other kids ordered, but I didn't even care. I loved that cheap fucking popsicle that day, my mother, all of it.

I have to blink hard to keep my vision from blurring. I'm driving too damn fast for that.

One more block, I think. *Just one.*

I check the rearview, making sure I'm not being followed.

A smile spreads across my lips when I see I'm the only idiot traveling to the wrong part of town. Nobody behind me.

Am I free?

I park on the street and rush to the door of the small house with mostly dirt in the front yard instead of grass. I quickly knock; adrenaline is the only thing that moves me forward.

His mom answers, and she's drunk off her ass, per usual. I'm given her signature scowl as she screams his name. She's always been a bitch toward me.

"Coming," I hear Bryce say from his room.

I glance back, my eyes scanning the street, my heart pounding louder in my temples.

I need him to hurry.

"Bryce!" I scream over his mom's shoulder, and when he hears my name, the sound of his footsteps on the peeling linoleum quickens.

"Birdie?" He smiles, moving past his mother, and pulls me into a hug. "I tried to find you, went to your place, and texted you, but it's like you vanished into thin air. Are you okay?" He trails off.

I shake my head. His face falls.

"Oh, Birdie," he looks pained. For me. At that moment, my heart almost bursts with the veracity of my love for him. It's the last thing left in my existence that hasn't been touched by Javier's darkness, I realize. My high school sweetheart. My actual gentleman. He would never rip my clothes from me against my will. He would never look bored while talking about my dead mother. He would never pin me down and hurt me while I cried.

I wrap my arms around him and return the embrace tightly, breathing in his familiar scent, feeling like I'm home, if only for a moment.

That's when I hear the sirens in the distance. Time is running out.

"I'm leaving town," I whisper, guilty I even came here and involved him. "I wanted to let you know."

Bryce takes a step forward, and his mom reaches out with her long, boney fingers. "You're not leaving with her," she says, digging into his shoulder. He rips away from her, a flash of anger twisting his expression as he glares over his shoulder at his mother. "Go have another drink," he snaps.

Her hand slowly lowers to her side, and a moment later, she shuffles back down the hallway.

We move into the yard, but Bryce doesn't take his eyes off me. "What happened?" he asks, searching my face. He stops when he sees the Range Rover.

"Birdie...what have you—"

"It's Javier Marin," I whisper. "I'm in a lot of shit, and I can't get out. I have to leave town *now*." I pick up my pace and walk to the SUV.

He follows. "Okay. Let me come with you."

"Are you sure?"

He confidently nods. "I mean...if I'm invited."

I laugh, despite the seriousness of the situation. "Of course, you're invited, doofus. You need to grab your stuff, or..."

He shakes his head, tapping his jeans pocket. "Got my life savings on my person already." I don't even question why. I'm used to living with parents who'll steal your last dollar to fund their addictions.

"Life savings, huh?"

We climb inside the Range Rover, and I snap it into drive.

"Four hundred bucks, baby. The places we could go."

We take off, and I zoom to the end of Bryce's street, taking a back road that leads to the highway. Bryce is glancing

worriedly in his side mirror.

“Birdie, I think they’re already onto us.”

A frustrated sob lodges in my throat. No! This car is a fucking beast, we can make it!

But before I can take the on-ramp, a handful of police cars fall in line behind us. *That fast. Fuck.*

Bryce looks over his shoulder. “Birdie.”

I gun it, nearly reaching triple digits on the odometer, but it feels like nothing. He places his hand on my thigh, and while it’s meant to be a comfort, I know it’s him surrendering.

Softer, this time. “Birdie.”

“What!?”

“They’ll clear the highway and move all traffic to the service road,” He says calmly. “Then, they’ll lay spike strips.”

“I think we’ve both played enough GTA to get past a few little spike strips.” I might sound like I’m kidding, but inside, I’m dying.

“If you hurt someone driving like this—” Bryce twists in his seat again, watching the onslaught of cars gain on us “-if you kill someone driving like this, you’ll go to prison for decades. We both will. You know how they treat the poor kids from Santa Christo.”

I grip the steering wheel even tighter as rage and bitter despair burn in my chest. “Yeah, they treat us like we’re *already* criminals. Maybe I’ll prove them right this time.”

Bryce keeps his eyes on the road. In the distance, I see the metal strips being thrown across the pavement, and I’m driving so fast that there’s no way I can avoid them. I take my foot off the accelerator and try to brake enough to slow us down without flipping the fucking car. It’s not enough, and the spike strips are too goddamn close. Bryce reaches for me, holding my shoulder as we sail toward our doom. I brace myself, gripping the steering wheel tighter as we swiftly drive over them. Those fucking spikes sure know how to ruin a good time.

The SUV swerves out of control, the world spinning out of control, and I know it's really over when we slam to a violent stop, right into a cement barrier. The airbags deploy, casting a white powder out. My face slams into the bag that violently explodes out of the steering wheel.

For a moment, I can't hear. Can't see anything. Every single bone in my body feels like it's been attacked with a sledgehammer.

I fight my way out of the airbag, sitting back in my seat, and cast a sidelong glance at Bryce. His face is covered in blood, but he's conscious.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, realizing what happened.

My words sound as hollow as I feel.

"It's okay, Birdie. I was getting bored sitting at home anyway," he says with a laugh as smoke billows from the hood. We unbuckle, and I hear my name crackle over a loudspeaker.

"Birdie Moore, come out with your hands up."

More sirens fill the space, and pretty soon we're surrounded. For a brief second, I think about making a run for it, but with the whiplash, and the helicopters circling us, I'd never fully escape.

I look out of the sunroof and see a golden anchor on the side of the bird. Those aren't police choppers, they're Javier's. Just making sure his property is returned.

Sucking in a deep breath, I take in the faint smells of the leather, the way the wisps of clouds float across the sky, and how tightly Bryce is holding my hand. He leans in and kisses me, and the taste of his blood mixes with the saltiness of the tears streaming down my face.

"Hey, pretty girl," he whispers, wiping my tears away, smudging blood across my cheek. "It's gonna be okay. We'll find a way out of this."

"You swear?" I breathe, holding his face in my palms.

"I swear," he says. "We'll find each other."

“I love you,” I say. He smiles dreamily. “I’ve always loved you, Birdie Moore. Come on. Before they shoot us.”

We stumble out of the wrecked car, our hands in the air.

It’s okay for me to ruin my life, but I should’ve never involved him.

It was stupid and selfish.

A SWAT team in full gear and assault rifles runs toward us. One grabs and slams me onto the ground with brute force. As my face presses against the burning hot concrete, I feel as if I deserve the pain.

“Just fucking shoot me,” I seethe.

The officer leans in and smells my hair. Fucking pervert. “Javier wouldn’t like that very much, would he?”

And that’s when it’s confirmed that he has this whole fucking city in his pocket. Not a surprise, though.

I’m numb now, to all of this, and I barely resist as the officer cuffs me. It’s only when I see Bryce pinned to the hood of a police cruiser, his arms being roughly cuffed behind his back, that I lose my shit.

“Let him go, you fucking assholes!” I scream out as the cold steel of the cuffs digging into my wrists. I wish I could break free, steal this asshole’s weapon then open fire. At least I’d go down in blazing glory, but my strength is laughable compared to this hulk of a guy who’s dragging me toward the car. I can’t see Bryce anymore because vehicles are blocking my view.

Like a rag doll, I’m thrown into the back of a squad car. Five minutes later, Bryce joins me. His nose is bloodied and his hair is a tasseled mess. Of course they beat the fuck out of him. Most of the cops in Santo Christo aren’t good ones.

“Are you okay?” I whisper, meeting his eyes, noticing the bruise forming over his brow.

“Yeah,” he tells me, trying to wipe his face with his shoulder since we’re both cuffed. Somehow, he accomplishes it.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he says, forcing a smile.

The car slows outside of the police station and an officer opens the door.

“Bryce!” I scream out, scooting across the seat, as they jerk him by the arm, one of the officers readying a black bag to shove over his head. “What are you doing? Let him go! Don’t you dare put that thing on him!” Worry echoes in my voice as the door is slammed in my face.

“It’s okay, Birdie. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine,” Bryce says, trying to comfort me from the sidewalk. If I could see his eyes, they’d be fear in them. I hear the unease in his tone as he is pulled away, promising that he’ll find me.

“No, no no,” I cry out. His family desperately depends on his help to survive. And this isn’t his first strike. Even though I was driving, Bryce will go away for a long time for this.

This is all my fucking fault.

I should’ve never gone to his house.

“He didn’t do anything wrong,” I strain between gritted teeth. The officer sitting in the front seat meets my gaze in the rearview. I try tucking my thumb in between the metal to pull my hand through the cuffs. It’s a party trick my mom taught me when I was younger, but I know there’s no way I’m escaping this car. Not when I’m caged in the backseat with cuffs this goddamn tight.

The door swings open again by a man wearing all black. He’s a big guy with a mustache, broad shoulders, and looks like a pervert.

Is he a detective?

I’d bet my virginity he’s not. I’d bet anything he’s one of Javier’s hired hands

He reaches in and digs his fingertips into my arm as he pulls me out. The guy is strong like he could break bricks with his grip.

“Let me go,” I scream. “You’re hurting me.”

He tightens his hold on me. “You really want to draw more attention, little girl?”

As I’m led past the entrance of the station, I panic, and my arm goes numb. If I don’t have a bruise tomorrow, I’ll be surprised.

“Where’re you taking me?” My heart hammers in my chest as a slick black Mercedes comes into the view.

“Back to your owner,” he snarls.

“No one *owns* me.” But we all know that’s not true.

His deep laughter tells me as much.

The guy throws me in the back seat, and it smells like new leather, like the Rover I just crashed in spectacular fashion.

“Now, keep quiet.”

“Fuck you,” I spit, kicking my leg out, aiming my heel at his balls, but he’s quick, and I miss by millimeters.

“Feisty,” he mutters. “Mia Moore’s kid, huh?”

I don’t answer.

“You suck dick as good as her, too?”

I’m rarely lost for words, but right now, I’ve got nothing. I didn’t expect my dick-sucking skills to be questioned today, let alone compare them to my mother’s. Fuck’s sake. I settle for trying to kick him again. This time I actually make contact with his knee, and he grunts, returning my blow with a killer, open-handed whack across my cheek that makes my teeth feel loose and my ears ring loudly. I taste blood.

“Sit tight,” he says, slamming the door. *Where the fuck am I gonna go?*

Moments later, I hear the trunk pop open, and a ripping sound. The asshole yanks my door open again, and before I can evade him, he slaps a piece of duct tape across my lips.

“*Ahh*. You hear that? It’s you *finally* shutting your fucking mouth.”

I try to mumble something, but it's pointless to keep wasting energy. No, what little bit of energy I still possess, I'd better keep for what's next.

We travel across town through the nice suburbs, pass the wards, and head toward the dock. As the car rolls to a stop, I see the outline of a tall figure waiting in the shadows. The door opens and the bastard tosses me onto the ground like I'm trash.

On my knees, I'm forced to bow at the feet of a man wearing designer shoes. My eyes trail up the perfectly pressed pants until I'm eye to eye with the devil himself.

Javier.

His name's stuck in my throat, choking me, and I try to calmly suck in air although I'm gasping for it. The pungent smell of cigar smoke lingers in the wind and I wonder how long he's been waiting for me to be returned. He looks at me with murder in his eyes and my body trembles with fear.

"You made Daddy worried," he says coldly, and it takes me a second before I realize he's not referring to Justin. He's calling himself Daddy. *Vomit.*

"Stand the fuck up," he commands, but I can't find the strength. Instead, he grabs me by my arm and drags me up the bridge leading to the monstrous boat that towers over us. I try to pull away from him, dropping my body weight to make it more difficult, but it doesn't stop the inevitable.

He's strong, double my size, and could move mountains with his pinky. Even if I stopped walking, I'd be nothing more than an inconvenience and he'd drag me across the freshly waxed deck like a rag doll. I'm almost tempted to throw myself into the sea with hopes I'd sink straight to the bottom, taking away his control and power over me, but his grip is too tight. I scream out, begging for someone, anyone, to help me but it's as if I'm invisible.

The bartenders and random women dressed in scantily clad clothing, turn their heads, pretending I don't exist. I wonder how often this happens.

Javier leads me through the main area and down a set of wide stairs.

“Please! Someone help me!” I get out one last time as our feet hit the bottom step on the ground floor.

Javier turns me around and tightly grabs my cheeks, forcing the corners of my lips together where I can no longer scream. His fingertips dig into my skin causing more pain than I ever imagined and I blink away tears. “So fucking pretty, but so damn stubborn. Just like your mother. Suppose that’s why she’s dead.”

I swallow hard, trying to open my mouth to tell him to fuck off, to ask him if he’s responsible, but it’s no use.

“Ah-ah. Keep it up, Birdie and I’ll cut out your tongue and feed it to the fish.” He pulls a knife from his pocket and slides the blade across my bare cheek. A warning, but I see mischief and cruelty sparkling behind his dark as coal eyes. He slides the cold metal over my quivering bottom lip and I’m too frightened to say anything else.

I’ve heard the horror of Javier Marin, and having him look at me with such unbridled distaste sends a shiver down my spine.

The knife glides down my throat and I nearly choke on my fear.

This is it. He’s going to kill me at the bottom of these steps and have his men clean up the blood. I’m sure I wouldn’t be the first. Javier must enjoy watching the panic course through my veins because his gaze lingers on the rapid pulse throbbing at my neck.

“Are you finished trying to draw needless attention to yourself?”

I nod, knowing I have no choice. No one will save me here. Hell, I’m not sure I can even save myself.

Javier snaps the knife shut and the burn of the blade lingers on my skin. Turning on his heels, he strides toward a long narrow hallway, pulling me with him. He stops at a door and pulls a ring full of keys from his pocket. After unlocking it, he

steps aside, allowing me into a bedroom with mirrors on the ceiling.

Javier removes the handcuffs, freeing my wrists. But I'm well aware I'm in my own personal prison.

"Sit," he demands before going to the wet bar in the corner. Carefully, he picks up a crystal cantor with a golden liquid inside. He swirls it around, then pours a shot into a whiskey glass. His back is toward me, but I don't dare defy him. There is no escaping this yacht so I follow his orders and sit on the edges of the bed. The blood-red comforter is soft, and I wonder if this is his room.

Casually, Javier strolls over and watches me.

"What you did today, Birdie, I've killed people for less," he coolly says before shooting down the alcohol. I don't dare meet his gaze as he stares because I'm sure he'll get off on my distress.

Javier might be evil, but I don't think he's lying to me right now.

Casually, he refills his glass, then pulls something from his pocket. After he takes the second shot, he strolls toward me, jerking my hand toward him. A devilish grin meets his lips as he snaps a thick silver bracelet on my wrist and locks it. I glance down at it, recognition filling my eyes.

"Where did you get this?" I ask, confused and angry.

"From your mother's cold, dead body." He smiles as if he just delivered the best news. "You see, all of this is much bigger than five thousand dollars. You really are an ignorant little girl, aren't you?" Laughter releases from the back of his throat, causing me to jump.

"You'll be paying your mother's full debt of \$120,000. It's all recorded in the ledger. I'll get you a copy so you can see exactly what your mother wasted your future on. No one can escape me, Birdie. Not even in death. You came here begging for pennies for your mother's grave and ended up finding your own instead. I have to say though, it's a very noble gesture, wanting to make sure Mommy had a proper resting place.

Especially since, if the tables were turned, she'd let you rot in an unmarked grave without a second thought."

"I don't owe you a thing for Mia's debt," I seethe. "Those debts died along with her."

"Wrong!" Javier gloats as he pulls a folded stack of paper from his pocket and straightens it with deliberate slowness. "Your mother signed a contract that passes her debts and winnings to her next of kin, upon the event of her death." He hands me the creased contract, stabbing his finger at the signature scrawled in red at the bottom of the page. It's a weird texture, the ink. "Is that—"

"Blood," Javier confirms. "Your mother's blood oath. Signed, dated, witnessed. You didn't need to come knocking at my door, little Bird. I would have come kicking yours down eventually."

I can't talk. Can't move. Can only stare at the dried blood that once beat inside my mother's veins. "See?" Javier soothes mockingly. "Your pathetic mother did leave you an inheritance, after all."

"Shut up," I whisper, tears welling on the brims of my eyes. His hateful words permeate through me and fully sink in.

The same bracelet that my mother was imprisoned to wear sits firmly clasped around my wrist. I always thought I was different than her, that I'd never make the same mistakes, but here I am, a fly caught in Javier's wicked web.

"You're adorable. And you're gonna make me *a lot* of fucking money, but first, you need to get ready." He smiles and it almost seems genuine, but I know better. His smug silence cuts me to the bone.

I stare at the wall, wishing I could disappear. Asking Javier for help was a mistake, but if my mother's debt was owed regardless, it was inevitable that he'd make me pay it off somehow. He would have found me no matter what...wouldn't he? Bile rises in my throat.

"Pants off. On the bed. Chop chop, we don't have long thanks to your little side trip." He turns toward the ajar

bathroom door. “How’s that water coming along?”

Someone else is here?

Rafe appears with a wooden bowl filled with water in his hands. He refuses to look at me, and there’s a fresh line of bruises and scrapes along his jaw and cheekbone. He sets the bowl down on a table beside the bed and looks to his father for further instruction.

Javier looks at his son with irritation. “Where’s my blade?”

Rafe appears to be using every ounce of his energy to remain unaffected by his father’s cruel treatment. “Faye,” he says. “You know how sentimental she is.”

Javier shakes his head, but he looks amused. “Well, I hope she sterilized it after slitting whichever throat was on her chopping block this time.” He heads for the door. “I’ll find her. You stay here and help Birdie out of those clothes. And make sure this one doesn’t get away from you twice in one day, won’t you, son?”

“Yes, sir,” Rafe answers.

As soon as Javier is gone I’m on my feet, stepping up to Rafe and grabbing hold of his chin. As I’m turning his face to see the damage his father has inflicted, Rafe’s hand seizes my wrist hard enough that I have to bite back a cry of pain. His eyes meet mine, a warning in them, but also a wildness.

“He did this because of me?” I ask. “Because I ran away from you?”

He looks away momentarily. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for you to get hurt.”

Rafe scoffs, pushing my wrist away from his face before he lets go. “What do *you* think it’s worth?”

I don’t answer. An uneasy silence settles over us as the seconds tick away.

“You should get undressed,” Rafe says stiffly, taking a step back. “It’s easier if you do it yourself. If he comes back and

has to do it for you, it'll hurt."

"Does anything not hurt when it comes to your father?" I reply, making no move to take off my clothes. Let Javier rip them from me. I won't go willingly into that fucking auction.

"Birdie," Rafe hisses. "Do yourself a favor and get undressed."

"Or what?" I challenge, stepping closer to him once more. "Will you do it if I don't? I thought you were a gentleman."

He just shakes his head. "Don't say I didn't warn you," he mutters.

The door bursts open behind me. I turn to see Javier has returned, holding an old-style barber's blade in one hand, and a can of shaving cream in the other.

"Did I speak fucking Latin?" He accosts his son. "Her clothes are still on."

Rafe opens his mouth to speak, but I'm faster. "He did try his best," I say.

Javier grins as he looks between the two of us. "Well, Rafe must be off his game today. First, he lets you escape, and now he can't get you undressed. Seems like my son has a soft spot for you."

Is that true? Did he let me get away?

Rafe glares at me. "There's nothing soft between us. She clearly wants a struggle with you, sir."

Thanks, Rafe. Throw me under the fucking bus, why don't you? Javier sets the blade beside the bowl of water and turns his full attention to me. "Normally, I'd happily oblige, Birdie, but we're running behind. If you're not naked and on your back in thirty seconds, I'll call the police officers holding your little boyfriend Bryce and instruct them to give him a thorough cavity search."

"What?" I stammer.

Rafe bites down a smirk. "In the ass, Birdie. That's where they'll be searching."

Javier looks at his wristwatch, bored. “Twenty-five seconds.”

I’ve had my bluff called. Furious, I yank off the shoplifted shirt, shimmy out of the jeans, and unhook my bra, letting it fall to the floor as I glare at Rafe. *Be a fucking gentleman now*, I challenge him silently. I push my panties down, step out of them, and lie on the bed, utterly defeated, as naked as the day Mia birthed me into this cruel world.

I’ve been so intent on fighting these two that I haven’t really thought about what I’m fighting. The auction, of course, but in this immediate moment? The bowl of water and the blade? The shaving cream? Javier appears above me, depressing the trigger on the can of shaving cream and spraying a big glob of white foam into his hand.

That’s when it really, truly sinks in: He’s not planning on shaving my legs. Of course, I knew this, but everything has happened so fast, I haven’t let myself think about it.

CHAPTER 15



*M*y hands automatically go to the juncture between my legs, my palms covering the fine triangle of hair that grows there. Javier looks at Rafe expectantly, setting down the can as he picks up the barber's blade. One wrong move and he'll cut me deep enough to cause serious damage. *That's why he uses this and not a regular razor.* I'm so fixated on the blade that I don't notice Rafe moving around the bed at first. Not until he grabs my wrists and yanks them up above my head, pinning them in place with his impossibly strong grip, leaving me completely exposed.

"Is this really necessary?" I blurt out. Javier uses the back of his foam-covered hand to nudge my knees apart, taking a moment to study me. He frowns, seeming to change his mind as he takes a towel and wipes the foam from his hand. Rafe must notice the sudden change, too. "Something wrong?" he asks his father.

Javier looks between Rafe and I, then back at the spot between my legs. "It just occurred to me," he says, pressing his thumbs to either side of my—*ugh*—pussy and gently stretching me open, "that our little Bird has been free of her cage since I last verified her *innocence*." He draws out the word *innocence* like it's a hilarious joke.

I steal a glance at Rafe. He's looking at the wall, at the ceiling, anywhere but at my outstretched body that he's helping pin down to the bed.

"Just checking that she hasn't lost that little v-card of hers in the interim," Javier murmurs as he continues to molest me.

“There are a few gaps of time unaccounted for today. When she visited her little boyfriend...” he tries to insert a finger into me dry and fails. He fixes Rafe with an accusatory glare, his next sentence dripping with suspicion. “At the mall.”

“At the mall?” Rafe snaps, his careful stoniness disappearing for a moment.

Javier sucks on his index finger as he returns his son’s irritated stare with a blank gaze.

“You think Rafe fucked me at the mall?” I ask, confused and frightened by the weird dynamic between father and son. Neither of them pays me the slightest attention. Javier parts my labia gently with his thumbs, making me yelp at the sudden stretching as he pushes a finger inside me. I breathe around the intrusion, squeezing my eyes shut tightly, ready for pain.

“I guess not,” Javier says, withdrawing his finger, reaching over me to wipe it clean on the lapel of Rafe’s suit with a shit-eating grin. What a fucking asshole. My cheeks burn with shame—I want to apologize to Rafe—but for what? Ending up with my vaginal secretions as his fucking aftershave for the evening?

The next part is the stuff of nightmares. Javier forces my knees apart as wide as they’ll go, to the point of pain, and narrates every stroke of his barber’s razor as he strips me clean of every last trace of pubic hair. I almost have a panic attack when he starts close to my clitoris, but I fight back the urge to scream. I can’t risk him getting distracted and cutting me. Not there. God, please, not there.

Javier admires his handiwork as he wipes his hands dry on a towel. “It’s a shame I’m not keeping you for myself,” he muses, his eyes lingering on my shaved pussy. “I’ll have to find someone else to replace Mia. You know I made the doctor cut you out of her so her pussy wouldn’t be ruined by that pretty little head of yours.”

“That’s enough!” Rafe snaps, letting go of my wrists as he rises from the bed to go toe-to-toe with his father.

Javier gives his son a withering once-over. “For that, I’ll let you give Birdie her enema.”

Tossing the towel on the bed beside my naked body, Javier gives me a final once-over.

“And considering you took advantage of my generosity today, Birdie, you’ll now be wearing what *I* choose. There’s makeup in the bathroom. You’ve got one hour,” Javier turns on his heels and exits the room.

A sob releases from my throat as soon as the door snaps shut, but I don’t have time for a meltdown. Five thousand dollars seemed impossible to repay; over one hundred thousand would take me two lifetimes. I sit up on the bed, tugging and pulling on the bracelet fixed to my wrist, hoping it will break. It’s too strong. Fuck. Hot tears roll down my face.

“Hey,” Rafe says, his dark eyes shining with—concern? For me? “You’re okay. He’s a fucking asshole. Forget him. Go shower, get dressed.”

“What about...” I trail off. I must look pathetic. Crying, naked, perched on the edge of Javier’s bed with my arms wrapped around myself. Rafe pinches the bridge of his nose. “No enema. As if he’d ever know. He’s just trying to get in every last bit of humiliation before you’re gone.”

I nod numbly, getting to my feet.

I stumble past him into the bathroom, and I have myself the best fucking last shower a virgin could ever hope for. Hot water, vanilla-scented body wash, and a thick, fluffy towel to wrap myself in when I’m done. After I’m dry, I take stock of the next step: getting ready.

A plethora of expensive makeup is spread on the counter, a blood-red dress hangs on the back of the door. Reaching out, I pull the silk toward me, allowing the slinky material to slide down my fingers. It floats as it falls back against the heavy oak door.

I apply dark, over-exaggerated eyeshadow and crimson lipstick. If I’m going to be a whore, I might as well look the part. After pulling my long brown hair from the ponytail it was

in, I brush my fingers through it. Then, I take a deep breath and slip on the dress that fits me as if it were tailored to my exact measurements. It exaggerates every curve, allowing more cleavage than I'm comfortable showing. Great. In another life, this dress might make me happy, maybe excited even. It's the dress of a wealthy stranger, of someone I will never be. Dead, empty eyes stare back at me as I pass the mirror. I almost recognize the face of my mother in me with lipstick and eyeshadow this dark. I may be barely eighteen, but I'm wearing the face of someone at least a decade older. A soft knock sounds against the bathroom door.

"You kill yourself or something?" Rafe calls out. I open the door, steam billowing out of the bathroom as Rafe blinks. He studies my face, the heavy-handed, spiteful job I've done with my makeup. The barest hint of a smile touches his lips, his expression softening.

"No," he says. He takes a folded hand towel from the stack beside the basin and wets it, gesturing for me to sit on the closed toilet lid.

"No? Am I not meant to look like a whore?"

Rafe reaches a tentative hand out, grasping mine. I didn't realize I was shaking so hard, but now that he's squeezing my clammy fingers with his steady grip, I'm acutely aware of how I must look. A nervous little girl playing dress-up with Mommy's makeup. A fawn on shaky legs learning to walk in the cruel light of reality. A terrified virgin about to be sold to the highest bidder.

Rafe's gesture of comfort is foreign in this awful universe Javier has built. I take it anyway, grateful for what might be my last human interaction not based on ownership and pain.

"You're okay," he says. "You can do this." A small smile, a shared joke. "But not with that eyeshadow."

Fifteen minutes later, Rafe has wiped away the hatchet job I did on my makeup and replaced it with a flawless finish, complete with winged eyeliner and waterproof makeup. For, you know, the crying.

“Wow,” I say, studying myself in the mirror. “Who taught you to do makeup so well?”

Rafe’s eyes glance down to the bracelet around my wrist, and back to me, all semblance of softness gone. He doesn’t have to say it. He’s telling me my mother taught him how to do this. MY mother. My *dead* mother. Who didn’t teach me, her own daughter, how to even apply fucking sunscreen. It’s like another stab to my blackening heart. How many more of those stabs can I take before the last vestiges of love I had for that woman are twisted into hate and bitter resentment? What happens when there’s no love left for her?

Forcefully, the bedroom door slams open, causing me to jump. I step out of the small bathroom as Javier hands over a pair of strappy heels that seem stories tall.

“I can’t walk in th—.”

“Oh, little bird, you’ll figure it out.”

Javier’s hand flies out, his large palm gripping my throat. He moves me toward the bed, where I’m forced to sit. Taking a step back, he watches me as I struggle to put on the stupid fucking shoes. His eyes study me like a specimen under a microscope.

“Go and check on the rest of tonight’s items, Rafael,” Javier dismisses his son. I watch Rafe depart the room, almost mournful at his absence.

He tried to show me kindness in a world where being kind isn’t allowed. I’ll probably never see him again.

Sucking in a nervous breath, I stand tall, keeping my head high. I don’t want to look into his menacing eyes that cut me straight to the core, but I’m forced to when his hand jolts out and grabs my chin. He looks over my face, making sure to check the quality of his goods. When I grow uncomfortable, he smirks like the fucking devil he is.

Maybe this won’t be so bad? Maybe a nice man will buy me, pay my entire debt, and I’ll be free from this monster. When my eyes finally meet his, I try not to act frightened, but

he sees through it. As a sly smile slides across his lips, I turn my head.

The boat lists to the side, as precarious as the small glow of hope I still have left in my heart.

“You look like a child when you’re scared,” the man standing before me remarks, sliding the blood-red tie from his neck. I feel so small, sitting here on the edge of his palatial bed, an offering for an underworld king.

“I am a child. I’m barely sixteen,” I whisper.

It’s a lie. I’m eighteen. About to graduate high school. My whole life is ahead of me.

Until this.

I’m clinging to the hope that my lie will help me somehow. Surely he’ll take pity on me if he thinks I’m only sixteen?

Or... have I just made things worse for myself?

I swallow painfully as nausea grips me. Doesn’t he get seasick living on this floating mansion in the middle of the sea? Doesn’t he worry that he might drown in all this water so far from any shore?

Javier cocks his head to the side, smiling. The gesture is meant to be casual. Disarming. I can tell my fear amuses him. It’s written on his angular face, in his cat-like black eyes, clear as day.

Javier Marin is a panther. This boat, his jungle. And me? I am nothing but food to him. Another meal to snatch up in his jaws and consume.

“Sweet sixteen and never had a cock inside you,” Javier replies, draping the tie ever-so-casually around my neck. I don’t dare breathe as he pulls one end, only stopping when the knot rests firmly at the hollow where my collarbones meet. “You’re not a child, sweet girl. You’re a missed opportunity.”

His expression shifts from predatory to something softer, but that doesn’t make me feel better. He reaches his hand out to me, the large red ruby ring he wears around his middle finger glinting in the moonlight. It’s the exact color of the

figure-hugging satin dress he has chosen for me. The same color of his tie, the same tie that winds tight around my throat, an unspoken promise of violence.

Everything in this world is the color of blood.

“Birdie.” Javier snaps his fingers, signaling his impatience. “Come.”

I accept his grasp, letting him pull me to my feet. The luxury super yacht cuts through choppy water, and I look like a baby giraffe learning to walk in patent stilettos.

“You look lovely.” Javier pushes me toward a full-length mirror beside the bed. “See?”

I do see, even though I’d rather not. I see a man, poised and lethal, immaculately dressed, with casual violence in his eyes. Then I see myself—a girl, barely a woman, trying to look older with makeup and fancy clothes that don’t fool anyone. Grief has hollowed my stomach and paled my cheeks. The dark circles under my eyes won’t go away. My gaze trails down to the thin metal band clasped tight around my wrist, and the sight of it—locked and immovable—forces my attention away from the mirror. I scratch my wrist furiously as I try to get my fingernails to the flesh the band is pressed tightly against.

“You’ll get used to it,” Javier says, watching me. “Mommy did.”

I think of my mother, lying lifeless on the ground. The silver band around her wrist was the only thing that marred her pale skin. I marvel at how cruel Javier Marin is and how he cuffed the same bracelet on me in the wake of her demise.

“I came to you for help,” I protest feebly, unable to take my eyes off the silver that ensures he knows my every move. It’s fused from a special alloy and locked with a key only he possesses.

Javier chuckles. “Yes, you did,” he agrees. “What a silly girl you are.”

I want to ask him about the tie around my neck, the only thing that looks out of place against my expensive outfit. I

bring my hand up, intending to loosen it just a little, but he beats me to it.

He tightens it, making a tsk sound. He cinches it until I can't breathe at all. I look at myself in the mirror, the way my fingers pull at the soft fabric as I begin to choke. "It's for the buyers. Something to mark your innocence. Red means virgin, little bird."

I want to throw up at the fact someone chose the color red to delineate *virginal*. Aren't wedding dresses white for purity, not red for blood? And judging by the look on Javier's face, it was he who decided the color code.

He reaches into his pocket.

"Open up," he says, grabbing my jaw with one hand before I can clamp my mouth shut. I see a flash of white—a small, round pill embossed with an anchor—before it presses against my tongue. My instant reaction is to spit it out, but this isn't his first time doing this. With one hand, he holds my mouth closed, pinching my nose with the other.

"Swallow," he snaps. I shake my head furiously.

What has he given me? *A roofie? An upper? Fucking poison?*

Who gets their branding embossed on their own goddamn pills?

I struggle against his grip, but Javier is strong. I try to pry his fingers from my mouth, to wriggle out of his death grip to get a breath, but it's futile. This man is a wall of steel muscle and grim determination.

"You'll run out of air shortly," he warns, looking bored as he glances at his watch.

I don't want to lose control.

I can already taste the bitter pill at the back of my tongue, starting to dissolve. I bring my hand up to Javier's cheek, dragging my fingernails along his flesh, gouging four bloody lines along his clenched jaw.

Fire sparks in his eyes. Too late, I realize my mistake.

“You’ll pay for that,” Javier explodes, his soulless glare the only thing I can see as the world fades away. “Mark my words. You will fucking pay for that.”

CHAPTER 16



The sucky thing about living on an island is that when something goes down on the mainland, you're always one step behind.

By the time I got to Santo Christo to meet with Mia Moore, the bitch was dead.

Then her daughter slipped through my fingers like I was trying to hold onto water. And as much as I've tried to trail her, to catch her at an opportune moment—Birdie Moore has managed to evade me for three whole days. It's not her evading me so much as Rafe Marin tailing her ass, day and night. He didn't leave her side during their shopping trip. I was watching like a fucking creep as Marin fed Birdie Moore fries dipped in a strawberry milkshake. I was watching as she tried on dresses in the changing room. And I was within grabbing distance of her when she stole that Range Rover and gunned it to her little boyfriend's house in the slums.

I'm pissed, truly, at how inadequately I've managed this...
Situation.

And now? I lost her somewhere during the police chase that ended with the cops closing part of the freeway and Mia's delinquent daughter running her stolen vehicle over spike strips before she smashed head-on into a guard rail. I heard she and her meathead boyfriend Bryce were arrested, but there's no mention of Birdie in any police database. I've had my guy search all of them, and he's good. Great, in fact. He could find a needle in a government database haystack before I've even finished my first coffee of the day. Bryce was booked for

grand theft auto and held without bail, but Birdie, it seems, has vanished into thin air.

I'm not missing my chance to find her, not again. For all I know, she could disappear just like my sister did, especially if she's tangled up with whatever is happening on that goddamn ocean liner the Marin family conducts their business out of. And if Birdie Moore disappears? My chance at finding my sister does, too.

That's why I'm here, on this fucking renovated carnival cruise ship, after instructing my private banker that I might be making a large payment today and to make sure there were no holds on my trust fund account. I've got half a million dollars accessible in mine, and as far as I know, Davina's has the same, unless hers was frozen after she disappeared. One million dollars in cash at my fingertips. If that doesn't buy the information that will help me find Davina, I don't know what will.

You might be wondering how I found out about the auction. No, I'm not signed up for Javier's email newsletter. When I lost Birdie's trail, I went to the last place I could think of that she might be—the shitty double-wide she called home. She wasn't there, of course. That would be too easy. But her stepfather was, and he had quite the story to tell me when I asked him how much it cost to hide his wife from the high table. Once I explained I knew Mia was from the island and that Mia wasn't even her real name, he went pale, as if he'd seen a ghost.

He wanted to know how I found out about Mia and if others were coming for him. It was all the confirmation I needed to know Rafe wasn't bullshitting me.

I didn't even have to pay him for the pleasure. The guy was so fucking drunk he just started talking when I asked where his daughter was. He just kept repeating the name, Javier Marin. I couldn't get much more out of him that made sense, which was probably to be expected. Guy just lost his wife. My own father died a few years ago, and my mother still hasn't gotten past it.

Rafe had made it pretty clear he wasn't going to be much help when it came to Birdie. It was time to turn to my other Marin source: Crazy fucking Faye.



“Faye,” I say as soon as she answers my call. “Long time no see.”

I hear her laughter tinkle down the line. “It’s been two weeks, baby. You miss me already?”

In between talking, she’s sucking on something. “You need to call me back? Your mouth sounds busy.”

Just then, the sucking sound turned to what I can only describe as teeth crunching on rocks. It’s so loud I have to hold the phone away from my ear. “Jesus, are you eating gravel?”

“Lollipop,” Faye answers, crunching away. “Cherry flavor.”

“Lovely,” I say dryly. “As much as I love imagining you sucking on a cherry lollipop, I’m calling for another reason. A little bird told me you have... well, a little bird. Birdie Moore. On your boat.”

A brief silence. “Maybe. Depends. You want to buy her?”

I frown. “Buy her? She’s for sale?”

Faye snorts. “Her virgin pussy is. Auction’s tonight. 10k buy-in gets you a bidding seat. If you win, I’ll throw in a cherry lollipop for free. You can smash two cherries in one go.”

She’s for sale. She’s a virgin? I didn’t think those existed past grade school in Santo Christo.

“And if you lose...” Faye continues, “Maybe we can have that hatefuck you’ve been talking about.”

Shit. “Rafe told you about that? It was just talk.”

“Well, don’t let your mouth write checks your cock can’t cash, my dear little Prince.”

Faye gives me the details for the auction, and I wire her ten grand immediately.

And just like that...I’m going to finally sink my teeth into Birdie Moore.

I’m going to buy her.

Because she’s the key to helping me find my sister.

CHAPTER 17



BIRDIE

I wake up on my back, my top half draped over the end of Javier's bed. It's no longer just us. Now, four bodyguards surround the mattress, one for each of my limbs. None of them touch me for a moment, but they're obviously positioned so they can hold me down within a split-second if needed.

Four bodyguards for one teenage girl. Looks like shit's getting serious.

Javier looms over me, his knees against the edge of the mattress, forcing my thighs apart. His cheek is bleeding, and a small smirk forms on my lips.

He sees it.

"I should sell you to the worst motherfucker out there," he threatens, touching his fingertips to his cheek and bringing away bright red blood. "I should send you to a fucking whore camp. Stick you in a shipping container. Tie you to a bed and let every man and his dog rape the fight out of you."

I swallow down the urge to tell him to fuck himself. "Don't be such a fucking crybaby," I manage the strength to muster, though it comes out slurred and slow.

By his reaction, telling him to go fuck himself would've been far less offensive. I open my mouth to apologize, to try and backtrack before he kills me where I lie. Javier Marin stands back, grinning now as he shoves his hands into his pockets.

“Looks like your medicine is working,” he says, seemingly satisfied with that piece of information. He switches his attention to the four men who stand guard over me. I want to ask him what he fed me, but I can’t make out another word. It’s as if someone has stolen my tongue.

I try to sit up.

The room spins.

Javier holds his hand out to assist me, and I accept, letting him yank me up to a sitting position.

“Practice smiling a bit,” Javier suggests, patting the top of my head as if I’m a dog. “At least *act* like you’re having a good time.”

I narrow my eyes at him like an obstinate child who’s just been scolded.

“Watch her,” Javier orders the guards. “Make sure she doesn’t do anything too stupid.”

He leaves me with them. I put a hand to my throat, wondering what’s floating through my veins right now. Something that sedates the brain and body, and renders one almost mute.

I dig my nails into my palms, trying to use the pain to wake myself from my drugged stupor. I focus all of my remaining brain power on trying to speak.

“H-how long was I out?” I manage to ask the bodyguard standing to my left. He stares straight ahead. I blink heavily, turning to the second guard. “What’s the...time?”

No response.

Not even a cursory glance in my direction.

Nothing. *Fuckers.*

Do they have any idea how much energy it took for me to ask those three simple questions?

I glance down at the red satin that hugs my body. As I run my fingers along its smooth surface, I suddenly understand the legacy my mother left me.

She sold my soul to the devil years before I ever could.

I remain on the edge of the bed as the bodyguards continue to surround me. Each is bulky, and they all have guns. If I could get my hands on one, I'd potentially have a chance at getting out of here. Even if they hurt me, I wouldn't feel much, judging by the poison bubbling pleasantly in my bloodstream.

Time ticks on, and I'm not sure how many seconds or minutes pass.

My body grows heavier. My brain feels like a jar of smushed marshmallows, and it's so damn quiet in here that I feel like I can hear the lights buzzing. I try not to focus on the tick of the second hand on the clock. The sound invades my ears, beats with the rhythm of my heart, filling my head with a repetitive taunt. Time's passing far too slowly, as Javier's words play on repeat in my head—*you will fucking pay for that.*

The boat rocks across the water, struggling to focus on reality.

Where are we going?

Javier owns the sea. He's beyond the law and does whatever he wants. I've always heard stories of his extravagant yachts; though, before tonight, I never truly believed all of it. It sounded so...*outlandish*. Like something out of a movie.

But as I lie in this room on a velvet comforter, I have a feeling all the tall tales are true. My dumbass stepdad constantly owes Javier money, so why doesn't Justin have a silver bracelet attached to his wrist?

What does he do to appease Javier?

Theft? Petty Crimes? *Murder?*

No. Justin wouldn't have the stomach for that, surely. Or the brains.

A cell phone dings, pulling me away from my thoughts.

"It's showtime, Princess," one of the bodyguards says, his words too casual for this to be an isolated event. These men

are used to this.

I stare forward in disgust as another grabs me by the arm, hauling me to my feet. As I take a step, the shoes are easier to walk in now—or maybe it's because I'm being propped up against the hard arm of a third guard. Firm hands lead me out of the room, down a hallway, and into an elevator.

As I stumble forward, I realize how wrong I was about the heels. I nearly fall into the elevator, scared that I may break an ankle. Maybe I could hurt myself? Have to be rushed somewhere for medical attention?

Who am I kidding? I'm too fucked up to do anything useful right now, much less pull off a daring escape.

I have to play my cards correctly if I'm going to make it out of this alive. I've already enraged Javier once today. Twice, if you count me escaping Rafe, stealing a car, and then taking the police on a short-lived high-speed chase. Shit, I'm not brave enough to press my luck and play with fire a third time.

The elevator door slides open, and I try to memorize every detail about the vastness of the boat. It sways over the water, and crowds of people drink on the deck. Many walk past me, avoiding eye contact, pretending as if I don't exist. Not one seems concerned about a young woman being here, dressed like a high-end slut, selling herself. I'm just another faceless body living out my whore prophecy.

I'm led to double doors, which snap open when we come close, and while I'm intrigued by what I see inside the giant room, I'm also horrified.

Women—and a few men—of all different ages wear the same bracelet that's bound to my wrist. I glance down at mine, wishing I could rip it away, feeling as if it's burning into my skin. When I look up, I notice Javier walking toward me, wearing a mischievous grin. I can't even fake a smile right now.

“Birdie. Mm. Are you ready to make *daddy* a lot of money?” Javier purrs.

My skin crawls when he places his hand on the small of my back and leads me across the room to a woman. While most of the people here are focused on the stage, when I walk by, heads turn, watching me, studying me. The red tie around my neck says I'm for sale, and tells them there's a price on my body.

"Watch her, Faye. Don't let her out of your sight," Javier demands. The woman nods and leads me behind the stage. I turn and see a girl younger than me standing in the center of the large stage, struggling as the man holding her pulls her dress from her slight frame, leaving her in her underwear under bright lighting. She has a black tie around her throat. Not a virgin, then. *I guess Javier wasn't lying about the thirteen-year-olds in Santo Christo.*

Time stops, for me, anyway—as I watch her being stripped naked, humiliated, for the entire room to watch. The guy holding her arms behind her back rips her panties from her, leaving her completely exposed. She screams out, and when she looks up, she makes eye contact with me.

Empty eyes.

No soul.

I feel as if I'm looking into a mirror as she blinks away. Wonder how much her dignity cost? We know mine is over six figures. I begin to dry heave, wishing I was back at the trailer park because being there is better than being here any day.

The woman who's in charge of watching me tuts in disapproval, placing her hand on my shoulder as she stares at the girl screaming, with her panties shoved into her mouth, a makeshift gag that muffles her cries. "Silly goose. If she cooperated, she'd make life much easier for herself."

I try to speak, but nothing comes out. Faye notices, and a sly smile breaks out across her pretty face. "You're rolling. He gave you Molly, huh?"

"Who's Molly?" I ask before I understand.

Oh.

She's talking about the drug Javier shoved down my throat. Molly. Ecstasy. Fucking great.

"He must really like you. Only good girls get to enjoy their first auction." *First auction? People do this more than once?* She tugs on the red tie wrapped tight around my throat. "He does have a thing for virgins." She wrinkles her nose up, stepping back and releasing her hold on me, giving me a once-over. "How old are you?"

I'm too high to answer, or to stand on my own, apparently. I somehow manage to trip over my own feet, but it doesn't matter because suddenly Rafe appears, as if out of the shadows, catching me before I go ass up.

"She's eighteen," he says, and I guess my little lie about my age didn't work. Guess it wouldn't if Javier knew so much about my mother. "Don't worry, she's not sticking around long enough for Dad to get attached." He leans me against the wall beside the stage door, stepping back as if he's afraid he'll catch something if he touches me too long.

I look between the two of them, entranced. Two beautiful people from a twisted bloodline I can only begin to fathom. "She's your sister?"

"Ahh, it speaks," Faye says. "Yes. I'm his sister." I see the silver bracelet, just like mine, that she's trying to hide behind her long sleeves, and notice she's not that much older than me. "But--"

An openhanded blow lands on my right cheek, sending me flying. I land heavily on my side, my elbow screaming in pain, but I don't even care. I laugh as I see Rafe shake his head, glaring at his sister before he picks me up. He doesn't let go this time. "What the fuck, Faye?" His suit sleeve slips down as he holds my dead weight, and *fuck*. Rafe is wearing a silver bracelet, too. I stare at it, my brain stuck in molasses as I try to make the cogs go around.

He has these bracelets on his own fucking children?

"Mine's gold," Faye brags as if that makes it better. "Because I'm his *favorite*."

The crazy apple didn't fall far from the psychotic fucking tree, I see.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, happy my lips are stained with blood from Faye hitting me. It matches the color of my dress. The color of my fate. Red, bloody, violent.

“Are you on your fucking meds?” Rafe hisses.

“No,” Faye admits, echoing his tone in a mocking fashion.

“I'm telling him.”

“I'll slit your fucking throat,” Faye challenges.

Rubbing his temple, Rafe sighs, hauling me to my feet. Faye's just fucking gone, like a ghost, not a trace of her, as I look toward the stage door.

Rafe looks tired. “Come on,” he says, draping my arm over his shoulder, helping me stumble to the place where I'll be prepped for auction.

I'm so high I don't even care.

No wonder my mother was an addict.

How else would you survive this life, day in and day out?



WE EVENTUALLY END up back in Javier's office, the place where I signed away my virginity only days ago. Javier's behind his oak desk, staring at the door as if he's been waiting for us.

Rafe drags me across the room.

Javier puts his hand up when Rafe begins to speak.

“She beat you here,” Javier says to his son. He looks... *different*. More relaxed, somehow, yet on edge at the same time. His breathing is faster than normal as if he's just run

upstairs to get here. And his eyes, normally so ferocious, are clouded, as if he's on drugs, too. At least, that's how it looks from here.

Rafe tries to speak again, but Javier smashes his fist down on his desk. "Not now!" he yells. "Go and make sure things are moving out there." Rafe starts to tug me toward the door again.

"Leave her here," Javier adds.

Rafe looks between his father and me. "Jesus, she can barely fucking stay awake. You want me to leave her on the floor?"

Javier shifts in his seat slightly. "Mm-hmm. Put her there."

I let Rafe fold me into the same chair I sat in to sign that fucking contract. The difference is, whatever he gave me—Molly?—is bubbling beautifully in my bloodstream. I'm so fucking chill; I wouldn't care if Faye slit my throat right now. I'm so chill I'd hand her the blade myself and giggle until she severed my head.

I love this feeling. I love this moment. I love Rafe. I ... don't love Javier, but I don't hate him, not on this watermelon sugar high. Fuck, I love Harry Styles! I start humming the tune to the song, slumping down on my seat. Rafe gives me an odd little pat on the shoulder before he leaves, the door slamming shut behind him.

Javier stares at me, and his eyes look almost anime-like. Huge and dark, like I could get lost in them and never find my way out. A black hole, pulling me in. "Birdie," he whispers. "I want to tell you a secret." And he beckons me closer with a curl of his index finger.

I smile eagerly, leaning clumsily over the desk. Javier takes the tie around my neck and tugs it forcefully until my entire top half is bent over the cool flat surface, my nose almost touching his.

"How do you feel?" he asks.

I smile so hard my cheeks hurt. "Amazing," I whisper.

And then he kisses me. I jerk my head away slowly, but he lets me draw back. I shake my head. “No,” I murmur.

“Just a little goodbye kiss,” Javier insists.

I’ve got no inhibitions at this moment, no ability to rationalize how fucking weird this is. Whatever this drug is, it’s made me incredibly suggestible—and even though I logically know that it’s the drug and not me, it still feels like me. It makes no sense. “I’m so hot,” I say. “I need water.”

Javier nods. “I’ll get you water. One more kiss, little birdie, before you leave my cage.”

I laugh again. He doesn’t need to ask me. He can take whatever he wants—he already has, over and over again—and we both know this. So for him to even ask, especially when I’m fucking high, is beyond hilarious.

“Don’t stop,” he says.

My laughter seems to amuse him. He grabs the back of my head, crushing his lips against mine, as his tongue finds mine.

And holy fuck... I *melt*.

Into the moment, into the feeling, into the man who’s about to sell me. I kiss him back, the best fucking kiss of my entire existence, even as the last remnants of logic scream somewhere at the back of my heavy brain to stop! *Now!*

Javier’s breathing is fast, his grip tightening on me. He groans into my mouth, biting down on my lip hard enough that I taste blood. My eyes fly open at the sudden pain of his bite as he loosens his hold on me, slumping back in his seat.

I hear a rustling noise coming from under the desk, and then Faye crawls out, using her father’s throne-like chair to haul herself up off her knees. She smirks at me as she wipes cum from the edge of her cupid’s bow lips. I’m still draped over the desk, close enough that I can see the red marks from where Faye’s knees have been grinding against the carpet.

What the fuck did I just witness? What the fuck did I just take part of? My addled brain is piecing it all together. Javier

was acting weird when we walked in because he was getting his dick sucked underneath his desk the entire time.

By Faye.

His... *daughter?*

Javier pats me on the head again, zipping up his trousers and leaving the office. I force myself off the desk, sliding back down into the chair I started in. I stare into space when Faye clicks her fingers in front of my face.

“Hey, little slut.”

When I don't answer, she takes hold of the tie around my neck and begins to pull the material tight. Subtly at first and then violently, cutting off my air. I scratch at the noose strangling me, choking as she abandons the tie and starts to throttle me with her own slender hands.

“He's mine,” she spits, her lips so close, her long dark hair falling like a curtain around my face so that she's the only thing I can see.

I don't fucking want him, I want to say, but I can't, on account of being choked to death and all. Maybe I won't have to be sold after all. Not unless one of Javier's customers is into necrophilia with dead virgins. Because his deranged daughter is about to kill me before I can repay a single penny to Marin Holdings, LLC.

Faye's assault ends as abruptly as it began. One moment her hands are squeezing down on my larynx, and stars are blurring at the edges of my vision. The next moment, she's flying across the room, striking me with violent force.

I choke and splutter, sliding from the seat onto the floor as I clutch my bruised neck. I wheeze in panicked gulps of air as a pair of men's dress shoes appear in my vision.

Rafe.

“You have to stop attacking people,” he chides his sister, as casually as if she's a toddler biting the other children on the playground. “Marcus!” he hollers.

One of the bodyguards from my earlier escort barges into the room, an uncapped syringe in his hand. Faye drops him to the ground with a well-timed sidestep and a kick to the back of his knees, then starts to beat the shit out of a guy three times her size. I watch from the floor, still high as fuck, as it takes four more bodyguards to rip Faye from Marcus and pin her to the ground. Rafe picks up the syringe Marcus dropped in the struggle and brandishes it like a knife above Faye.

“Don’t you fucking dare!” she screams at her brother.

Rafe slams the needle into her upper arm as Faye lunges for his neck like a freaking pitbull infected with rabies. He stays just out of her reach, letting the bodyguards do the heavy work of keeping her pinned as the fight slowly leaves her. Faye’s breathing becomes slower, and her expression softens, her jaw slackening, her mouth hanging open slightly as her head droops forward. Despite her almost-comatose state, she finds my gaze amongst the dwindling chaos and locks on me.

“You’ll never escape Javier. You’ll never escape your fate. He’ll use you up until everything good and pure is gone.”

I swallow. “Is that what he did to you?”

Faye groans out a pained laugh. “Do I look like I was ever good or pure?” she slurs.

Rafe steps in front of me, obscuring my view of Faye. “Come on,” he says, hauling me to my feet. “Let’s try this again.”

CHAPTER 18



Everything was moving so slowly, but now time is passing too fast. Like lightning. One moment I'm on the floor in Javier's office. Then, I blink, and hands push me onto the same stage where I watched the young girl screaming earlier.

I want to protest, but I can't. I can't protest because Javier is standing in the shadows beside the stage, gripping a bloodied, beaten Bryce in a headlock, a gun pressed up against his temple.

"Behave," Javier mouths. *Fuck. Fuck!*

A naked woman staggers past me as Marcus, one of the bodyguards from earlier, pushes me out on the stage. I fall to my knees and try to look past the bright lights that nearly blind me but fail. A male voice with a very slight accent, not unlike Javier's, echoes through the room as I push myself up and stand tall. Adrenaline guides me forward as somebody announces the bidding will commence momentarily. What will somebody pay for a poor girl from Santo Christo? Five thousand? Ten? That's not even a tenth of what I owe. It would take me a lifetime to pay my debt.

"Meet Mila."

That's not even my name. Through my drugged haze, it takes me a moment to click.

Mila. *Mia*. A deliberate twist of the knife by Javier, I'm sure.

“Still a teen. Barely legal, or is she? We’re not supposed to say, but folks, make sure you don’t get caught red-handed with this one. The complete package. Mila’s got everything to offer you. Even,” he pauses dramatically. “Her virginity. Completely untouched. Intact. Ready to be broken in. You can be her first everything. You know what they say about a *virgin*.”

I squint, trying to see beyond the blinding lights. Who is actually an audience to this fucked up auction? I can just make out a semi-circle of bidders seated in plush leather chairs, mostly suit-wearing businessmen with the occasional woman. There are far fewer people here than when the younger girl was auctioned off earlier. Is that because I’m more expensive?

I look forward, trying to ignore the way Javier described me as if I’m a piece of property he’s selling on the east side of town.

Check out all the amenities.

For some reason, the women in the audience enrage me the most. I’m all too familiar with evil men with horrific intentions. I don’t give a shit about equality when it comes to buying virgins to rape. These women should fucking know better.

The thought of my mother makes me even angrier. I’m here because of her, twice over.

A well-intentioned attempt to give her a final resting place delivered the shocking blow of inheriting her debt. Just another twist, forcing the knife in my heart even deeper.

“A hundred thousand,” a booming male voice states.

I scan the room, trying to find where the bid originated.

A hundred thousand dollars? My vision blurs, and I blink hard to hold back the tears. A hundred thousand would almost pay off my entire debt. And then I’d be free. For some reason, though, the thought of someone paying that much money makes me sick to my stomach.

I should feel hopeful that I won’t spend the rest of my life paying off my mother’s debts and that I might be free one day.

But I remember Faye's words: Javier will never let me go.

Now that I've gotten a glimpse of this world, I know it can't possibly be that easy to get out. But it doesn't stop me from hoping like a fool that a higher price might mean my ticket out of this place.

"One Thirty," another man says, pulling me away from my thoughts.

"One Sixty," a voice says from the back.

Marcus is behind me again, leaning in to whisper in my ear. "Turn around, show them the full package."

I glance over at Javier, who has tired of holding Bryce and is now holding a gun to the back of his head, as my beloved boyfriend kneels before him. Unshed tears gleam in Bryce's eyes.

I take a few steps forward and do as I'm told, slowly turning on the spot until I've completed a full three-sixty rotation. When I face forward again, my eyes adjust past the lights, and I'm better able to see the bidders looking at me like the finest cut of Wagyu steak. Every single one of them, men and women, are old enough to be my parent; some are even triple my age. They probably have partners and kids, but none of that matters here. Rules and integrity don't exist at sea. This is Javier's world, and we're forced to play by the laws of *his* kingdom.

"Two hundred thousand," a male voice says from the back of the room as heads turn. I search beyond the seated bidder's circle and see a set of broad shoulders forcing through Javier's bodyguards. A new bidder comes into view. My eyes go wide when I see the face of the voice and realize he's not much older than me. Maybe twenty? He looks like a fucking sculpture, cut like stone, as a black t-shirt and jeans hug his body like a second skin. His eyes focus on me, his jaw tight.

Business attire is optional, apparently.

I glance over at Javier, and an amused, albeit surprised, expression breaks out across his face.

“Well, folks,” the deep, silky voice over the speakers proclaims. “Bidding has now gone private. You know the drill. Those interested will need to wire one hundred thousand to certify and secure your claim. Bidding will resume in the crimson room in thirty minutes. *Serious inquiries only.*”

Javier’s eyes linger on the new mystery bidder while Rafe and Marcus grab one of my arms each and snatch me away.

“Who was that?” I ask. No answer.

We walk to the side of the stage and enter another area. This one is much smaller, more intimate. Even the ceiling is lower, the walls darker. Red couches line the perimeter along with mirrors. A round stage is the main focus in the center. Things seem more... *serious* in here, if that’s even possible. More grave. More hopeless.

Faye is draped across the couch closest to the round platform in the middle, almost like she’s waiting for me. I have zero clue how she’s suddenly conscious in the small amount of time that’s passed since she was held down and injected with some kind of sedative.

“Shouldn’t you be wearing a straitjacket or something?” I ask as we approach her. “Your drugs wear off already?”

Rafe and Marcus let go of me, and I massage my sore wrists. Faye’s pretty face twists into a grimace. “Never mind me. Seems *your* medicine has worn off, little Birdie.” She hands me a water bottle and produces a pill from somewhere. “Here. Take this. And drink. I heard you were thirsty.” She winks as I take the water I’m going to guzzle and the pill I’m going to hide somewhere.

I drink, dropping the pill down the front of my dress at the same time. I feel it settle between my breasts, snug between the silk and my warm skin. My hot skin, actually. I’m feverish in this place, like a lobster being lowered into a vat of boiling water. It must be the Ecstasy raising my body temp, even though the other, more addling effects seem to be wearing off.

I drain the water bottle and hand it back to Faye, who throws it to Marcus. “Oops,” Faye says. “Sweetie, you

dropped something. Here, let me.”

She slips her hand into my dress, between my breasts, fishing the pill out and lingering a few moments more, her fingers brushing against my nipples in a totally unnecessary way. I want to slap her, but I’m already desensitized to being sexually assaulted after all the ways Javier has touched me, inside and out. A little graze against my tits is nothing compared to being held down and having my nether regions shaved with a Sweeney fucking Todd-style razor blade.

Plus, I hate her. I don’t want to show her that her touch affects me in any way.

Faye seems to take my silent stare as an open challenge. She squeezes one nipple to form a hard peak, then the other, before slowly sliding her hand up my chest, the pill I hid now nestled in her palm.

“You’re not going to take your medicine for Mommy?” she purrs.

Christ, she’s just like Javier, down to the way she moves and sounds like a goddamn panther stalking prey through the jungle.

“My mother is dead,” I say through gritted teeth. “And I’m not taking any more *medicine*.”

Faye tips her head back and laughs, pocketing the tablet. “Oh, Birdie. You think I’d just give you a pill and expect you’d take it willingly? You silly *baby*.”

My resolve weakens as I catch up. *Fuck*. “The water,” I guess.

“Mmhmm. Tasteless, odorless, special medicine for baby birds like you. Daddy *insisted*. Personally, I prefer when the girls are screaming and naked in their cages. But,” she shrugs, glancing sharply at her brother, who is standing silent by my side. “*You* must be a very special baby bird.”

She puts her thumb against my lips, cupping my chin in her cold palm. “So I gave you my most special medicine.”

Oof. Something about the way she says that makes my skin fucking crawl.

Rafe suddenly steps forward. “What do you mean?” he asks, and there’s an edge of panic in his voice. “Faye. What’d you give her?”

“Maybe you should make yourself throw up,” Marcus says to me.

“Wait,” Rafe cuts in. “Faye? Did you poison Birdie’s water?”

Wouldn’t that be fucking ironic?

I’m here to sell myself, but instead, I’m probably going to die from an overdose in front of the assholes bidding for my untouched pussy.

Maybe I *should* make myself throw up.

“I’m getting the fucking ipecac,” Marcus says. “Fuck, Faye!” He rushes off somewhere to find a first aid kit, I guess. I contemplate my mortality as I watch Rafe and Faye duke it out before me. All families are dysfunctional in their own way, a school guidance counselor once told me. I’m not sure she’d call this dysfunctional so much as completely psychotic. They’re like a family of vampires baying for blood.

“Faye!” Rafe grabs his sister by the throat and marches forward until the back of her head *whacks* heavily against glass.

Against the glass box I didn’t notice before, in the middle of the stage, suspended from the ceiling. Now I understand what she meant by cage. Now I understand where I’m going to be when the bidding recommences.

Fuuuck.

“No,” I whisper, taking a step backward. I don’t like small spaces, not ones that can trap me. If I thought being paraded on stage was bad, this is a fucking nightmare beyond belief.

Will I even be able to breathe?

The thought of being trapped in there, suspended midair, while strangers circle me like sharks vying for their next pound of flesh... it makes me want to scream.

“What did you give her!?” Rafe growls, throttling Faye hard enough to leave marks. Hard enough to make her choke. He loosens his grip when she starts to answer.

“Relax,” she rasps. “I gave her a vial of E. Father’s orders.”

Rafe glances at me, then back to Faye. “Swear.”

Faye nods. “Cross my heart and *hope to die.*”

“Swear on his grave.”

Faye’s smile vanishes. Faye vanishes, replaced by a younger, sadder version of herself. “I hate you,” she says mournfully. “I’ll *kill* you.”

“Swear on his fucking grave.”

Her expression is dead. “I swear on his fucking grave,” she whispers.

Rafe releases her, smoothing down his tie, and adjusts his suit jacket as he cracks his neck. His cheeks are flushed. He’s embarrassed, I realize. By whatever just happened between them.

Marcus appears beside me, an uncapped bottle of ipecac in his hand. He’s breathing heavily like he just ran as fast as he could to get this vile shit that might save my life if I were poisoned.

He holds it out to me, and I look at Rafe. Why I’m putting my life in the hands of Javier’s son, I’m not sure. He shakes his head. “She’s fine. No poison.”

“Not this time,” Faye coos. Her mask has returned. Apparently, whatever traumatic grave she’s just sworn truth upon is forgotten for now.

“Jesus, you can’t help yourself, can you?” Rafe mutters.

She shakes her head. “Nope.” Her sly grin returns as she watches me sizing up the box. “Think of it like an aquarium.

Everybody wants to see the pretty little fish.”

I shudder inwardly at the sudden image that flashes in my mind, a girl locked in a glass box full of water. Especially a girl who has nightmares of drowning. Of course, I know they won't fill it to the top—why would they?—but the description creeps me out.

“Rafe, you've got such a hard-on for this one; why don't you get her undressed?” Her eyes narrow as she talks to her brother.

“I'm not getting undressed,” I protest, stepping back, colliding with Marcus's broad chest as he moves in behind me, gently taking my wrists in his hands to stop my umpteenth escape attempt.

“Would you buy a car without test-driving it? *No*. You wouldn't,” she says.

“Wouldn't a test-drive require having sex?” I ask before I can stop myself. My knees feel... weird. Oh no. This is the next hit of ecstasy slamming into me. I sag back until Marcus shifts his hold to support my weight.

“Sorry, baby,” Faye shrugs. “You have no choice. If you struggle in front of the bidders, you'll embarrass Javier. You don't want to know what happened to the last woman who defied him publicly. The amount of money you'd make him doesn't and wouldn't matter once he's lost in his madness. In his rage. I love it when daddy gets mad, though.”

I think of the story Javier told me while he was defiling me in the ship's first-aid room. What he wished he could do to me.

“The things I would do to you under different circumstances. I'd make you sit on my cock in front of an audience, legs spread, so they could watch me break this little pussy until it bled. I'd make you come so hard around my cock. You'd cry for mercy and be begging me to fuck you harder at the same time. I'd cum inside your broken cunt, and then I'd hold you down while other men lined up and took their turn fucking your cum-filled holes.”

I have no doubt that my punishment would go something like that. Public humiliation and being raped raw. It could always be worse, I think to myself. Just when I'm positive I've hit rock bottom, a new hell unveils itself underneath my feet.

My hand begins to shake. Rafe goes to the bar and pours two shots of vodka, then hands me one. "Take this."

"None for me?" Faye teases.

"Shut the fuck up," Rafe growls at her.

I look down at the shot glass in my hand. Screw it.

Whatever Faye gave me ain't kicking in fast enough. After I shoot it down, he hands me the other, and I take that one, too. Considering my stomach is pretty much empty, the alcohol burns through me, swiftly taking over.

It doesn't take long for me to feel it.

Marcus unzips my dress before I can even protest, tugging the straps over my shoulders with a speed that suggests he does this on the regular. The dress slides effortlessly over my skin—maybe why they chose silk—and stops at my hips, leaving my top half naked. As I'm grabbing for the material, Marcus rips my arms behind my back, and Faye takes great delight in sliding it over my hips and down my thighs, letting it pool on the ground around my shoes. Now I'm wearing just a pair of flimsy white lace panties that are so thin they leave absolutely nothing to the imagination. And the tie still knotted around my throat. Faye nods her approval, removing the red silk from my neck and wrapping it around my wrist instead, finishing it off with an obscene bow. I'm somebody's very expensive gift, or I will be very soon.

Three knocks ring out on the other side of the entrance to the Crimson room, and Faye motions for Marcus to drag me to the box. To make sure I'm ready for when the bidders enter.

"Please," I beg, tears filling my eyes even as the fight is draining from me, thanks to that fucking drug. "Please don't make me do this."

Faye smiles, unzipping her own dress and letting it fall to the floor, revealing her almost nude form, the only piece of

clothing remaining on her flawless body a black lace thong. She takes my hand, leading me up the perspex stairs into the glass box of nightmares.

She sits on a small clear bench in the middle of the coffin-sized tank, spreading her legs wide and patting the spot in front of her. “Come and sit on Mommy’s lap,” she says. “You didn’t think we’d make you do this all by yourself, did you?”

I don’t want to be trapped in a box with crazy Faye. *What is she going to do to me?*

Before I can protest, Marcus practically shoves me into the box, the door slamming shut behind me. I hear the sickening slide of a lock and look down to see Rafe has imprisoned me with his insane sister.

His eyes are full of something—apology, maybe? Regret?

I don’t know. I’ll never know. I’m made of gelatin, and I can’t fight her grip as Faye pulls me down to sit in the space between her thighs. My back leans against her breasts as her long hair tickles my shoulders. I’m frozen in place as she wrenches my thighs apart, as wide as they’ll go, and slips her fingers into my panties, dipping one finger inside me.

“You’re dripping,” she whispers in my ear, trailing her wet finger from my pussy up to my clit, pressing firm circles that make me jerk in her terrifying grip. My hips hurt, and I’m burning up, a drugged fever that grows hotter and hotter with each passing second, and *I can’t move*.

“Shhh,” she soothes, kissing a trail up my neck. “It’s okay, baby bird. Don’t be scared. It’s time to fly.”

...and I wish I could.

CHAPTER 19



She's beautiful.

That's the first thing I notice about the girl trapped in the glass box suspended from the ceiling in the middle of the bidding room aboard *The Riverwood*. I'm not exactly dressed for the occasion, but not to worry—the girl I'm bidding on is barely dressed at all. She's wearing nothing other than a pair of lace panties so tiny and so completely see-through that I can see the glistening wetness of her slit from across the room as Faye sits behind her, rubbing her little swollen clit. It's vulgar, the way her legs are forced open, the way she writhes under Faye's fingers. I'm grateful that I made a quick pit stop at Lindsey's house before I left the Island this morning. If I hadn't laid her on her bed, hung her head off the edge, and used her throat as my own personal fuck hole, I'd probably have cum seeping through my jeans right now at the sight of the girl onstage being pleased so cruelly. Faye catches my eye and holds my gaze as Birdie Moore's hips rise involuntarily, seeking the very pleasure she's wanting to run from.

“Cigar? Champagne?”

A man appears at my left, a case of cigars and a tray of champagne glasses in the hands of a young waitress beside him. I recognize this man, even in the dim light of the room.

Pedro Marin. Javier's younger brother. Head of the Marin cartel. A trader in just about every pleasure you can dream up, especially ones that involve the flesh.

I wonder if he has something to do with Davina's disappearance. If he was one of the men wearing a Halloween mask while he raped my sister in the sex club just down the hall from this very room.

"Mr. Marin," I nod, shaking his hand. "Darius Prince. My father spoke highly of you."

A dark eyebrow raises, and Pedro erupts into laughter. "He spoke highly of me? Mr. Prince, I think you're telling tall stories."

I join the laughter, though I'm feeling anything but amused. Inside, the fear this will all be for nothing is like a blade in my gut, slicing me to ribbons. I have to find her. I have to find Davina.

"Seems the apple didn't fall far from the tree," Pedro muses, gesturing to the glass cage with his cigar. "Your father, he was a smart businessman. Spent plenty of time on the other side of this boat. Liked to bet big on the blackjack tables. But he always knew when to fold." He bites the cigar between his teeth and thumps me on the back as I swallow the desire to rip his fucking face off. "You and your lovely sister, though. Not gamblers so much as voyeurs. What was her name again?"

"Davina," I grind out, clenching my fists, so I don't fucking punch him.

Da-vi-na," he enunciates each syllable. "Such a shame... what happened to her. So young. What a waste."

Somehow, I think the waste he's referring to isn't the same as the one I'd highlight. Especially when he abruptly changes the subject, pointing the end of his cigar at the naked, clearly drugged girl being finger-fucked onstage.

"Wow, that's a pretty pussy, isn't it? I bet it even looks good torn and bloody. Better, even. Girls like that," he points at Birdie, "they need to be stuffed with cock until they're obedient. Some of them take a while to break, but others? You'd be surprised how quickly they roll over and spread those ass cheeks for you." He winks, jostling my shoulder with his. I maintain my neutral gaze as I steal a glance at him.

“Well?” he says, gesturing to the stage. “Don’t be shy. That’s what the glass is for. To get a look up close, without the temptation of touch. You don’t bid big on a girl like that and then hang back in the dark, my friend.”

I nod my thanks to Pedro, who is one thousand percent not my friend, and move closer to the stage, to the glass box, to the girl trapped inside. I look at Faye. She’s got a lollipop sticking out of her mouth now. Want to bet it’s cherry flavor?

Just for me—I know she does it for me—Faye pulls the lollipop from her mouth with a pop, as if she’s releasing a cock after sucking it dry. I grit my teeth as I watch her trail the sticky lollipop down Birdie’s collarbone, over her nipple, down past her navel... and into her bare pussy. *Better be careful, I think. Don’t want to pop that cherry with your cherry-flavored lollipop, especially not before it’s been bought and paid for.* The girl who was auctioned before Birdie was young as fuck, maybe fourteen, and she went for pennies since she wasn’t a virgin.

Suddenly, I wonder if a million dollars—my entire trust fund and Davina’s—will be enough to buy a virgin from Santo Christo. I have access to plenty more. A million is a drop in the bucket. But the rest isn’t easily accessible until I’m twenty-five, according to the conditions in my father’s iron-clad will. There are always ways around things, loopholes and such, but none of those loopholes are going to be possible to exploit now, tonight, especially from this boat.

I shake my head as I watch Faye fuck the lollipop in and out of Birdie’s drenched pussy lips before returning it to her mouth, sucking on it with a knowing smirk.

For me. *Of course.* Fucking Faye. I watch, feigning boredom, as Faye brings Birdie to the brink of an orgasm, only to pull her fingers away at the last moment. She’s edging her, driving her mad, getting her close to coming, and then denying her the pleasure of climaxing. Bitch.

“Don’t you go to school with my son?” A voice sounds beside me. I turn my head to see my family’s contract attorney,

a beady-eyed little pedo called Roger Dunkirk, as he tries to adjust his dress pants to hide the raging hard-on he's got.

"I go to school with your daughter, actually," I reply smoothly. Valmont Academy isn't a school, per se, and I'm college-age, but *tomayto, tomahto*. "I was her mentor last semester. How is Veronica? Isn't she about sixteen?" I point to the glass cage, to the teenage flesh being desecrated just centimeters from us. "She kind of looks like her, don't you think? Crazy."

Roger stares slack-jawed at me, shuffling off. Guess he won't be bidding tonight.

Good. One less competitor, though I highly doubt Roger was any real threat. It doesn't end there, though. Another guy approaches, presumably to look at the pussy he wants to buy up close, but he does a double-take when he recognizes me. *Jesus Christ.* Is there anyone not from the Island here tonight?

"Daniel," I greet my mother's middle-aged gynecologist. "This must be like a day at the office for you." He pales about seven shades when I say his name, and that's saying something for a man who already needs SPF 50 to walk from his front door to his car without turning beet red.

"You're lucky I don't tell your mother you're here," he says.

I can't help but laugh. "You're lucky I don't tell your wife, *Daniel.*"

"Mr. Prince," a voice cuts through the noise and the cigar smoke. Javier Marin approaches me on the opposite side, and I forget all about Daniel, the gynecologist, instead turning to face the man who I'm ninety-nine percent sure is fucking his own daughter on the reg.

"Mr. Marin," I nod my head, reaching my hand out to grasp his. He shakes it vigorously, holding on just a little too long.

"Mr. Prince, I understand this is your first time at one of our esteemed auctions." Esteemed? *Excuse the fuck outta me, but I don't think that word means what you think it means, you*

criminal motherfucker. Daughter fucker, technically. “Scaring off the other bidders isn’t generally looked upon favorably,” he continues smoothly. “I would hate for you to slip and fall from my boat for meddling in my business. The sharks are always hungriest at this time of night.” He gives me a curious look, a mixture of pity and understanding. “These old men with their small cocks and their embezzled bank accounts, they’re not going to outbid you anyway. Not if you really want her. Understood?”

I nod. “Understood.”

I really want her. Just not for the reason you think.

In the end, there are eight bidders. That both blows my mind and doesn’t surprise me. Eight men—actually, one is a woman, so seven men— vying to buy a teenage virgin to take home and make bleed.

My heart squeezes painfully in my chest as I wonder if my sister ended up in a glass cage on a stage like this. She definitely wasn’t a virgin, based on that tape Rafe showed me, but she was—she is—the daughter of one of the most powerful families in America. Would someone buy her just to squirrel her away? I can’t think about that now. I have to focus. Poor Birdie Moore is still orgasmless and panting in the glass box. I can’t see any ventilation holes—I wonder how long one can breathe in there. I guess it depends on how fast you’re burning up the oxygen. Faye is an expert at this, though. She stops messing around with edging and lollipops as the bids sound out. Birdie’s pussy is dripping wet now, the evidence of her arousal painting her thighs and puddling on the clear perspex bench she’s sitting on. Poor girl.

I bet if I put my tongue on her clit and licked, she’d come instantly. And that’s not me big-noting her skills. That’s me being impressed at just how painfully close Faye can get her without actually letting her orgasm.

The bids have been getting progressively higher this entire time, and I’ve stayed silent. Waiting for the pause that means others are out of the running. No point in driving up the price

by being overeager and joining in with the window shoppers who only bid small and early for kicks.

When the bid is at one-eighty, there's a lull. My gut says this is my chance. I lift the paddle in my hand leisurely. "Two hundred and ten," I bid. A wave of chatter rolls through the rest of the bidders. It's the first time I've spoken in this bidding room, and it's almost as if the rest of these fuckers assumed I was outbid or something.

"Do we have two twenty?" Pedro's smooth, baritone voice asks the small crowd. More hushed chatter, but no paddles rise in the air.

"Two hundred and ten thousand. Going once..."

The rest of the bidders are distracted, but not me. I look at Faye, who holds my gaze as her fingers work Birdie's clit faster.

"Going twice..."

Birdie starts to arch back into Faye, whose gaze is still locked on mine.

"Going three times..."

Birdie draws in a shocked breath, her entire body shaking violently.

"Sold!" The auctioneer declares. Birdie cries out as she finally gets to come, her thighs spreading even wider as Faye rubs her clit to completion.

My dick twitches in my pants despite the fucked up situation. Watching the girl I now own have an earth-shattering orgasm in front of an entire room full of people is cruel; it's depraved, but it's fucking hot at the same time. She slumps back against Faye, panting and exhausted, not even seeming to notice as Faye runs her fingers along Birdie's drenched cunt and then sucks her fingers hungrily. While still maintaining eye contact with me. Demonic fucking bitch.

I win the auction. Of course I fucking do. I wasn't going to walk away with anything less than the girl who was the closest thing to finding my sister that I'd had in months.

Two hundred and ten thousand dollars and a few drops of my blood to sign the contract, then Birdie Moore is officially mine.

Faye takes great pleasure in drawing an ornate dagger across my palm, watching bright red blood spring up along my wound as she dips a quill tip in, my blood now the ink that will seal this purchase. It's a small miracle, actually, that the family lawyer is here—Roger is only too happy to take a look over Javier Marin's contract and act as my witness before I sign on the dotted line. For a fee, of course. Ten grand for ten minutes of work. He doesn't even have to sign in blood! That lucky fuck gets to use an inkpad and his fingerprint beside his name as proof of witnessing my document. Now I understand why he hangs around these auctions. It's not to buy girls. It's to get business. Clever guy. I file that information away for future use. If this guy hangs around as often as I think, he might be another lead for information on Davina.

After the contract is signed and Faye has bandaged me, Javier Marin shakes my hand, then offers me a small key. "For her bracelet," he says. "Don't lose it. There's no locksmith to cut you a new one." He laughs, and I pocket the key, making a mental note to find a safe spot to hide it. I don't need anyone stumbling across it, that's for sure. I won't be hiding it underneath a dollhouse, that's for damn sure.

"Get comfortable in your room, Mr. Prince," Javier says. "Faye will bring your purchase to you now. You'll need to stay on the boat until bidding has concluded in a few hours. Until then, feel free to avail yourself of anything we have to offer... the minibar in your room is generous and on the house."

For two hundred and ten thousand? I should fucking hope so.

"Especially," he leans closer, "to loosen the little lady up. Nothing to say you can't use your purchase right now."

"I think the drugs have her pretty loose already," I reply. "But thank you."

The room is... cozy. Not really what I'd expect for the obscene amount of money I've just spent, but I guess it's not really the room I was buying, is it? It's the girl.

The girl who, right now, is tossed over Rafe's shoulder as he enters. He drops her onto the bed, and she barely rouses. Fuck. Whatever they gave her must have been strong.

At least somebody's had the decency to wrap a robe around her.

"Thanks," I say. "How does this work? Do I tip you?"

Rafe looks like he wants to punch my fucking lights out, his balled fist twitching by his side. "Uh-uh," I chide, wagging my finger. "No fighting in front of my new girlfriend."

"What the fuck are you doing buying her?" Rafe demands.

"Would you prefer it if one of those old fucks out there acquired her instead?" I challenge. "You think they'd treat her better than me?"

Rafe's jaw clenches; he clearly doesn't have an answer to that.

"Are you taking her back to the Island?"

"No, I thought I'd leave her in that trailer park. Of course I'm taking her to the island."

Rafe scrubs his hand over his face, clearly agitated.

"This is your fault, you know," I continue. "You set me on this course."

"I thought you'd speak to her mother!" Rafe insists. "I didn't exactly bank on Mia OD'ing and her daughter having to make a deal with Javier to pay for her mother's fucking funeral."

That slams into me like a gut punch. "What did you say?"

"She came to my father for a loan. Five thousand dollars." Rafe shakes his head, glancing at the unconscious girl on the bed. "If I'd known, I would have given her the money myself. And avoided this."

Five thousand dollars. I've spent more on a night out. On a pair of custom motorcycle boots. On a tailored suit. And this girl sold her virginity for five thousand dollars, so she could pay for her dead mother's funeral. She probably felt like she was selling her soul when she signed that contract. Javier would have smelled the desperation on her and pounced.

"Yeah," Rafe adds, seeing my reaction. "The girl came here wanting a loan and ended up selling her fucking soul instead."

"I didn't buy her soul," I protest.

"Yeah, well, Javier will find a way to get it, anyway. He always does. Always has."

"Like he got yours?" I ask.

He doesn't answer.

"Bye, then," I say impatiently. "You don't have to babysit her. Or do you come as part of the deal? I could use a little errand boy."

A cracking pain radiates through the top of my skull, and a moment later, I feel warm blood ooze from the spot where Rafe's just smashed something blunt and heavy against my head. "What the fuck was that for?" I swear, stepping back as I touch my fingertips to the split flesh at my scalp. He's holding a gun in his hand. He was so fast I didn't even see him whip it out. *That's what she said.*

"Don't make me regret bringing you this information," Rafe says tightly, gesturing to Birdie with the gun. "You're in my house right now, and outside of your little island, you're nothing. Nobody. I could shoot you and toss you in the fucking ocean, and the sharks would have you in seconds. We run bait lines off the back deck every single night of operation, Darius. Blood and fish guts all over the fucking ocean, and the sharks know the sound of our engines. Sometimes we feed them fish. And sometimes we feed them other things. Don't think you're too good to be one of those other things."

I hold my hands up in a gesture of capitulation. "I wouldn't dream of it."

“Don’t hurt her,” Rafe says, moving his suit jacket as if he’s wearing a cape, shoving his gun into the waistband against the small of his back before shrugging the jacket back into place. “Don’t fuck her. Just let her get over what just happened.”

Frowning, I watch Rafe stalk to the door. “Are you this protective of all the girls your father auctions off?”

He slams the door as he leaves my question unanswered.

And then it’s just the teenage girl I’ve purchased and me.

Fuck.

I stare down at her, wondering what the fuck I’ve just done. She looks so peaceful, passed out on top of the duvet. A chill runs down my spine as I imagine what would have happened to her if another man had purchased her. He’d probably have her legs spread and be balls deep by now. *Jesus Christ.*

I look at the minibar. Probably not a good idea to start drinking now. My skull already feels like it’s about to split in half. Rubbing my temple, I glance around the room, looking for something—anything—that will pass the time until The Riverwood docks and I can get the hell out of dodge. How the fuck am I going to explain the girl? I’ve been thinking about how to get her on the island ever since I learned of this auction. There’s no way I’ll be able to keep her a secret for more than a few weeks. At most.

It’s bright. Too bright. I spy a dimmer knob beside the light switch and turn it down so the room is bathed in an eerie glow instead of a fluorescent nightmare. Sitting down on the end of the bed, I wait.

A warm hand on mine snaps me out of my thoughts. I draw back, turning sharply to the girl who was unconscious a second ago. She’s blinking heavily, propped up on an elbow, her eyes slowly adjusting to the darkened room.

“Bryce?” she murmurs.

Sorry, can’t help you there, sweetheart. I don’t know what to say, so I say nothing.

Wrong choice. She takes my silence as confirmation—she must, because she’s sitting all the way up now, pressing into my side, her hand cupping my chin. “Bryce,” she says, a wonderment in her voice that, for some reason, stabs achingly at my blackened heart.

“Bryce isn’t here,” I say, gently peeling her hand from my chin and setting it on her lap. The silk robe Rafe dressed her in has fallen open, her tits and stomach on display. It’s dark, but it’s not that dark. She’s still wearing the tiny pair of white lace panties that hid nothing from view in that glass box.

She leans into me. She smells like a cherry lollipop. Jesus. The memory of her face as Faye defiled her virgin pussy flashes in my mind, and I push it away. Don’t think about that. She obviously didn’t hear me because she leans her full weight into me, tipping her face back, planting a tender kiss on my mouth before I can jerk my head away. She tastes like the clean burn of vodka and the sweet sugar of cherry-flavored candy.

“Bryce,” she whispers against my lips. “I’m so sorry. It got away from me. It all just got away from me.”

Fuck. She clearly has no idea what’s going on. She’s going to be in for a real shock when she wakes up in my bed tomorrow morning. I’m a fucking asshole, but her thinking I’m her boyfriend isn’t sitting too well. Especially when she suddenly shrugs out of the robe, letting it fall to the bed around her hips. She’s fucking perfect, even in the dark. Alabaster skin. A button nose that slopes at just the right angle. Lips that form a perfect rosebud when pressed together, thinner than all the botox-addicted bitches back home would tolerate, but better. Real. This girl is real, not some plastic-filled barbie doll that looks like all the rest of the barbie dolls. Perfect tits, nipples pebbled hard against the cool air circulating through the room. Dark, straight hair, fine like strands of silk that end in a blunt cut halfway down her back. And even though I can barely make out the color in this light, I already know her eyes. Big, wide, almost anime-like—the same eyes her mother had. Dark blue, like the waters that surround Valmont Island. Like the water that surrounds us now, here, on this ship.

“I’m not Bryce,” I mutter against her mouth. Her hands have found their way to my shirt hem, and she’s pulling at it insistently. I grab her wrists, yanking them down by her sides as I pull my face away.

“Birdie,” I say louder this time. “I’m not Bryce.”

She seems to finally hear me. Horror blooms upon her pretty face, a slow, painful remembering of where she is, of what this is. She recoils from me, her movements still clumsy. I reach across to steady her just as she stands up, rising so fast our skulls almost collide, like two clumsy toddlers reaching for a toy at the same time. She stumbles on those stupid fucking high heels, falling back...

And I catch her in my arms. A moment of clarity seems to break through her drugged inertia as she stares at me, eyes wide, breath quickening. I can see her heartbeat in her throat, as fast as the frantic flap of hummingbird wings. She’s terrified. She knows.

“Let me go,” she spits, fighting my grasp. I’ve got a good sixty pounds on her slight frame, maybe more, and a foot in height. She’s got the spirit of a warrior, though, and she’s slippery like an eel. I struggle to keep my grip on her, and I have to say, that surprises me. She tries to knee me in the dick and misses, her kneecap hitting my thigh instead. She’s panicking, like a captured animal. Like a bird beating its wings hopelessly against the bars of a locked cage.

“Stop,” I say firmly, squeezing my arms around her in a bear hug grip. “Hey. Calm down, and I’ll let go. I’m not going to hurt you.”

She doesn’t listen to a fucking word I say. I hold on, waiting for her to tire, waiting for her to be still so I can peel her off me and not have to feel her nipples rubbing up against my shirt or feel the sticky trail of cherry lollipop at the spot when my hand grazes her neck. She struggles longer than I would have thought, but eventually, she runs out of steam. Sagging in my arms, she makes a gagging sound. Great. The last thing I need is vomit on my shoes.

“Come on, let’s get you some air,” I steer her to the door, yanking it open and half-carrying her down the hallway to a set of double doors. I already know they lead out to a small viewing deck at the rear of the ship, and mercifully, nobody else seems to be out here.

I bust the door open with my shoulder, pulling my purchase alongside. There’s a bench that runs the length of the small deck, and I guide Birdie over, sitting her down. Once the cold night air hits her, she starts to shiver. No wonder. A thin satin robe and a soaked pair of panties don’t exactly scream warmth. Questioning my sanity, I shrug my jacket off and drape it around her shoulders. She looks up at me, and for a moment, I think she’s going to thank me.

What does she do instead? She rips the jacket from her shoulders and tosses it to the ground.

I pick it up leisurely and put it back on. No sense in both of us being cold. If she’s going to be stubborn, that’s her fucking problem. I can be a gentleman, or I can be a savage. I guess she’s—albeit unwittingly—made her choice.

“How old are you?” she snaps.

“What’s it to you?” I challenge her.

“I’m not sixteen, you know,” she huffs. “I’m eighteen. Still want me?”

I frown, taking a seat on the bench beside her. “Yes,” I reply.

If she’s telling the truth, and I believe she is, then this is a huge relief. If she’s eighteen, she’s legally an adult—and that makes things a lot less dicey for me. I wasn’t looking forward to explaining the presence of an unwilling minor in my island mansion when the Empyrean Table came sniffing around.

Maybe I won’t have to hide her at all. Maybe, if she’s actually eighteen, I can flaunt her out in the open. Wouldn’t that be something?

She shoots daggers at me, opening her mouth to no doubt fire off some angry monologue, but she’s stopped, slack-

jawed, by the sudden jolt of the doors bursting open and a girl running onto the deck.

My stomach twists uneasily. It's the girl who was auctioned before Birdie. The girl who can't be a day over fifteen, and I'm being generous with my estimations there. She's wearing an oversized white dress shirt, unbuttoned, and she's wielding a broken vodka bottle, its jagged edges glinting with freshly spilled blood. Oh, boy. This can't be good.

I stand instinctively, positioning myself in front of Birdie without blocking her completely. I can already tell she's the kind of girl who would be offended by me trying to defend her against a crazed attacker, even if said crazy is barely five feet and clearly weak. Even if said crazy attacker isn't interested in Birdie at all. The venom in this girl's eyes is reserved for me, and I don't blame her. She thinks I'm the same as all the other sick fucks who bid on women and girls. Maybe I am. Maybe I'm *worse*.

"Hey," I say, slowly taking my hands out of my pockets so she can see they're empty. "You alright?"

Her hand shakes violently as she jabs the broken bottle in my direction. "Don't fucking come near me," she spits, glancing behind her as she backs up to the edge of the deck. She peers over the side. The drop-down to the turgid ocean is high, and I remember what Rafe said about the bait lines.

"You don't want to jump," I tell her, taking a step toward her. "Trust me."

"Trust you!?" she shrieks, an anguished sob escaping her throat. "I should slit your throat, you sick fuck!"

"Sharks," I clarify, pointing past her, to the choppy water below. "There are sharks. More than normal. Please. You don't want to jump. You don't want to end up in that water."

"Sharks, men," she says bitterly. "There's no difference. At least the sharks kill you fast."

I feel a hand on my arm. Birdie. She's beside me now, pushing me back, reaching her hand out to the girl. I watch closely, my eyes darting back and forth, knowing I'll snap the

younger girl's neck if she so much as waves that broken bottle in Birdie's direction. I've already had one promising lead turn up dead in a fucking morgue. I'm not about to let the last remaining person who could lead me to Davina perish, as well.

Birdie inches closer, her hand outstretched. The girl's bravado slips, and she looks so young at that moment. A cornered child. It's a full moon tonight, and as the girl shifts on trembling legs, her shirt opens. She's nude under the shirt. She's been shaved, just like all of the girls who were sold tonight. But there's a silvery scar along her lower stomach, a raised line that's been cut between her hips and sewn up again. I know what that scar means.

This girl, this child... she's a mother. Or was. She's so frightened, but something about Birdie must calm her because her face softens, and her shoulders drop a little. With her free hand—the hand that isn't holding the jagged glass bottle—the girl reaches tentatively, too.

Birdie takes the girl's hand in both of hers and squeezes gently, something passing between them that I'm not privy to. I can't see Birdie's face from here, only the back of her head, but I can see the girl begin to calm down.

But peace is shattered when the doors push open again.

At first, there's just an arm visible. A ruby red ring gleams on the hand that holds the door ajar, and then the villain of the hour steps onto the deck, just in time for the young girl to yank Birdie's hand, twisting her, positioning her like a human shield, with the broken bottle at Birdie's delicate neck.

"Hayley," Javier says. "Put the bottle down."

"Fuck you!" she screams. "I hate you!"

A deafening shot rings out across the endless night, a bullet whizzing past my fucking ear as it makes purchase with its target, hitting the girl's hand. She yelps in shock, the bottle dropping from her bloody hand, now missing at least two fingers, maybe more. Her hands are small, but fuck—it'd still take a decent fucking bullet to cause that damage. Birdie drops low and crawls away, her hands meeting with broken shards of

glass from the exploded bottle. Her desire to survive overrides the pain of the glass, and I wince as I see her bloody handprints mark her path away from the crazy girl.

I swerve away from the bullet's path on instinct, even though it's long gone, turning to see where it came from. At the same time, I'm backing toward Birdie, my arms out as if I can shield her from danger.

Pedro Marin steps out of the shadows flanking the deck, a desert eagle in his left hand, and I wonder when the fuck he got out here. Has he been there the whole time? Guy's a damn chameleon, blending into walls and shit. He smiles indulgently at the young girl Javier called Hayley as she stares sullenly back at him.

"Come, now, baby girl," he says softly, almost as if he's amused by her violence. "Think of our son. You're being a bit silly, don't you think?"

Our son. Fuck. If she's this young now, how much younger was she when she had a baby? When he put that baby inside her?

"You said I wouldn't have to do it again," she weeps, hoisting her slight frame up onto the railing of the deck.

"Hayley. Don't make a liar out of me. I said no such thing."

He's getting closer to her, and she's teetering dangerously on the side of the railing. I feel hands at my waist. Shocked, I realize Birdie is hugging herself into my back, peering at the unfolding scene from behind the safety I afford her.

"Come," Pedro says. "Get down from there."

"Fuck you!" she spits. "You're a liar. You're a monster. You will never let me have my son, no matter how many times I do this. "

"Shhh," Pedro soothes her, reaching his hand out and pressing it against her flat belly. "Come on. Come down from there. I'll give you another baby. A girl, this time."

Her eyes go wide in disbelief. “No. I want my son. Give me back my son. You’re never gonna let me have him, are you?”

Pedro sighs. “Come down right now. You won’t jump.”

She doesn’t jump. She just pushes off Pedro’s broad shoulders with her bloody hands, and she’s gone. Birdie screams as Hayley disappears over the edge of the railing, rushing to the side of the boat to peer over. I follow, making sure to keep myself between her and the Marin brothers as we both look down. It’s dark, but not so dark that the lights along the side of the super yacht can’t illuminate Hayley being tossed around in the waves. The white shirt spreads out behind her like a pair of angel wings, and then the frenzy begins.

Rafe wasn’t lying.

The sharks are hungry tonight.

CHAPTER 20



She jumped. Oh, God.

When the girl's body hits the water, I expect a loud splash, but we're so high up I barely hear a thing. I grip the handrail tightly, wincing as pain rips through my hands. I look down at my palms, shards of glass embedded in my skin. The tiny pieces of broken bottle sparkle in the moonlight. Fuck, it hurts. But I can't think about that right now.

"Someone help her," I yell frantically, the thick salt air making me nauseous. I can taste it in my mouth, smell it in my nostrils, and I just want to get off this fucking boat. But not as desperately as Hayley wanted off.

I look over at Javier, shell-shocked, as he laughs. My desperation to save Hayley amuses him. My *pain* amuses him.

"*Someone help her,*" he mocks, and then he turns off the sarcasm as fast as he turned it on. "She got exactly what she deserved. Crazy bitch."

Hayley's screams echo off the side of the ship. The lights on the side of the boat barely illuminate her. I think I see blood against the murky black water. I'm not sure. It's my imagination. Hell, maybe I'm still tripping from whatever Faye gave me.

"But," Javier continues, grabbing my attention because my thoughts are everywhere and nowhere all at once, "at least she was entertaining."

"Until the very end," Pedro adds.

“You sure know how to pick them, little brother. Maybe one day you’ll learn.”

Pedro grins. “Maybe I chose her because she’s a crazy bitch.” He peers off the side of the ship. “*Was* a crazy bitch.”

There are no more screams.

Javier begins to clap loudly. The sound startles me, making me want to crawl out of my skin. I turn to flee back into the boat, to try and find a way out of this labyrinth of doom, but before I get a single step, the guy who led me out here is reaching out and grabbing my arm tightly.

“You’re hurt,” he whispers.

“Somebody has to help her,” I whisper.

The guy shakes his head, glancing at Javier, and then back to me. “It’s too late. Come on.” He leads me away, his tone gentle, but his grip tells me I don’t have a choice. I want to save her, do something, anything, but I also know I’d die trying. I’d sink to the bottom of the ocean, and no one would search for me in the same way they won’t search for her.

The urge to fight bleeds from me as he leads me to an elevator. I gasp for air, clutching at my chest, an overwhelming anxiety taking root inside my rib cage. Its poisonous tendrils find their way around my heart, snaking down into my lungs until I’m choking for a single breath. The elevator doors close, and my new captor leans me against the elevator’s steel wall, holding me, so I don’t slide to the floor.

“You have to calm down,” he says. “You’re gonna make yourself pass out.”

I give him a withering glare, despite my anxiety attack, despite the black dots teasing at the edges of my vision. “Fuck you. That girl-”

“It’s too late for her. You understand?”

How could I ever understand what just happened?

“She was what, fifteen?” I choke, hyperventilating between my words. “They got her pregnant? Took her baby? “They’re monsters.”

A deep sob gets caught in the back of my throat as everything seems to crumble around me. I've heard of some of the fucked up things the Marins have done, but *that?*

No wonder she threw herself to the sharks.

I'm trembling as the man who just bought me at auction guides me down a hallway into a room.

Looking around, I see metal everywhere. We're in the room. The same room where Javier decided to shove his fingers inside me to make sure I was a virgin. My gaze lands on the cold bench where he shoved my knees apart and forced an orgasm from me while I wept and begged him to stop. His words come back to haunt me.

You think if you just stay away from men like me, you'll be safe.

But you're not safe.

Because you want it.

You feel how wet you are now?

Your cunt is dripping.

I shake my head. "I can't. I can't be in here. *Please.*"

The air is too thick, and the guy seems to notice, grabbing what he needs. He lifts me up so I'm snug against his side and carries most of my weight with one arm until we're back in the bedroom, then in the bathroom.

He sits me on the closed toilet lid, and I look up, meeting his gaze. Whatever's happening in his head, I can't decipher it. The guy has a poker face that could win against the most savage of opponents.

"Just breathe," he says, a slight hint of annoyance in his voice.

Just get fucked, I think.

"She...chose to be torn apart by sharks instead of stay on this boat," I say, brokenly. "She wasn't ready to die. She just knew she couldn't get away."

I stare down at my glass-scarred palms and her blood on me. The only evidence left that she ever existed is on my skin. The same color as the tie, as the dress, as the liquid that seeps from my wounds. My archangel of death kneels down in front of me, placing the first-aid kit on the floor. He's calm, as if he's done this before, but agitated, as if he wishes he didn't have to. With his fingertips under my chin, he repositions my head, giving him access to my neck.

"This is going to sting," he explains, cleaning the wound on my neck with alcohol that burns like hell. I didn't even know she'd cut my neck. Too much adrenaline in a short amount of time.

"Fuck," I hiss, and I think I see him smirk. But it's quickly gone.

He moves to my palms, and with the plastic tweezers from the kit, he begins the painstaking task of pulling every tiny shard of glass from my hands. "Don't ever do that again."

"Do what?" I ask, pulling back, but he tightens his grip on my wrists. Some of the glass is wedged deep, and the head of those tweezers isn't doing any favors as he digs in my flesh.

"Wander away from me," he says firmly. "Do you understand?"

My gratitude at being removed from the scene of Hayley's demise is replaced by hatred. When I don't respond, he presses the tip of the tweezers against a piece of glass, pushing it further into my palm.

"Ah!" I protest.

"Do you understand?" he repeats.

"Yes," I nod sullenly, my words dripping with disdain. "And what is it that I call you? Master?"

"Mm." He growls. "I'd like that too much."

"Owner?" I suggest sarcastically, as he works on my other palm.

"Darius."

“And does Darius have a last name?”

“Prince.”

I laugh and sob in one noise. “Right. Prince Darius.”

He lifts a brow at me, unamused. “Darius Prince. Not Prince Darius.”

“Darius Prince. S-sounds like the name of an asshole.”

I begin to shake more violently, either the drugs wearing off or anxiety kicking up several degrees—I honestly can’t tell at this point. Could be shock. A wave of nausea hits me full force, my body trying to reject whatever it is Faye gave me. There are still remnants of the mind-numbing drug floating in my system. I double over, holding onto my stomach.

The brutality of what I saw, after everything I’ve already been through...it’s impossible to forget. This week will haunt me forever—however long forever gets to be. Maybe it won’t be so long. Maybe I’ll be fed to the sharks soon, too.

“Let’s take a shower,” Darius says, grabbing me under my elbows and making me stand. He removes the barely-there panties as if it even matters, and the robe that covered me. Turning on the water, he gets it to temperature and then guides me under the stream. I place a hand on the wall, steadying myself, trying to relax as his strong hands wash me. Any other time, I’d be modest. I’d try to hide my body, but I’ve come to terms with it no longer being mine. He’s probably cleaning me so he can fuck me. Then I suppose this will officially be the worst night of my life.

When his hand soaps down between my legs, his touch makes me jump, and our eyes meet. “You’re all sticky,” he explains, his eyes going back down to my shaved pussy as he gently rubs his soap-slick fingers over me. “Cherry lollipop.”

Faye. I remember now. The humiliation of being spread wide and fingered by Faye in front of a crowd was so overwhelming I’d completely blocked out the finer details. Like her sticking a lollipop inside me.

Like her making me come so hard I saw stars. *What have I done?* The question plays on repeat as my eyes grow thick

with tears.

Once I'm clean, Darius tries to get me out, but I slide to the floor.

I'm wet. I'm cold. I'm naked.

"You should let me dry you off," he offers.

I just stare at the puddles of water that surround my naked body. This looks like a good as place as any to curl up and die.

Darius takes the fluffy white towel that smells like lavender and dries me. Then he grabs the robe and puts it over my body, covering me, before leading me to a small couch that sits against the wall in the bedroom. Before we make it there, I nearly collapse. I feel weak, my legs giving out from underneath me. He catches me, and I'm ashamed to take comfort in the strong arms of a complete stranger.

A depraved stranger who buys virgins.

"You okay?" He asks absently, but it makes me feel like an inconvenience as he sets me down.

I don't have an answer to that. Am I okay? No, I'm not okay. I don't think I'll ever be okay again.

He sits next to me, and I lean my head against his arm, almost clinging to him like he's my lifeline, like he's my hope, which is ironic.

He's not my lifeline. He's not my hope.

He's my damnation.



I'M startled awake by the sound of beating on the door. My head hurts, a deep ache pounding in my temples. I feel like shit. A hangover from hell.

“Your boat is waiting,” a low voice says at the door.

“Give us five,” Darius replies, turning to look at me once we’re alone again.

“Let’s go,” he says. “Come on.”

I want to ask questions. Where is he taking me? What will he do to me?

But I don’t ask. I’m not sure I want to know the answers. My face burns hot as he snaps his fingers impatiently as if I’m a pet trained to follow his commands. “We’re leaving *now*.”

The kindness that he’d shown me last night has disappeared.

Maybe I imagined it... My head throbs as I move closer to him, and he tucks a stray hair behind my ear. “You look like shit. We’re going to have to take care of that. I can’t have you in public looking like a slut from Santo Christo.”

“Then why did you buy me?” I ask.

He turns and gives me one look, and I know the answer. Sick bastard. I hate him already.

The sun is barely rising over the horizon, deep golden bands lining the edge of the sea and sky. Fog hovers on top of the water, making it seem even more ominous than usual. I have no idea what time it is, but it’s early.

A small speedboat waits for us, and after Darius signs some paperwork, a release form if I had to guess, we step aboard the smaller vessel. The deck is hardwood, slick from being freshly waxed. The boat rocks as the driver moves us away from the super yacht that just hosted the worst night of my entire existence.

The waves are choppy, and the boat leans to the side. I stumble, trying to find my balance, as Darius leads me inside the cabin.

Red rugs are on the floors, red curtains on the small windows, and gold trim lines the room. This is just another one of Javier’s perks for those who spend hundreds of thousands. A free trip back as part of your purchase.

Darius leads me down deeper into the hull, where there's a large bedroom. I freeze when I realize where he's taken me.

"Lie down on the bed," he directs, and I wonder if I should be thanking him for doing this while I'm sober or cursing him for not taking my v-card last night when I was high. The waves slap against the side of the boat as my heart thumps deep in my chest.

I'm not ready for this.

Knowing I have a contract to fulfill, I do exactly what he says. My back hits the mattress, and I'm surprised at how hard it is. Like concrete. "Do you want me to take off my clothes?" I ask, not really sure how this works.

Darius is amused. "Did you think... Oh, Jesus, I'm not fucking you *now*. We literally watched someone die less than four hours ago. I may be a monster, but I'm definitely not a Marin. Violent d doesn't give me a raging fucking hard-on, despite what you might think."

I sit up, relieved, meeting his eyes. "Thank you."

"For what?" he asks incredulously.

"For saving me."

"Saving you?" he huffs, crossing the room. When he's close enough, he pushes me back down on the mattress and hovers himself above my body. "I'm not your Prince Charming, Birdie. I'm not saving you." His lips are close, too close, and I hate how my body seems to ignite while he's on top of me. It has to be the remnants of the drugs they gave me because I'd *never* want this bastard. Not on me. Definitely not *in* me. "I purchased you. And I own you...every part of you... until I take what's rightfully mine. Understood?"

I swallow hard, nodding, fighting back the urge to knee him in the junk.

"Didn't hear you, little bird," he growls.

"Understood," I hiss, barely audible, realizing fulfilling this contract may not be as easy—or as quick—as I thought. His lips hover above mine, and I'm worried he'll kiss me and

how I'll respond as his woody scent encapsulates me. Then he's pushing off the mattress, standing, running a hand over the black t-shirt he's been wearing since yesterday. I breathe out in relief, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't still terrified.

I sit up again. "Why *did* you buy me then?"

"Virgins from Santo Christo are rarer than unicorns. You're a collector's item. Limited edition. Like a coin. Like a postage stamp. I couldn't *not* have you."

It's a pathetic explanation. I don't believe him. A man like him could find a girl like me for free. They'd throw themselves at him. They'd fight each other to the death and step over the resulting dead bodies for a chance at him. "You spent over two hundred thousand dollars," I whisper, thinking about how a small fraction of that would've paid for my mother's funeral.

"And to think, I thought you'd actually be expensive."

I gasp audibly when he says that. It's so much money, but he acts as if he paid pennies as if he scored a bargain bidding on me.

My cut-up hands ache, and the shallow scratches on my throat burn. I blink away tears that are threatening to make an appearance, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of getting to me.

Darius pulls a chair from under the desk that's in the corner and sits, studying me. But I don't say anything else.

The boat eventually slows to a stop, and then Darius leads me outside. The wind whips my hair around and I hold the robe tightly against my body as my feet touch land.

"Where are we?" I ask, trying to recognize something, anything familiar. It's all completely foreign to me.

"Valmont Island," he replies, leading me down a sidewalk. I freeze beside him.

"Where are we going?" I ask, alarmed, hearing my mother's voice constantly warning me away from this place. I'm not supposed to be here. Not for any reason. Justin

demanded I stay away, too. Panic rises, alarms ring, and everything feels wrong.

“Home,” he says, tugging me harder, forcing me to walk in step with him.

No no no.

We walk a few more blocks. I’m in a daze the entire time. If I weren’t so damn scared, I’d actually admire the lush green grass, the towering trees, and the bright-colored flowers that line the edged sidewalk. I can tell Darius is someone here, just by how he carries himself, but it makes me more than aware that I’m nothing more than a possession. A pet.

A toy that he’s taking home to play with, before tossing it to the side.

Darius turns suddenly, taking us down a stoned-covered walkway that leads across perfectly manicured grass. Eventually, we come to a stop in front of a walled compound.

“This is your house?” I’m in awe that he could live in a place such as this. It drips with extravagance.

As he opens the door, he yanks me inside. He probably doesn’t want the neighbors seeing me while I look like this. Fuck. The mansion is unlike anything I’ve ever seen. The ceilings are impossibly high and the marble floors seem to go on forever. I’m greeted by a staircase that looks like it should be in a European castle. If I screamed, my voice would probably echo forever.

“Do you live here alone?”

“Basically,” he says, climbing the stairs. I follow behind him, exhaustion taking over.

“Are you going to kill me?” I ask as we make our way down a long hallway.

He turns, a mischievous smile briefly appearing on his lips as he meets my gaze. “You may have been cheap, but I’m not wasting a good opportunity. At least not yet.”

Darius guides me into a room at the end of the hall. It’s larger than the entire double-wide my family lives in. “You’ll

stay here.”

He pulls a key from his pocket, and I look at it nervously. “You’re locking me in here?”

“Of course. I own you, pet. Can’t let you wander off. Oh, and Birdie?” he adds. “Don’t try to escape. You’ll not like what I’ll do to you.”

The door snaps shut, and I hear the sickening scrape of the key, a lock sliding into place. I’m in fucking prison.

Oh, God. This is what I get for wanting my mom to have a nice resting place. As I stare at the four walls of my stately dungeon, I can’t help but wish that I’d just let her rot.

CHAPTER 21



SOMEHOW... I SLEEP.

S omehow... I sleep.

When I wake the next morning, I go straight to the door that Darius locked last night. I jiggle the handle, and to my surprise, it opens. My heart hammers as I decide what to do. *Should I stay in here? Is he testing me?*

I take my chances and walk down the hall toward the stairs. I pass another bedroom, noticing the door is slightly cracked. I carefully open it, and a four-poster bed comes into view, big enough for a king. I can tell this is a queen's room, though, just by the appreciation for pretty things that sparkle.

On an ornate wooden dresser in the corner, I spot a black jewelry box. I stare at the gold embellishments on the edges that seem to reflect shards of light into the darkness. Drawn to it like a moth to a flame, I cross the threshold and enter the bedroom. When I pick the jewelry box up, it's cold and smooth against my aching palms. Heavier than I imagined.

I twist the key in the back, waiting to hear the song.

I open the box and it's filled with lush black velvet. *Swan Lake* plays, but it's treacherously slow, and each note sounds slightly off-key, almost like a warning. It chills me to the core as a blonde ballerina with her arms upturned into a U spins on a spring in the middle.

She's not smiling, and her eyes are cold. She's trapped in this world, too. Stuck in a box, performing when she's told, without any means to escape.

When I was younger, I remember my mom getting me a music box from a resale shop that we'd sometimes walk through after we saw her dealer. Originally, the man wanted too much money for it, so mom followed him to the back of the store to help change his mind. Ten minutes later, it was handed to me in a cheap plastic bag with a smile. We never went back after that.

I'm pretty sure she fucked him for it.

And I loved that music box *so damn much*.

It was one of the only nice things I had until one day after school, I noticed it was gone. She had bartered it for drugs. That was the moment I realized that everything in my mother's life was always up for trade, even *me*.

The sliver of my reflection in the mirror behind the twirling character brings me back to reality. I'm a stranger, even to myself. I swallow hard as the eerie song eventually stops.

At the bottom of the jewelry box lies a beautiful pink diamond platinum ring. I notice the way it sparkles. *I wonder how much I could sell it for if I could just break out of here.*

Enough to pay off my debt?

There's a guy who lives in a small rundown house across from the trailer park who'd give me a quarter of what it's actually worth, but it'd be enough to figure out my next move.

Who am I kidding? I'm not capable of planning some grand escape, not from a literal fucking island in the middle of the ocean. The inkling of hope I felt vanishes.

After I glance at the ring one last time, I quickly snap the box shut and put it back where I found it.

Before I can turn around to leave, the sound of a throat clearing startles me from behind. As I turn my head, I see Darius watching me in the early morning shadows, like he's the damn grim reaper stalking me or something.

I'm not sure how long he's been standing there watching me.

“What do you want?” I finally ask, trying to calm my racing heart. Pushing off the doorway, he takes a few steps forward, scowling.

“What do you think you’re doing in here?” There’s an accusation in his tone as he grabs my wrists and searches my hands.

“I didn’t steal anything,” I say, opening my palms so he’ll let me go. He smells like soap, and his hair is damp from the shower. His jaw is clenched as he narrows his eyes at me. I’m breathing hard, my body going into fight or flight as he stares me down, pinning me with his gaze.

Finally, he lets me go, but he doesn’t make a move. My wrists throb where he grabbed them. Probably going to have a nice set of matching bruises.

After taking in a deep breath, as if to calm himself, Darius lifts his finger and points it into my face. I see his dark eyes swirling with anger.

“Don’t,” he seethes. “*Ever*. Enter this room again.”

I just stare at him until he holds his arm out, pointing for me to leave.

I don’t hesitate, fleeing the room, then making my way downstairs.

This mansion is haunting. It’s large, cold, and empty. *Who did that bedroom belong to? And where is she now?*

As my foot hits the final step, I smell bacon.

My mouth waters with anticipation.

I can’t remember the last time I had anything decent to eat.

When I was in Santo Cristo, I dreamed of living in a place like this. But now that I’m here? I’d so much rather be at the trailer park.

Darius pushes past me, and I follow him into the dining room. A large table, big enough to seat at least twelve people, is full of food, enough to feed several families in Santo Cristo.

“Who’s joining us?” I ask, hoping that he’s not wasting all of this food on himself.

“Sit,” he barks, sitting at the head of the table, in front of an empty plate. I look at the buffet of food—steak, eggs cooked many different ways, bacon, ham, several different loaves of bread, all the sides, and fruit toppings a person could want. The breakfast meant for a royal is spread out in front of me, and all I feel is sadness.

Darius glares at me.

Then swiftly picks up a steak knife, stabbing it into the dark oak table. “*Sit,*” he repeats.

I want to argue, but I don’t.

“Eat.”

I reach forward and pluck a few strawberries and grapes from the golden platters, placing them on my plate.

“More than that,” he snaps. “Hurry up.”

He wants me to eat more? Okay, buddy, you’re on.

He’s watching me like I’m an animal at the zoo, so I might as well act as barbaric as I can.

I grab a waffle with my hands and rip a shred of it off, not using any utensils. My stomach protests as I chew and swallow the sugary bread. Reaching forward, I pick up the fancy glass bottle of golden brown maple syrup. I open the lid and pour a dash of it directly into my mouth.

Darius’ eyes are glued on me.

“Enjoying the show?” I finally ask, wiping my mouth on my sleeve.

“You disgust me,” he admits.

“Same,” I snap.

He still hasn’t touched one item on the table, and the look on his face is unnerving. After I’ve finished making a complete and utter fool out of myself, I place my sticky hands on my lap and meet his chilling gaze.

“Where is my cell phone?” I ask, knowing I had it—my Mom’s phone— with the rest of my things before the auction.

His expression doesn’t change. “I’ve got it.”

“Can I have it back, please?”

He *tsks*. “What’s yours is mine. Because *you’re* mine.”

“I need to call my job, and let them know what’s going on.”

“Already taken care of. Told them you won’t be back.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “When are you going to fuck me and get this over with?” I glance down at the bracelet on my wrist. It’s tight and uncomfortable.

Darius is quick as lightning, standing and pushing the food off the end of the table, clearing a space. Plates and trays shatter to the ground as he grabs my throat and forces my back against the wood with a resounding thud.

He traps me against the table with his body weight. He’s angry. Lethal.

“What do you know about my sister?” He grinds out.

I look at him like he’s lost his mind, not understanding. He’s unhinged.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I gasp, struggling as his grip tightens, narrowing my windpipe.

“Davina. My sister,” he says between clenched teeth.

I search his face, confused. “I’ve never met a Davina,” I choke. “Why would you think I know her?”

“You’re lying,” he hisses, shaking me like I’m a rag doll as I grab desperately at his hands, trying to peel them off my throat one finger at a time. It doesn’t work. *He’s too strong*. “Everyone seems to believe she’s dead, except for me. And apparently, you know something. He told me you’re the answer to all of this. I know you know something. You’re a fucking *liar*.”

I begin to lose consciousness, the world slightly fading around me. Darius notices and lets me go, allowing me to breathe. I stand clumsily, sucking in lungfuls of air as I watch him, scared to make the wrong move that might set him off. When he takes a seat, I follow, collapsing back into my seat again. I'm too spent to try and run, and besides, where would I go?

"Who told you I'm the answer to all of this?" I ask urgently, my voice raspy after his failed attempt at strangling information out of me.

Darius is quiet as his eyes search mine. And then, finally, he speaks. "That's not your concern."

Red-hot rage snaps my resolve. Before I can even think, I pick up the heavy maple syrup bottle and lob it at Darius's head. He moves his upper body to the right, missing being hit by less than an inch. The bottle sails through the air, shattering against a large framed painting that looks like it costs more than my virginity.

Darius turns his head slowly to look at the splat of maple syrup sliding down the painting, and back at me. He laughs like a maniac, and the sound echoes through the cavernous space. Oh, shit. What have I done? I've woken the beast. I liked it better when he was cold. "I'll tell you what, little bird. You can tell me what you know about my sister, or I'll spend every minute of every fucking hour for the next year making your life a living fucking hell. You'll wish you'd been the one ripped apart by sharks."

"I'm not waiting for a damn year for you to fuck me," I whisper viciously.

"Oh," he says softly. Dangerously. "You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

He smirks, running his finger around the rim of the water glass in front of him, a high-pitched hum vibrating from the crystal.

"Know what!?" I yell.

He tips his head to the side, steepling his fingers on the table in front of him, leaning closer as if I'm a curiosity he wants to understand. "You don't know that I have a year to claim your virginity, silly Birdie."

I shake my head emphatically. "No, you don't."

He bites his lip, feigning concern. "Well, how long do you think I have? How long did you agree to?"

Oh, God. I want to throw up all over this ridiculous breakfast spread. I think of the cockroach in our bare pantry the morning before mom died. How we had nothing, not one scrap of sustenance to eat. And how this food right here could feed the three of us—me, Mom, Justin—for a fucking month.

"How long?" Darius prods cruelly.

My eyes fill with tears. "I don't know."

"You don't know," he echoes flatly. "You. Don't. Know."

"I assumed it would be the night of the auction," I say pathetically.

"Well, you know what they say about assumptions, right? They're the mother of all fuck-ups, Birdie Moore. You should never assume anything. I don't. I read every letter of the fine print before I bought you. One year. Once I pop that cherry of yours, it's all over, red rover. You can scurry out of here with my cum dripping down your thighs and your pussy bleeding from where I claimed it. But until then?" He grins, leaning closer to me. "Until then, I can do whatever I want to you. I can put it *anywhere* as long as you stay a virgin. In that mouth full of maple syrup. Squeezed between those tits. In your ass, while you fight me off."

I'm going to die. That's how this feels. Like death. I'm speechless as I watch Darius select a cherry from the large bowl of fruit, bring it to his lips, and bite down, tossing the stem in my direction. It lands on my plate as he stands suddenly, circling behind my chair, spitting the cherry pit on my plate beside the stem. It's been eaten clean, with not a shred of cherry flesh left on the hard seed. The leftover pieces

of the cherry look pitiful lying on my plate, a promise of what's to come, a warning of Darius's intentions.

"I'll leave," I mutter, but there's no conviction behind my threat. "I'll get some other guy to fuck me. I'll break my hymen with my own fucking fingers and show Javier myself."

He shakes his head slowly, pointing at the ceiling. At a camera, I hadn't noticed before, tastefully recessed into the plaster, so it's barely distinguishable from the dazzling downlights that illuminate the room.

"I guess now that we have your little threat on record, you won't do that," he says, smiling as if he's bested me. "You know what happens if you violate our contract, don't you? If you give it up to someone else. Hell, even if some guy rapes you in the three seconds, you'll be out of my line of sight. I get my money back."

Oh, God.

"I get my money back, and I return you to the Marins. You remember them, right? The guys who watched a teenage girl be torn apart by sharks and laughed?" He searches my face for confirmation. I nod.

"Right. And you remember that spot just about here," he leans forward, tracing a horizontal line across my lower stomach with his finger, hip bone to hip bone. "The spot where they cut a baby out of her. Girls without their virginity don't fetch much at auction, see, so they have to be more creative. Do you have any idea how much money a desperate couple will pay for a healthy baby?" He's waiting for a response. I shake my head.

"Probably more than I paid for you," he states. "You fuck me over, and I send you back to them? They'll find a way to recoup their losses. They always do. Do you understand?"

I nod dejectedly.

"So if it takes a year, then it takes a year. And you thank your lucky fucking stars that I don't give you to Pedro Marin to chain up like an animal while he breeds a baby into you."

I continue staring at the cherry's leftover parts as Darius leans down, his hands gripping the back of my chair, his breath warm against my ear. "I went to Brazil once," he says, putting one hand between my shoulder blades and walking his fingers down my spine. "You know, the girls I met there, they wanted to stay virgins until they were married. It was important to them. His fingers are at my tailbone now, and then lower. I gasp as his touch skates over my ass cheek, delving further, pressing against my asshole. I start to stand up, to flee his touch, but Darius is quicker. His other arm crushes me in a painful hug that pins my arms to my sides. "I haven't finished my story. And I haven't excused you from the table."

I stop fighting. I freeze. The word *year* keeps echoing through my mind. It can't be a year. He's lying. So why does it sound like he's telling the truth?

"These girls I met, they still wanted to do something," Darius continues, letting the arm encircling me drop lower, his fingers cupping my pussy through my pajama pants. Apparently, that isn't close enough, because he slides his hand into my panties, finding my clit, drawing in a sharp breath when he feels how wet I already am. I'm not a fucking nun. We're talking about sex and cum and he's touching me back there, too, and it's all getting confused in my head.

"Spread," he demands, tapping the side of his hand against my thigh insistently as he rubs slow circles against my clit.

And I don't know why, but... I do.

"So these girls, they'd beg me to lick their pussies. They'd suck my cock and swallow every drop of cum I gave them. They'd grind on my fingers, just like you're doing now."

Shame burns in my cheeks as I realize I've lifted my hips to meet his fingers. I try to lower them, but that just lets his finger push more insistently against the tight ring of muscles he's been dry-fucking through thin layers of material.

"There's nowhere to go," he says. "There's no point fighting."

He's ... right.

“But the best part was, they'd let me put my dick in their asses. They'd beg for it. Every girl I met. All these virgins, but they were whores for me.”

The thought of that makes me want to die.

“See, I bought your virgin pussy, and once I fuck it, you're free to go. But nobody said anything about me taking *this* cherry in the meantime.” He presses his finger more forcefully against my ass, at the same time rubbing my clit faster. To my horror I let my head fall back against his shoulder, spreading my legs even wider to give him better access, ready to let that wave of euphoria hit me.

“Are you close?” Darius murmurs. I nod, drawing in a shuddering breath—

—and he stops. Everything, all at once. Stops.

He takes his hand out of my panties, my pussy throbbing, unsatisfied, my panties soaked. The other hand moves away from my ass, and he returns to his seat. Fucking prick.

“You'd better believe that I'm going to find out what you know. Even if it means fucking it out of you, in the ass, dry.” He pops another cherry in his mouth, tossing the stem on my plate. “Gotta love contracts, right? One entire year with my cock buried in your ass, or your mouth, every moment I get.”

My heart thuds as the reality of what he's saying threatens to swallow me alive. “Why are you doing this?” I whisper.

“Why are you playing me for a fool?” The coldness returns to his voice.

“I'm not, I don—.”

He holds up his hand. “Shut up. This is what's going to happen. Listen carefully. You'll do what I tell you. You'll be enrolled at the academy with me. I'm not fucking letting you stay here on your own all day every day. Since you've acquainted yourself with my sister's room already, you'll have no problem finding her uniforms in the closet. They should fit you nicely.”

“I’m not going to *school*, Darius.”

He nods. “You go where I go. I’m in my final year at Valmont Academy, and I’m not about to let a little distraction like *you* fuck things up for me. Besides, most girls like you would kill to score a place at Valmont. Most girls would be falling over themselves to tell the world they’re living on Valmont Island. .”

I look around, dazed. “This is a prison, not a paradise. I’m not going to some fucking academy with a bunch of preppy assholes like you.”

His voice lowers. “I don’t think you understand me clearly. I own you, Birdie Moore. You’ll do whatever I say you’ll do and if I request it, you’ll do it with a goddamn smile on your face. Defy me, and you’ll pay the price.”

“Do you really think I’m afraid of you?”

“You should be.” Within seconds, he’s standing, removing the space between us and digging his fist into my hair. With all of his strength, he pulls me from the chair and drags me through the dining room. I try to grab and claw at him, but he continues to pull me down the hallway. Compared to him, I’m a frail twig.

When we get to the edge of the bottom step, he yanks me by my arm, then pulls me to the top floor. With each stair, a throb in my side as the edges dig into my body. I’ll have bruises from my head to my toes tomorrow.

When we finally reach the top floor, he drags me back to the room where I stayed last night. He pushes me onto the bed, and stands before me, breathing heavily. There’s a craze in his eyes.

Darius undoes his belt and slides it out of his pants with the snap of his wrist..

I try to back away, but he grabs my ankles forcing me to the edge of the bed.

“See this belt? Do as you’re told, or don’t, but just know that every time you step out of line, this leather is going to brand your ass.”

“You’re fucking crazy,” I scream, no longer able to hold back my words. I slide off the bed, trying to run past him, but he’s too fast. Blocking me with his body, he shoves me against the wall, forcing both of my wrists above my head.

I’m truly his prisoner.

“I’m going to show you fucking crazy, Birdie Moore or should I just start calling you my whore? Birdie Moore the cheap whore. Has a ring to it, doesn’t it?” His breath is warm on my cheek, and I want to knee him in the balls. As I open my mouth to speak, he keeps my wrists steady with one hand and shoves his other palm over my lips. Rage radiates from him as he leans in and hisses in my ear. “I own you, Birdie Moore. I’ll get the information I need. And until then, you’ll stay locked in this room or by my fucking side.”

I dissociate as he continues to threaten me. A tactic I learned when my mom and Justin would argue when I was little. *I’m not here. This isn’t me. I’m somewhere else.*

Darius shakes me. “Did you fucking hear me?”

When I don’t answer, he storms out of the room, locking me in.

I slide down the wall, coming to rest on the floor in a pathetic heap. My panties are wet from where he touched me, and the taste of maple syrup buzzes in my mouth. My body screams with the bruises that are going to blossom to life under my skin in the coming hours, but I barely notice the physical agony. It’s the voice inside my head that hurts the most, a steady temp as it taunts me mercilessly: A year. A year. *A year.*

CHAPTER 22



As promised, once the contract was signed and Javier received his money from Darius, my mother's body was released from wherever he'd been hiding it. The funeral home was kind enough to call Darius and let him know. However, I wasn't allowed to step foot on the mainland to plan anything. I could only speak to the funeral home using Darius' phone. And he watched me, listening to every word I said on speaker mode. Fucking prick.

My mother is finally getting put to rest, but at what cost?

Today is the burial. I suppose I should be grateful he's letting me attend that.

The two-door Bentley smells like leather and sits low to the ground, the seat hugging my body as if it were custom-made for me.

"Why are you wearing that dress?" Darius glances over at me. I can see the judgment in his expression.

"Because I wanted to," I say, and look out the window as we make our way off the ferry. It's the only way on and off the island.

"It's not the one I chose for you," he says grudgingly. Rafe had me try this on the day he forced me to shop. I thought it looked like appropriate funeral attire, and apparently Rafe did too.

I was surprised when it was delivered to Darius' house in a box with my name on the front. I wonder what deal was made

to allow me to keep it. I'm shocked he didn't rip it from my body and force me to wear the one he chose from his sister's bursting full walk-in robe. Perhaps even a monster like Darius has a shred of empathy on the day his captive's mother is being laid to rest.

We arrive at the cemetery and I step out of the car. The black dress falls gracefully around my body. It's much more elegant than I remember when I first tried it on. The material is soft and smooth, a gentle caress against my skin. If only it were for a happier occasion.

Darius steps into the cemetery and I spot the small pop-up tent with a few chairs set up. I explained to the funeral home that my mother knew very few people, and that only a handful would attend. Even if money wasn't an issue, Mom wouldn't have wanted the attention, so I asked to skip the before-burial service and go straight to the cemetery.

The graveyard is old. You can tell somebody tries hard to keep up with the maintenance... and fails. It's not as unkempt as I thought it would be, but the whole place is in a sad state of affairs. Many of the headstones are cracked or broken, while some lean haphazardly to the side. The grass has been mowed hurriedly, but the edging is still long and sharp. The caretaker here is old, and he does his best, but the place is starting to go to ruin. There's a nicer, newer cemetery close to the highway, but that was well out of the budget. The plot alone was ten grand. And Budget Funerals didn't have access to perform burials there. All up, it was north of twenty grand to inter my mother in the fancier ground up the road. I settled, just like I've settled my entire life, for the most basic fucking option.

I sold myself for this, but at least my mother will have a resting place with a humble headstone of her own. People will know she existed. There'll be a place to bring her flowers.

Fuck.

As we near the spot where a hole has already been dug, Darius' face is stern and unreadable. His jaw is tight as he stares forward with an icy cold gaze. He looks up at the dark,

bruised sky. It might rain. My new dress will be ruined. None of these things matter.

“Don’t try anything,” Darius warns. I fight the urge to roll my eyes. What, exactly, does he think I’m going to try? There is nowhere to run. Nobody here who could rescue me.

We’re the first to arrive, other than a guy from the funeral home. He gives me a curt hello, but doesn’t say much else, and avoids eye contact as I move closer. The dark casket I didn’t choose is closed and I run my hand across the smooth, cold surface, frowning. Inside is my mother. I just hope she’s at peace. I study the casket more closely, a chill running through me as I notice tiny roses embossed in the hardwood. This coffin is a piece of art.

Darius notices my frown. “What?”

I shake my head. “This isn’t the right casket,” I say quietly. “This is the most expensive one they had. I can’t afford this.”

The guy from the funeral home clears his throat. Eavesdropping. “Someone called and requested we upgrade your mother’s casket. He had to special-order it.”

“Who?” I ask.

“A man. I’m not sure of his name. He insisted on paying for it. Everything is settled.”

I look at Darius, a question on my face. Did he-? He shakes his head. “It wasn’t me.”

Who, then? And how?

In the distance, I hear the familiar sound of a rattling engine. Mom’s car. Black smoke leaks from the tailpipe as it sputters to a stop in the parking lot.

Justin gets out, slamming the door loudly. His eyes are bloodshot and trails of old tears streak his cheeks. He looks worn out, sporting a black suit and tie I helped him choose at Goodwill the last time he had a court appearance. It’s ill-fitting, but he still looks decent. I’m relieved he put in the effort. I’d half-expected him to arrive in jeans and a t-shirt. A faint smile appears on his face as he sees me, and he

practically runs over to where Darius and I are standing, wrapping his arms around me and burying his face in my neck. Darius, apparently disgusted by the display of affection, takes several measured steps away from us. I cling to Justin, my dad—even though he’s not my biological father—my protector even though he did a shitty job of it, and my confidante even though he never knows what advice to give. My safe person in the world, even though he couldn’t keep me safe from this.

I can’t remember the last time somebody hugged me. Was it Bryce, just before the police chase? That feels like a lifetime ago. When I try to think of the last time I hugged my mother, my mind goes blank.

“Are you okay?” Justin asks, pulling back to study me. I haven’t been allowed to contact him since I was shipped off to the island.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “All things considered.”

His gaze trails to the bracelet on my wrist, the reminder that I no longer have choices of my own, and he focuses on the dark bruises on my arms.

“Has he hurt you?”

“It’s not as bad as it looks.”

“You should be home by now,” Justin says urgently. “Why aren’t you back home?”

I raise my eyebrows, giving him a pointed look. “I can’t do this here. It doesn’t matter, anyway.”

I sense Darius’s scrutiny.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see he’s focused on us. His broad arms are crossed over his chest and he doesn’t look happy. But then again, does he ever?

The attendant breaks the moment, asking if we’re waiting on anyone else to arrive.

I shake my head. “This is it.”

He nods, gesturing to the coffin, giving us a little more time to say our final goodbyes before the burial process

begins. Justin steps forward, placing his trembling fingers on top of the casket as I watch the dark clouds roll in. The only thing that pulls me out of my thoughts is the sounds of footsteps against gravel. When I see Rafe, I smile.

“What are you doing here?” I sound happier to see him than I should considering he’d slit my throat if his dad demanded.

“Yeah,” Darius says, stepping beside me so our arms are touching. “What are you doing here?”

“Came to pay my respects,” Rafe addresses me, ignoring Darius completely as he gives my shoulder a comforting squeeze. “Nice dress.”

“Thanks,” I tell him. “The guy who picked it out is a real fashionista.”

“I bet. It suits you. Your mom would like it on you.”

Ugh, that last sentence is like a stab to the heart. I’ve not had the courage to ask Rafe how well he knew my mother because I don’t think I want to know the answer. The truth of her seeing Javier’s kids more than me hurts too much.

In the distance, I catch sight of the slick black limo that Rafe rode in, and the guy standing beside it. Javier. He’s dressed in a dark suit, an umbrella in his hand, just in case.

“What’s *he* doing here?” I seethe between gritted teeth.

“Couldn’t keep him away,” Rafe says, shaking his head. “I tried to. For your sake.”

I shrug. “Whatever. Can’t get any worse than it already is, can it?”

Rafe chews his lip, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze. Then he turns and heads back to Javier.

“Birdie,” Justin whispers behind me, and I suck in a deep breath, trying to gain control of my swirling emotions.

Between Javier and Darius, I’m trapped. I wish I could run away from both of them, but I know they’d find me. They always do.

Justin looks at Darius with hate in his eyes and then speaks directly to me. “They’re going to start. You want to go up and say goodbye before they do? Closure, you know?”

His words are like a dagger to the heart. Closure, huh?

I approach the coffin alone, for once a man not by my side, dragging me along or gripping me tight to make sure I don’t flee.

It’s just me. And the casket, and inside, my mother’s dead body.

I try to think of something to say.

And the only thing I can think of is this: *I fucking hate you.*

I hate you for leaving me here. I hate you for this life. I hate you because you were my only real family in this fucking world, and now you’re gone, and you’ve left me here to the wolves.

I shuffle away, the distinct lack of closure reverberating in my mind as I take my place beside Justin. The guy from the funeral home says a few generic words about death.

Mom’s casket is finally lowered into the cold earth, and I feel nothing.

There are no prayers. No music. Nobody gives a eulogy.

And just like that, it’s over.

What an ending. What a fucking anti-climax.

We walk away as the tent is lowered and the couple of folding chairs are picked up. As I near the exit, Rafe is speed-walking back from the limo, a bunch of bright red posies in his hand. He catches my arm, pulling me to the side so we’re away from the rest of the small crowd.

“Thanks for coming,” I tell Rafe.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and it feels like a blanket apology for everything. For my mom’s death, for capturing me, for my

misfortune. The list is a mile long. “Here,” he shoves the flowers at me. “For you. For the grave.”

That’s the moment I finally feel something. Tears prick at my eyes as I take the overflowing bunch of flowers, the thick bundle of stems so wide I need two hands to hold it. “Thank you,” I whisper.

“Don’t mention it,” he says, glancing over my shoulder. “Birdie,” he says, more urgently. “If you need to get off that island—if you need help—you ask to see the auditor. Understand?”

I open my mouth to protest, but Rafe shakes his head tightly. “Here comes Prince Asshole,” he murmurs. “Ask to see your contract. Ask for the auditor. He won’t be able to say no. He’ll have to bring you to The Riverwood.”

Rafe doesn’t say anything else as he walks toward his father. Darius stares bullet holes into his back as he departs. “That guy’s dangerous,” he warns, glancing down at the flowers.

“You’re one to talk,” I reply. “At least he remembered flowers for her grave.”

Darius sneers. “How nice of him.”

I glare at him, walking back to the grave. The hole is completely filled in now, fresh earth piled up over the space where my mother’s body now rests. I toss the flowers on top, aware of a presence beside me.

Justin. He’s clutching a single rose in his hand. “You steal that from another grave?”

“You know it,” he replies, placing it beside the pretty bunch Rafe supplied.

“What will you do now?” I ask Justin, avoiding looking in Darius’ direction.

“Pay off my debts,” he says. “Go straight. No more gambling. I’ll save you, Birdie.”

“Don’t worry about me,” I demand. “I’ll be fine.”

“I can’t let them do this to you,” he explains.

I lift my wrist, my fingernail tapping against the solid bracelet. “Just face it. This was my inheritance, Justin. It was always going to end up like this.”

It’s as if the realization of what I said sinks in, but he’s not as shocked as I’d hoped. He probably knew this would happen, too. Justin opens his arm and pulls me into a tight hug. It almost feels like a goodbye. When I try to pull away, he’s still holding me tight. “I can’t bear to watch you leave with that guy.”

I squeeze him one last time, my heart deadened. “Then you should get in your car and drive away first.”

Justin lets me go and sucks in a deep breath. I can tell there’s more he wants to say, but he doesn’t. As he turns to head toward the Buick, I make a beeline toward the Bentley.

Before I can get in, though, I notice the window in the back of the limo sliding down. Faye comes into view, applying gloss to her lips, then smacking them together like it’s any other day. “Is it done now? I’m bored to death.” She laughs.

The high-pitched sound fills me with rage.

“Aww.” She makes a pouty face, mock pity. She smirks, looking at her fingers, the same ones that made me orgasm in front of all those people. Then she lifts them to her lips and blows me a kiss.

I hate her. I hate them both.

Before I can open my mouth to say anything, I hear a commotion behind me.

Justin has a knife in his hand. He’s yelling at Darius. Words are exchanged and then Darius strikes Justin in the face, knocking him flat on his ass.

Jesus fuck.

I can’t hear what they’re saying, but I can’t let Darius kill Justin, and I know he’s more than capable.

CHAPTER 23



“*H*ey!” I bark, yanking the knife from Justin’s grasp. After I reposition the blade in my fist, I take a few steps forward, ready to gut him like a fucking fish. “You’ve got some balls on you, old man. You’re a dumb piece of shit, waving a knife at me.”

Birdie runs over and pushes me out of the way. She leans over, helping Justin to his feet, standing between us.

“Move,” I say between gritted teeth. “Now.”

“No. Please don’t do this here. Please,” she nearly begs. Her voice is strained and I can see the stress of the day written in her expression.

“Get in the car,” I demand, needing to show this guy some goddamn manners, but she stays planted. I meet her eyes.

“Promise not to hurt him and I will.”

I laugh. “As if you have a damn choice.”

“Darius,” Javier coolly states from behind me, as if he casually ran into me at a social event. I keep my gaze locked on Justin as Birdie zeroes in on Javier. “This man owes me *a lot* of money. Give him the opportunity to repay his debts before you think about taking his life.”

I stare at Justin for a long while, hating that Javier had to get involved. “Today must be your lucky day,” I finally say, dropping the knife and climbing into the Bentley. As much as I wanted to show Birdie’s pathetic stepdaddy the error of his ways, going to war with the Marins isn’t on my list of things

to do right now. Birdie says something to Justin and helps him up from the ground before joining me in the car.

I peel off, kicking gravel and dust in my wake.

“We have to stop at my place on the way back to the island so I can get my things,” she says quietly. “Please.”

“No.” I squeeze the steering wheel harder.

She opens her mouth to say something, but no sound comes out. I’m not stopping for her. Fuck her.

But then, I see her lip tremble. I remember where we just were. At her mother’s funeral. Fuck.

“Okay, fine. But you need to make it quick. If I run into that stepfather of yours again, I’ll slit his fucking throat.”

I expect her to respond, but she quietly stares out the window. When I glance over at her, I notice a few tears roll down her cheeks, but she pretends like she’s not crying.

Once I make it to the trailer park, I go straight to her place. She doesn’t question how I knew where she lived. And she doesn’t know I visited her drunk step-daddy inside that filthy place to find out about her mother, either. The siding is rusted and the roof looks like it could cave in with a strong enough wind.

She gets out of the car and doesn’t give me a second glance. Carefully, she finds the spare key that’s hidden in the dead plant by the front door, then steps inside.

I wait.

As much as I hate the island, I’m ready to go back and leave this shit hole behind. Today was an inconvenience. I seriously considered skipping the funeral, but what kind of monster would I be if I stopped Birdie from saying her last goodbyes? I’m a terrible person, but even I have some level of decorum.

Five minutes later, Birdie is walking toward the car with two black garbage bags full of things and a puppy in her arms. It’s taking every bit of strength she has to hold her tears as she struggles to open the door. I want to tell her to leave the

fucking mutt behind in the trailer, but when she holds the little thing in her arms and kisses his head, I can't.

Goddamn it. I must be going soft.

Especially because a part of me wants to comfort her. Run my fingers through her rain-soaked hair and tell her it will all be okay.

But the reality is it won't. I would be lying to her.

Life is cruel. And hers is about to get crueler.

CHAPTER 24



*D*read overwhelms me as I put on the academy uniform Darius laid out for me. The puppy I rescued from becoming a part of Justin's dog fighting ring sits at my feet, watching me. I think I'll call him Rebel.

"Whatcha think?" I ask, picking Rebel up and setting him on the bed. He lies down, his little tail wagging furiously. Today, while we're away, the housekeepers that I never see will take care of him.

I stand in front of the mirror, looking at this unrecognizable version of myself.

Darius was right. His sister's clothes *do* fit me perfectly. They don't belong on me, though. This uniform feels more like a costume, a role play, me pretending to be some snobby trust fund kid at Valmont. If the haters at my old school could see me now, attending one of the most prestigious academies in the world, they'd shit themselves. This place makes Harvard look like a community college.

It doesn't matter, though. I don't belong there.

Last night, I lay awake, hugging Rebel, wishing I were back in Santo Christo. At least I belonged there. I knew what to expect and what was expected of me. It was predictable. It was, ironically, *safe*.

"Okay, boy. The nice people are going to take care of you today." Rebel rolls over, giving me access to his belly. I give him plenty of scratches, one last kiss on the head, then I tell him goodbye as I shut the door behind me.

At the bottom of the stairs, I'm met by Darius. He's wearing a uniform like mine, only his is more like a tailored suit. On the breast of his blazer is a golden V embroidered into the fabric. The threads sparkle in the overhead light. Then I notice the crown on top of the emblem. The same crest is embroidered on my blouse and jacket.

He glances at me with an eyebrow cocked, then takes a few steps forward.

"What are you doing with this hair?" Reaching forward, he twirls a few strands between his fingers. Darius shakes his head and grabs my wrist, pulling me down the hallway into an office. It's dark and cold in here, and ash from an old fire is in the fireplace. But it's just as lifeless as the rest of the oversized house.

"Chair," he says, pointing to a seat that looks like a throne. It's velvet and reminds me of the same chair I sat in when I begged Javier for money. One of the stupidest mistakes of my life.

"What are you doing?" I ask when he pulls a knife from the drawer. A glint of light reflects off the blade as he admires it. He slowly runs his finger across the edge, and it's menacing.

Moving in front of me, he brings the tip under my chin, forcing me to look up into his eyes.

"Today," he clears his throat. The point of the blade, digging into my skin, and I'm worried he may cut me open. But I hold my head up high, not daring to move.

"Today, you'll behave. You'll listen. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I whisper, barely opening my mouth as he holds the hilt firm in his tight fist.

"There will be things that you'll do, that you won't like."

I blink up at him as my body begins to tremble.

I should run away from here. Every alarm inside of me is screaming.

"Remember, you belong to me. You do what I say"

Bending down, he moves his face closer to mine. “Are you scared, little birdie? Is that fear I smell?”

“No,” I lie.

“Hmm. I guess I’ll have to try harder then.”

Swiftly, he moves the knife, standing behind me, taking my hair into his hand, and wrapping it tightly around his fist. He jerks my head back, forcing me to meet his eyes before he cuts at least five inches off with one swift movement.

He still has it wrapped around his hand as I look back, realizing what he’s fucking done.

I gasp and stand, but he’s too fast, reaching forward, and yanking me backward until I slam into the chair. It nearly falls over.

“You cut my fucking hair off!” I cry.

“You weren’t paying attention. Rules, Birdie. On this island, you’ll follow them.”

“And if I don’t?” I ask.

He walks around me, sliding the sharp knife down my jawline, setting the cool blade against my lips. “I brought you into this cruel world, and I will remove you from it if I have to.”

“You’d *kill* me?”

He narrows his eyes but doesn’t hesitate as he stabs the knife into the wooden arm of the chair I’m sitting in, missing me by inches. “Sure.”

The loud bang causes me to jump and a cold shiver runs up my spine. As he pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to gain control of himself, I know he’s not joking. He would undoubtedly take my life if I crossed him. And right now, I want to live. I want to get out of here. Escape.

“But, before I let you die, you’ll tell me what you know about my sister. Then, I’ll forcefully take what’s rightfully mine. Afterward, as you’re begging for your goddamn life,

then I'll decide what to do with you. See, you ultimately decide your own fate."

I scoff. "What a visual, huh?"

"You *will* fulfill this contract. Only you get to decide if it's the hard way or the easy way."

"Fuck you," I whisper.

With more strength than I expected, he pushes me backward until the chair clanks on the floor. As I'm trying to crawl away, to get to my feet, Darius stands over me like a monster in the dark. "Your defiance tells me you want it the *hard* way. Dangerous game you're playing, little Birdie. But." He shrugs. "I'll make sure to enjoy every fucking second of torturing you, listening to you beg for your life."

I close my eyes tight, hoping this is a bad dream and I'll wake up soon.

Wake up. Wake the fuck up, Birdie.

"Now, shall we go?" He says, bringing me back to reality.

I pick myself up off the floor and don't say anything because there's nothing *to* say. It's obvious I have very few choices here. I can give him information about his dead sister that I don't have. Or I can die. Looks like I'm fucked either way.

We climb into his Bentley, and he drives us a couple of miles at most. Too many questions are on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow them down on our way to the academy. I've only heard things in passing about the education and training conducted behind the esteemed walls of this secretive institution. It was a place I knew I'd never have access to. A dream, really. A fairytale.

But the reality is far from that. Now this place is part of my own fairytale—the brothers Grimm kind. This place is my living nightmare.

And as far as nightmares go? It's absolutely beautiful.

The place looks less like a school and more like a palace; built from limestone and marble, it looks like a more modern

version of Hogwarts, or maybe Cinderella's castle. My vicious Prince Darius snags the parking spot closest to the entrance, and I have to wonder if that's by luck, or by design. *Just how important a person is he on this island?*

Darius slides out of the car first, coming around to open my door for me. He holds out a hand to help me out, grabbing my wrist when I try to slap his hand away, yanking me out of the car as gracefully as possible. "Behave," he mutters through his teeth, a brilliant smile fixed on his face as fake as the rest of this place. He lets go of me, and I look around at the rest of the students milling about the gates. Oh, shit. All eyes are on me. Darius wraps his arm around my shoulder, holding me against his body as we walk together. Hushed whispers ripple through the crowd of students. For some reason, my presence alongside Darius is a big thing. He guides me down a grand hallway, pushing me through a set of double doors marked *administration*.

The way his jaw stays locked as we enter the headmaster's office isn't lost on me.

"Birdie Moore," Darius says, presenting me as if I'm a gift.

The older man behind the desk moves the book from in front of his face to glance at me. Small glasses balance on the end of his nose, and he honestly could not look less interested in me if he tried.

"Bring her to the infirmary...to be checked out. I'll let them know you've arrived."

"Yes sir," Darius states, grabbing my arm and guiding me back out to the hallway. Our footsteps echo onto the marble floor that has the Valmont crest every few feet until we're outside. A couple of hundred yards later, we're entering a building that looks like an old-fashioned hospital for incredibly rich patients. After signing in and waiting for ten minutes, we're escorted into an all-white room with a low bed and a wall stocked with medical supplies behind glass doors. It smells like rubbing alcohol and plastic. Is this the academy's nurse's office?

A woman wearing a white coat enters, with a clipboard in one hand and a few vials of something in the other.

As soon as she sees me, she drops everything, almost as if she's seen a ghost. The vials crack as they hit the floor, but none of us make a move to retrieve them.

I don't say a word as Darius shoves me forward.

The woman stares at me. Her mouth opens and closes, and there's a familiarity about her that I can't quite place.

"Can I speak with you in the hallway, please, Mr. Prince?" she says to Darius. I'm left on my own as they step outside. I stand awkwardly, trying to hold my breath so I can hear their hushed tones over my rapidly beating heart.

"What the fuck is she doing here?" The woman asks.

My face contorts. *Does she know who I am?*

He says something, but I can't make out the words. It's alarming how calm he is compared to her hysteria.

"You shouldn't have brought her here."

"What's done is done," he states. I somehow hear him say *that* part crystal clearly.

A few minutes pass, and the door opens. They both return.

The woman avoids making eye contact. "Jump up on the table, please."

I stay where I am. "For what?"

She takes a few steps forward, her intimidation gone. "I get that you're new here, but it's time for your required implant. You'll either take it willingly or be strapped down and sedated. Your choice. I suggest not being strapped down and sedated."

I glance at Darius and he nods. "She'll be fine." His voice lowers. "Won't you?"

That murderous part of him that scares the shit out of me makes an appearance, and I begrudgingly walk over to the

table. I lie on my back, sucking in a deep breath, staring at the blinding lights above.

“Can I ask what kind of implant this is?”

“It’s a contraceptive implant to prevent pregnancy. You’ll get two. The first one in your arm today, another in your cervix after ninety days. We like to let your body acclimate first.”

My face contorts. At the rate Darius is going, because he’s so convinced I’m withholding info, I won’t have sex for another year. Seems pointless.

“That’s a lot of effort to make sure I don’t get knocked up,” I say in disbelief. “Ever heard of condoms?”

“Every female on the island of child-bearing age is required to have these until they’re approved to have children.”

My heart thuds so deep in my chest that I’m sure they both heard it. “Approved?” *Like a credit application?*

She walks over, carrying the large syringe she just prepped. “An island can only fit so many people,” she says matter-of-factly. “It’s just economics”

Turning my arm outward, she jabs the needle halfway up my inner bicep. I cry out, the pain sharp and sudden.

The woman laughs. “Relax. That was just the numbing agent.”

Darius stands in the corner of the room with his arms folded over his chest, watching me. I’m just ready to get this over with so I can escape his overbearing presence and get back to my puppy.

Ten minutes pass and the woman grabs a scalpel, slicing into my skin. I feel pressure and some tugging as she shoves a toothpick-sized item inside my arm. Once it’s in place, she seals the cut, then wraps it in a bandage, finishing the whole thing off with a butterfly clip.

“Take some pain reliever. It will hurt later,” she explains. “Oh, I should’ve asked this first. Any chance you’re currently

pregnant?”

Darius listens carefully for my answer.

“Only if God is the father,” I joke. Neither of them laughs. Tough crowd.

“No chance I’m pregnant. No chance in hell.”

“Good,” the woman tells me.

There’s a sudden commotion in the hallway. A young woman wearing the same kind of uniform I have on is yelling and begging as two hospital orderlies drag her along. Her blazer dwarfs her slight frame, but as she twists out of their grip, I catch sight of a slight swell at her belly.

Is she... pregnant?

“Please don’t do this” she’s begging. “Please don’t.”

“Shit,” Lilith swears, running out to the hall. She pulls a syringe from her lab coat and jabs it into the girl’s arm, injecting something that makes the girl stumble on her feet. Her head tips forward and the orderlies carry her away, down the hall, until I can’t see them anymore.

I turn to Darius slowly, as the reality of what I think I’ve just seen sinks into my bones, settling, festering. “She’s pregnant,” I whisper. “Where are they taking her?”

“Birdie...” Darius warns. “I’ve already told you. There are rules.”

“What kind of rule are they following right now?” I ask, holding my head in my hands as I listen to her screams. *Please! Please don’t!*

Darius appears to weigh his next words carefully before he speaks them. “Well,” he says. “They only used to use one form of contraceptive implant, until recently. But the failure rate was too high. I guess hers failed and somebody noticed.”

Oh, God. “What are they going to do to her?”

I already know the answer, but I want him to say it.

The doctor returns, looking flustered. “Sorry about that. Where were we?”

“We were just talking about where that pregnant girl is being taken,” I say quickly.

Lilith looks between me and Darius. “Pregnant girl? I think you’re mistaken.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you people?” I snap. “I know what I saw.”

“Apologies, Lilith. She still has her mother’s trashy mouth.”

I stand, tired of the underhanded comments, and rush toward him with my fists drawn.

“Birdie, the bandage,” she warns.

Darius stands in place as I raise my fist to punch him in the face. “Do it,” he urges with a smirk, then lowers his voice until it’s rough, “I’ll enjoy the *fuck* out of the hard way.”

I’d break his nose. Ruin his pretty face for a few weeks. But knowing he wants me to do it, so he has a reason to punish fuck me in the ass, has me stopping mid-swing. Swallowing hard, I put my hand down and suck in a deep breath.

I have control of my emotions. And control is powerful when you’re *being* controlled.

“Thank you, Lilith,” he says to the woman as she leaves the room without giving me another glance. I move past Darius, and he holds his arm forward, putting me in a chokehold. Inhaling deeply, he smells my hair and then slides his bottom lip up the shell of my ear. Pain courses through me as he violently jerks me further back.

“Such a good girl,” he growls. My breath hitches as my breasts rise and fall, and I hate that he smells so damn good. “Sad, though. Now that you’ve got that rod in your arm when I do finally take your cherry, I won’t be able to send you back to that trailer park knocked up with a baby.”

“I’ll *never* be your good girl,” I struggle to say, knowing if he holds me any tighter, I’ll lose consciousness.

“Mm. You do know what they say about bad girls, though? Apparently, they like it rough.”

“I hate you,” I choke out.

As he holds me with one arm, he slides the other down my ass, and under my skirt. With the flick of a finger, he pushes my panties aside and glides his digits down the slickness of my pussy. I swallow hard, barely able to breathe, my nipples as hard as pebbles. Anyone who walks past could see this.

“Drenched. Like a *very*, fucking bad girl.”

I gasp, my body instantly responding to the pressure of the pads of his fingers, and nearly begs for more. He circles my clit, my knees threatening to buckle under me. Just barely, Darius presses one finger back inside of me, all the way past the knuckle. It's tight, and my pussy clenches, wanting him to keep going. But per usual, he pulls away, leaving me dripping for him.

However, I'm still in a chokehold. Keeping me in place, he brings his free hand that's covered in my juices to his lips, and I hear him sucking his fingers dry. “Mm. Tastes just like cock tease. My favorite flavor of pussy.”

His hand whips back around and he shoves his digit more violently inside of me, and I gasp. Pulling away, he slides his slick finger inside my mouth, slightly loosening his grip on my throat.

“Suck,” he says and I know there is no use arguing. I taste the sweetness of myself, and I can feel his rigid cock pressed against my back. The fact that this makes him hard as concrete should make me sick.

“Bad little birdie,” he whispers, pulling my earlobe into his mouth and sucking. My eyes nearly roll in the back of my head.

“Are you done?” I finally ask, my panties soaked.

He spins me around until I'm face-to-face with him. Lifting his hand, he grabs my throat. I gasp, holding his hand, as he squeezes my windpipe closed.

The rage. I see it. I notice he's losing control. My eyes go wide and I try to reach forward, to get him to stop because my vision is beginning to fade.

“Dariu—“

He squeezes even harder. “I’m not done. Not until you tell me what I want to know.”

CHAPTER 25



BIRDIE

J wake up in Darius' arms as he carries me back to the academy.

I'm confused.

And pantiless.

"Where are..."

"In my pocket."

"Why?"

"Because I said so." He sets my feet down on the sidewalk and slides his palm to my ass cheek before squeezing. "I want to touch you at any time without restriction."

"A little fucked up, don't you think?" I say, feeling awkward. One strong breeze and everyone will be looking at the new girl's freshly shaved virgin pussy. That's just what I need to help build my reputation considering it doesn't look like I'll be leaving Darius' personal prison for a very long time.

"Why did that doctor freak out when she saw me back there?"

"It's not often we have newer people on the island. You have a better chance of winning the lottery than getting one of the admission seats. Usually, you're only admitted through birth or marriage. And since I neither birthed nor married you..." he trails off.

“Why did they let me into the academy, anyway? If we’re not married.”

“No. But a student died, and his spot at the academy became available. I forced, I mean I *asked* a few people to do what I wanted. Now, on paper, I’m essentially your... *sponsor*.”

“You mean *captive*.”

“Call it whatever makes your pussy wet.”

My cheeks flush as I remember him touching me at the breakfast table just an hour ago. One day I will get my revenge on Darius Prince.

How can I even entertain the thought of being attracted to someone I hate with every fiber of my being? But the way he touched me... the way he made my body come alive... only to deny me any release. It’s no wonder I’m thinking about it. He left me without any satisfaction, and now, without panties, I’m hyper-aware of my swollen, frustrated clit with every step I take.

“First session doesn’t start for an hour,” Darius tells me when we’re close to the Bentley. “Sit in the car and I’ll come back for you then.”

“Can you at least leave me the keys?”

He meets me with dead eyes. “Do I look like a fucking idiot?”

“Do you want me to answer that truthfully or lie?”

Shaking his head, he turns and walks away. While he’s off galavanting, I’m left to sit in the car and wait for my owner to return like a dog. The thought gnaws at me as I shift in my seat, trying to ignore the way the thick wool of my skirt rubs up against my pussy. He purposely didn’t let me come. He knew I’d be seeking relief. Fucking asshole.

A few students pass by the car, wearing the same dark plaid uniforms as me. They look older, at least twenty-one.

“Are you going to the memorial service in the chapel?” I hear one of them say. Memorial service? For the dead guy,

Darius mentioned, perhaps?

“Only because we have to,” the blonde replies with a laugh.

Are all of the students at Valmont Academy psychopaths with zero compassion?

More students pass the car, and eventually, I can't stop fidgeting. I get out and follow behind the next group of people who walk by.

“Are you Birdie?” This guy asks. He's tall, with dark hair, and looks like he could be in magazines. He might be a little older than me, but I'm not sure.

“Yeah,” I say, looking around confused. Is he one of Darius' goons? Am I going to be punished?

“Hey. I'm Archer,” he holds out his hand and gives me a boyish smile. “My mom. You just met her back at the infirmary. Lilith? She told me to be sure to show you around.”

“Oh yeah. The doctor who stabbed some rod into my arm. Weird she said that,” I say, honestly.

“It's because you're new. Sometimes it can be hard adapting as an outsider,” he explains and while it makes perfect sense, I trust no one.

“Okay. Well, Darius Prince mig—.”

Archer laughs. “I'm not afraid of Darius. It'll be fine. He knows I'm not trying to steal his...what has he been telling everyone you are? Oh yeah, his *property*. Fuck that guy.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “Fuck that guy.”

I smile wide and wonder if this guy is normally this nice or just overly charming. Either way, I take the kind gesture for what it is and we enter the chapel.

“Hey, lucky timing, scoring the dead guys' place. Anyway, see ya round,” he tells me with a wave, walking toward the front, and I squeeze into the back.

The cathedral is beautiful with tall high pitched ceilings and low-hanging lighted lanterns. Early morning sunlight

beams in through the stained glass, casting shards of turquoise, green, and blues through the room. But I can't help noticing that everything is dark and gloomy. It's as cold as Darius' mansion.

In the front of the room, there is a picture of a guy that looks to be Darius' age and a beautiful woman. She looks just like Darius but with softer features and plumper lips.

"Davina," I whisper.

Her smile is perfect and those chestnut brown eyes stare straight through me. The organ plays, and the music seems to breathe life into the silence.

The peppy blonde who made the comment earlier, steps up to the front of the room, taking her place behind a golden podium. She almost looks sweet and angelic as she wipes invisible tears from her eyes. "Today we're here to remember Heath Anderson and Davina Prince who were *both* lost in a tragic boating accident over spring break. Today is Davina's birthday and her twin brother Darius is spending it here, mourning with you."

My eyes trail over to Darius who's sitting in the front row, looking forward like a statue. It's his birthday today. Huh.

I can't even tell if he's breathing from where I am. His reaction doesn't change.

The girl continues on and on and on. And I just want to scream for her to read the room as she talks about herself and her friendship with Davina.

"Enough, Lindsey." Darius says from the front pew. The room grows extremely quiet as he sucks in a deep breath. "Enough. Can we please move on?"

"Of course, of course. I'm so sorry, sweetheart," Lindsey says. "Thanks for coming, everyone."

People stand and start heading for the exit.

As I stand to walk out, hoping to escape being seen, I lock eyes with Darius.

It doesn't matter that there are hundreds of people in the room. He sees me almost immediately.

He's furious. Dangerous.

All I know is I need to get the fuck out of here as quickly as I can.

I make a beeline toward the door, trying to squeeze through people, but we're bottlenecked at the only visible exit.

Darius shoves his way through the crowd, and reaches across several people, grabbing me by my suit jacket. As soon as his hand slides into the neck of it, he jerks me backward, dragging me through the hoard of people like I'm light as feathers.

CHAPTER 26



BIRDIE

I 'm fucked.

CHAPTER 27



“Get in here,” Darius roars, dragging me to the bathroom. The *female* bathroom. He shoves me inside, and I’m greeted by a restroom that looks like it’s out of a five-star resort. The walls are lined with thin, vertical pastel pink tiles, rectangles piled all the way to the roof. Black and white hexagon tiles are arranged into a striking pattern on the floor. Five cubicles take up most of the space. A long marble counter runs the length of the opposite wall, and five deep basins with ornate tapware are spaced out along it.

A young woman tries to enter, and he tells her to fuck off just as he tosses me to the side and locks the door.

I stand, trying to escape him, but he’s bigger and faster than me. Doesn’t help that the only way out is through him.

“I thought I told you to stay in the car,” he murmurs, taking several slow, but calculated steps toward me.

The warning sirens are screaming in my mind. Right now, Darius is angrier than I’ve seen him so far, and I know I’m going to be punished for this.

The question is... what’s the punishment going to be?

“Did you really think you could fucking run away after disobeying me?”

He wraps his hand around my throat and forces me backward, until the back of my head slams into a full-length mirror beside the last basin. I wince as I think I hear the glass splinter behind me, but no shards rain down on the floor.

“Answer me.”

“You bought my virginity,” I say breathlessly. “You didn’t buy my goddamn existence. You want to keep me on this island, you want me to be a good girl while I wait around for you to get it up so you can finally screw me? Good fucking luck.”

He tips his head back, a chilling laugh coming from his throat. “You think I can’t get it up? Oh, Birdie.” He lets go of my throat and spins me, so I’m facing the mirror, gathering my wrists in his grip as he presses his body into mine. I struggle against him, but that just seems to excite him, if anything. My cheek smashes into the mirror, and a hollow ringing buzzes in my ear.

He cages me against the mirror with his arms, one hand planted on each side of my face as he angles his lower half, his erection pressing between my ass cheeks. I fight the urge to let out a shocked moan, biting down on my tongue instead. He’s *big*. Not that I have anything to compare it to, but holy hell—*how could that ever fit inside me?*

“I can get it up there right now if you want,” he threatens. “I’ll have to use blood for lube, but you’ll bleed plenty. Or you can tell me what you know about my sister. About her disappearance. Just tell me what you know.”

“I don’t know anything,” I protest.

“Tell me,” he roars. “Tell me!”

I set my jaw stubbornly. Fuck him. Fuck all of this.

“Even if I knew something, I wouldn’t tell you,” I spit. “I’d die before I told you anything, you psychotic piece of shit.”

I scream as Darius slams his fist into the mirror, right next to my face. It smashes this time, and my cheek is still pressed up against it. I recoil from the shattering glass, shrinking back into Darius’s imposing figure, watching in horror as blood drips from his fist. He grabs me roughly, yanking me so I’m facing him again. “You really shouldn’t have said that,” he mutters. “You stupid girl.”

A knock at the door breaks through the fog of our battle. For a moment, everything else faded away, and it felt like we were the only two people in existence. Not in a good way. It felt like being trapped in hell with the devil himself, surrounded by flames.

“Fuck off!” Darius yells toward the door. I start to cry for help, and in an instant, his palm clamps over my mouth.

“It’s Lindsey,” an unimpressed female voice says on the other side of the door. “What are you doing in the girls’ bathroom, babe?”

Babe?

A terrifying grin spreads across Darius’s face as he lets me go, walking backward to the door. He flicks the lock and cracks the door open without taking his eyes off me once. I guess I could try to run, to get past him, but I’ve already done that once, and look where it got me.

Massaging my throat, trying to will away the pain from where Darius manhandled me, I watch, silently, as the blonde girl who led the memorial service stalks into the bathroom, her head tilting to the side as she gives me a scathing once-over.

“Who the fuck are you?” she asks.

CHAPTER 28



All I can see is red.

I'm a terrible person. A vile human. An irredeemable soul.

It's already gone way too fucking far with this girl. I've abused her beyond any acceptable explanation. I've defiled her. I've literally purchased her from a human trafficker and murderer as easily as if I were buying a new car or motorcycle. Easier, actually—I don't even need a license to ride this toy.

On the other hand... she agreed to this. Signed a contract in literal blood, *her* blood. She needed money so badly, and the only thing she had worth a damn—her virginity—was the thing I could exploit to make her mine. The worst part is, I don't even want to fuck her, not as part of a transaction, anyway. She's extremely fuckable, don't get me wrong. With that doe-eyed expression and those pretty lips? She's not the kind of girl you just want to fuck.

She's the kind of girl you want to get to know.

The kind of girl you want to kiss.

Unfortunately for her, none of that matters. What matters is that she's the key to finding my sister. And that means that unless she cooperates, she's going to suffer.

"Who the fuck are you?" Lindsey's voice echoes in the girl's bathroom.

"She's my new toy, aren't you, Birdie?"

"Well, I hope you're going to share," Lindsey replies.

Birdie cuts her a scathing glare before looking at me. “Your hand is bleeding.”

Lindsey looks down at my bleeding fist, sticking her bottom lip out. “Poor baby. Let me kiss it and make it better.”

I let Lindsey kiss my bloody hand—her equivalent of pissing on a tree to mark it as hers—as Birdie watches on, a look of revulsion briefly crossing her face. Rage burns in my gut like acid, like poison I keep willingly drinking because I cannot let this go. Davina is not dead. I would feel it, wouldn’t I? I would know! I’d fucking know if she was dead, and she’s not. My sister is out there somewhere, alive, possibly suffering and scared—and this little bitch can help me find her. *Why won’t she help me find her?*

“Lock the door, Lindsey,” I instruct.

Lindsey looks intrigued. She does what I ask, returning to my side as we both feast our eyes upon Birdie. Something about being locked in with not one, but two psychos like us has her spooked. The cool, bored disposition she was trying so hard to maintain is gone, replaced by a genuine terror.

“Scared?” I taunt.

Her eyes travel warily between Lindsey and I.

“This is your fault, you know,” I say.

“My fault!?” Birdie echoes in disbelief. She snaps her attention to Lindsey, perhaps looking for someone more empathetic than the villain she believes me to be. “You know he bought me,” she says quickly, her words panicked and fast. “He bought my virginity at an auction. Your boyfriend had his fingers inside me this morning while he was threatening to kill me. He’s psychotic.”

Lindsey looks shocked. But it’s not the kind of shock that says she’s troubled. It’s the kind you get when your boyfriend fucks your ass until it bleeds for the first time and you end up liking it a little too much. My little cum thief isn’t worried, she’s *excited*. Oh, Lindsey, you twisted little liar.

“He *is* psychotic,” Lindsey agrees, her plump lips lifting up in an evil grin. “It’s what I like most about him.”

The hope and indignation on Birdie's face melt away, replaced by a numb acceptance.

"If you would just tell me what you know about my sister," I add, "I'd fulfill our contract right here, right now. I'd fuck you on the floor of this bathroom and send you to the mainland on the midday ferry, so you could crawl back to that trailer park with my cum still in your aching pussy. So this is your fault. What happens next? You did this to yourself."

"I don't know anything," she whispers. "I swear."

"Save it," I snap. "Or I'll make Lindsey sit on your face so you can't make a noise."

"Sounds pretty good to me," Lindsey murmurs.

I turn to Lindsey, giving her a sharp glare. "Don't think you're off the hook, you little cum thief. You think I'd let you cum if you sat on her face?"

Lindsey shakes her head. "No, sir."

"You want my cum?" I ask her, my hand capturing her jaw, lightly at first, then rougher. Lindsey nods. "Get on your knees, then. Let's show the new girl how it's done on the island."

Lindsey is beyond eager. I knew she was a little nymphomaniac, but I didn't realize just how much of a deviant she was. She's got my cock in her fist and her tongue lapping at a bead of pre-cum in the time it takes me to undo the top button of my pants.

My cock, already erect as soon as I started pressing it into Birdie's back, is now hard as a fucking rock. I fight back a choking sound of pleasure as Lindsey works my dick like a pro like this is her full-time profession. I'm not going to last long, not with the thrill of Birdie in the room watching.

Except she's not watching. She's half-crouched in the corner of the room, her hands over her eyes.

"Birdie," I bark. "Get up. Now. Hands by your sides."

With great reluctance, she unfolds herself into a standing position and does what I say, looking at the floor.

“Eyes on me,” I state, my voice more relaxed by degrees and Lindsey sucks and squeezes and licks me closer to exploding.

Birdie takes a deep breath, locking eyes with me.

“Come closer,” I tell her. Birdie shuffles closer, still trying to stay out of my reach, but I manage to grab her, yanking her so she’s standing between Lindsey and me. I thread my fist into Birdie’s hair and grip hard, forcing her to look down at what Lindsey’s doing to me.

“You see that?” I murmur in Birdie’s ear. “This is how it’s done. Take some mental notes. This will be your job, from now on.”

Lindsey stops abruptly, pulling away so that only the tip of my dick remains in her mouth. Without warning, I grab the back of her head with my free hand and fuck so deep into her throat that she gags violently on my dick. “I didn’t tell you to stop,” I say between gritted teeth. I hold her there for a moment, my cock filling her throat entirely, suffocating her as tears begin streaming down her cheeks—and then I let her go.

“Keep sucking until I come in your mouth,” I tell Lindsey. “Don’t swallow. Not one drop. You keep it in your mouth like a good girl.”

Lindsey nods, bobbing on my cock once more with a moan that vibrates pleasantly through my body. I think she’s just relieved that she can catch her breath, to be fair.

I’m about to come. My cock gets incredibly hard, and I reach for one of Birdie’s nipples, clearly visible through her shirt since she’s not wearing a bra. I squeeze her breast as I come into Lindsey’s mouth with a strangled groan. There’s a lot—I haven’t jerked off in a while, and I haven’t fucked since I took Lindsey in the ass. I pull my cock out of Lindsey’s mouth and she tips her head back to hold as much of my cum as she can without spilling any. A couple of drops leak from the sides of her lips and make their way lazily down her chin. Watching this little cum thief waiting for her next instruction just adds to the pleasure.

“Birdie,” I grin, wrapping my fingers around her upper arm and squeezing tight, “this one’s for you.”

“What?” she gasps. “No!” She clamps her hands over her mouth. As if that would stop me.

“Lindsey, spit it in her mouth.” I help Lindsey to her feet and then turn back to Birdie, who’s shrinking back against the wall again. *Idiot. We’ve got you cornered.*

“Open,” I order Birdie. She shakes her head emphatically. I shrug. “Hard way? My *favorite.*”

I kick her legs out from under her, and she yelps as her knees smash against the tiled floor. I crouch beside her, squeezing the sides of her jaw until I force her mouth open.

“Lindsey.”

My obedient little cum thief’s eyes are practically fucking sparkling with desire as she begins to let my cum drip slowly out of her mouth onto Birdie’s tongue. Then she opens her mouth wider, and the entire load rushes into Birdie’s mouth, invading her throat, making her gag.

“Now kiss her,” I tell Lindsey. “Make sure she gets every last fucking drop.”

Lindsey grins, getting on her knees in front of Birdie—who I’ve still got restrained in my grip—and presses her lips to Birdie’s open mouth, running her tongue along Birdie’s cum-soaked lips, kissing her deeply.

Just as suddenly, Lindsey recoils with a squeal, holding her lip. “She fucking bit me!”

I make a tsk sound, turning my complete attention to Birdie. “Swallow all of that like a good girl. You’re a good girl, aren’t you, Birdie?”

Her eyes blaze with fury as she shakes her head, trying to escape my grip. But she’s no match for me. I slam my hand over her mouth and nose, forcing her to swallow. “You’re a whore, aren’t you? Just like your mommy. Swallow like a good girl.”

Almost immediately, the light dims in her eyes. Was it the mention of her mother? Or calling her a whore? Whichever it was, the fight drains from her as she sags in my grip, defeated. I watch her throat bob, and her cheeks aren't rounded anymore. "You swallowed it all?"

She nods brokenly.

"Good." I release her, smiling, satisfied with my handiwork.

Satisfied, that is, until she smiles back and spits a mouthful of my own cum back at me. It lands on my navy blazer, right on the Valmont Academy emblem, and slowly seeps down into the expensive material.

"You little cunt," I grind out. "This is dryclean only."

"You're a fucking coward, Darius Prince" Birdie says, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth. "You can't even cum on me yourself? You have to get your girlfriend to do it? What are you afraid of? That you'll like it?"

Oh, no. She did not just say those words. She did not just spit my own cum back at me.

Rage explodes in every cell of my being, every fiber, every nerve ending. My blood pressure must be fucking skyrocketing right now, because I'm so furious I can feel the anger coursing through my veins, passing through my dead heart, spreading like a disease. Pure, unadulterated rage.

It takes every ounce of self-restraint I possess to stop myself from knocking her head against the tiled wall repeatedly until her skull caves in and her brains start leaking out.

"Lindsey," I say calmly—too calmly. "Time to go. I need to speak with Birdie in private."

Lindsey opens her mouth as if to protest, but she stops herself. She must see how close I am to murdering somebody. Guess she doesn't want that somebody to be her.

"Go!" I roar.

Lindsey scuttles out of the bathroom, and I lock the door behind her.

Birdie is still on her knees, spitting the last remnants of cum-flavored saliva from her mouth onto the floor. I rip her up by her hair, throwing her against the bathroom counter between two basins.

“You want me to fuck you?” I yank her skirt up and remember she’s not wearing any panties, using my bleeding hand to touch her bare pussy. She’s fighting me, but it’s useless.

“I’ll fuck you.” I use two fingers to swipe a glob of cum off my blazer front, forcing it into her mouth. She bites down on my fingers immediately, and I use my other hand to hit her across the cheek hard. The blow stuns her long enough for me to do the same thing again, forcing more cum into her mouth, and this time she’s too dazed to bite me.

I clamp her mouth shut with my non-bleeding hand, pinching her nose shut so she can’t breathe. At the same time, I shove my bloody fingers into her pussy.

Giving her a savage finger fucking that is tempered only by the need to keep her hymen intact. Can’t have her getting away from me on a technicality, can I?

She’s panicking, eyes wide, chest expanding and falling as she gasps for air that can’t get into her body. At the same time, I’m curling my fingers, hitting her g-spot, and her legs are shaking violently. Coming on the verge of blacking out. She must be seeing stars right about now—from the lack of oxygen, from the impending orgasm.

“You want me to make you come?” I ask her.

And fuck me dead, *she nods*.

I smile viciously as her pussy clamps down on my fingers, as her entire body bucks with pleasure... and then I let go of her, shoving her to the ground.

CHAPTER 29



BIRDIE

*S*lide down the wall, my body useless as the orgasm shatters through me. Darius leaves me in pieces on the floor with my skirt hiked up, his blood smeared between my thighs, and my pussy dripping wet.

At any moment, someone could walk in, and I know I need to pick the broken pieces of myself off the floor. If anyone saw me like this, they'd think the worst.

Once I catch my breath, I push myself up off the cold floor. I'm dizzy; intoxicated. As I stumble forward, conflicting thoughts make my mind race. I will never forgive Darius for what he's done, for leaving me like this on the floor. Showing me the reality of the year ahead while the taste of his salty cum lingers on my tongue.

I hate the way my body responds to him. Nearly passing out on the brink of an earth-shattering orgasm at his hands. I've betrayed myself. I've betrayed all decency. *Because I liked it. Because I want more.*

I smooth down my skirt and take a deep breath, trying to figure out how to avoid him the rest of the day. I don't want to face him, not after that, because in that final moment, *he knew*. He knew I wanted it. Then he gave it to me.

Turning on the water, I grab a paper towel and dip it under the faucet, needing to clean his blood from between my legs. It looks like I've been raped and left for dead.

Glancing over, I notice the shards of shattered mirror on the floor, and I curse myself for wanting him so badly. For

desperately needing him to touch me like that again. My fingers slide down between my legs, and I tremble when I graze my swollen clit. I'm so fucking wet, with his cum and my arousal all as one. I lift my trembling fingers and place them in my mouth.

What did Darius say I tasted like? Cock Tease? He's right.

The fantasy of him fucking me has me squeezing my thighs together. I feel high. I feel like a fool.

And then the anger returns.

I shouldn't want this. He's like a fucking drug. He's given me a taste of what it's like to come under his brutal touch, and now I'm hooked. I want it again. What's wrong with me? I hate myself for feeling like this.

I hate myself for wanting more of his toxic touch, while I teetered on the edge, as he held me in his death grip, withholding all oxygen. I saw fucking stars.

And I hate him.

Pulling my skirt down, I adjust my shirt and jacket and try to compose myself.

Get a fucking grip, Birdie.

I step out of the bathroom and make my way across the grounds, to the headmaster's office. As soon as I enter the main entryway, I run into Archer again. The nice guy.

"You okay?" he asks, searching my face.

I wonder if he sees my internal anger or how disturbed I am with myself for coming so damn hard. "Do I look okay?"

"No, you look lost," he says.

"Oh." My face cracks into a smile. For a second I almost forgot how raging pissed I am.

"Can you tell me how to get to the headmaster's office?" I ask and he gives me a look. "What? I need my class schedule."

"I'll go in with you. He's a total perv," he says, leading the way.

We walk down the same long hallway as before and I knock.

I nod, a silent thank you and we enter. The headmaster's beady eyes narrow in on me and then his eyebrow lifts when Archer moves in behind me. No telling what would've happened had I entered this room alone. Now that I'm looking around, it does seem more like a dungeon than a library.

"Birdie Moore, is it?" His voice is deep and gruff.

"Yes."

"Yes sir. That's how you address me. Understood?"

"Yes sir," I say. Archer stands beside me, bored. "I came to get my schedule."

"Ah, yes." He opens a drawer and pulls out an index card with my name written on the top in a fancy script. In the corner, there's a Valmont V and my curriculum is printed down below.

I read each class.

"Anything else?" he barks.

"No...*sir*," I say.

"Off you go, then," he says, and Archer and I quickly leave.

Archer snatches the card from my hands and looks it over. "I can show you where you need to go or give you directions. What do you prefer?"

"If you can show me, that would be awesome."

He nods as we continue walking. "Are you always this nice?" I ask.

"No. Absolutely not." Archer chuckles.

"You're not getting in my pants," I tell him.

He makes a choking noise, and his face goes beet red. "Don't worry." He looks me up and down, then focuses his attention on the bracelet. "You're not really my type."

I actually feel somewhat offended. “Why? Is it because I’m poor?”

“It’s because you remind me of...family.” He laughs. “Not into it.”

“Do you have a sister?”

“Only child,” he tells me.

“Me too,” I say.

I look up at the stained glass windows, the same ones that were in the chapel. This place is gothic with golden plaques hung outside of each professor’s door. Many students avoid eye contact with me and I’m mildly self-conscious about the silver bracelet on my wrist. Or maybe there’s blood still between my thighs. *So many things to be self-conscious about.*

Regardless, we make our way through several connected buildings and Archer points out where every single one of my classes is.

“Any more questions?” he asks, checking the time on his phone.

“No, that’s it. Thanks for helping,” I offer and he gives me a grin before leaving. I stand outside of my first class, not sure what to expect when I walk in.

Will these people stare at me just like the assholes at my old school? Probably.

After the hallways clear, I make my way inside. As I enter, I quickly scan the room searching for an empty seat, not wanting to draw too much attention to myself. However, all eyes are on me. The new girl. In the back, there’s one desk with an empty chair. I keep my gaze on the floor as I make my way there. When I get closer, that’s when I notice Darius is planted right fucking behind me.

A mischievous grin meets his perfect lips and I swallow hard, trying to ignore him. He doesn’t look like he smashed his fist into the glass and then finger-fucked me into oblivion. He looks relaxed. Calm. Like the fucking devil he is.

I sit, keeping my hands in my lap, increasingly aware of him leaning forward. Darius breathes against the softness of my neck and makes his way up to my ear. “You didn’t think I’d let you out of my sight for too long, did you?”

His warm breath brushes against my ear as he licks the shell of my ear. “Remember who owns you.”

I swallow hard, as he sits back in his seat, and I try to act unaffected by him. Gritting my teeth, I don’t give him the satisfaction of a reaction of knowing how far he’s wedged himself under my skin. But I can’t help squeezing my thighs together.

The professor speaks up and goes on about business calculus. Different equations are written on the whiteboard and I realize I have no pen or paper, nothing. As if Darius reads my mind, he hands me a notebook and a pencil. When I open it to the first page, there’s something written in elegant cursive. His handwriting.

I can smell your cunt from here.

I scoff, trying to ignore the dull ache between my legs. He chuckles behind me, leaning forward again, his hot breath licking my skin. “Bet you’re dripping fucking wet,” he whispers.

I turn and look him square in the eyes. “Check for yourself, then.”

The smirk on his face as he reaches his hand forward, has me turning in my seat, batting him away. The last thing I need is for him to call my bluff because he’s so goddamn right it angers me.

Stupid body.

As soon as the lesson is over, I stand and rush out of the room. The memories of his touch linger like an unscratchable itch. Darius walks past me, bumping my arm, nearly knocking my notebook from my arms. I stop walking and rest my back

against the wall, trying to get a hold of myself while also creating space between us. When he's out of sight, I go to my next class.

To absolutely no one's surprise, Darius is waiting with an empty seat right next to him this time. His gaze burns into me and I avoid him as best I can. But as soon as I sit, he scoots his chair closer, resting his palm on my thigh, and squeezing.

I gasp, my heart rate increasing as the older woman begins her lesson on economics. The room smells like musty old textbooks as she continues on in a monotone voice.

I'm not stupid, but all of this is beyond the shitty education I got at Santo Christo High. I'm lost and draw doodles in the top corner of the notebook because she might as well be speaking in another language.

I tap my pencil against the paper, and Darius reaches over, grabbing and snapping it in two. "Stop fidgeting."

Instead of bringing the slightest bit of attention to myself, I sit eerily still and stare forward the rest of the time. He doesn't take his grasp from my thigh, though.

As we're dismissed, a tall guy with fire-engine red hair walks up to Darius and pats him on the shoulder. "Ready for Founder's Day?"

Darius shrugs. "Not sure if I'm going, yet. Not after what happened during spring break."

That must be when his sister went missing, I think to myself, as I listen to their conversation.

"It's the biggest party of the year, man. Ya can't skip." The guy pauses then turns to me, looking me up and down.

"Gonna introduce me to your friend." He smirks at Darius, lifting his brows, intrigued.

"This isn't my friend, James. This is my fucking property. Don't speak to her," he states, grabbing my wrist and holding up the silver bracelet. Recognition flashes on the guy's face, knowing exactly what this shackle means—off-limits. "Understood?"

James nods and I'd be lying if I didn't say I was grateful. The dude looks like a fucking creep.

Darius places his hand on my shoulder, pushing me forward through the crowd, and into the hall. He doesn't let me go and keeps his grip on me all the way to our next period. When we enter, I realize he's wedged me between him and Lindsey.

"Are you sure she isn't *my* gift?" Lindsey coos, meeting Darius' eyes.

His gaze narrows. "Cum thieves don't deserve gifts."

She goes stiff, her expression icy, and he seems to enjoy watching her squirm as he wraps one arm around me, brushing his fingertips on my skin. Trying to make his girlfriend jealous. It seems to be working.

"Why are you doing this?" I whisper so that only he can hear me.

He gives me an incredulous look and smirks. "Because I can."

"You're a bastard," I spit out in a hushed tone, realizing I can't escape him. Not at home. Not at the academy. Nowhere.

At the end of the day, I'm relieved when we finally make our way across campus to go to PE. However, I'm scared to death when I see the large pool and hear the coach talk about swimming laps. The pool is deep, too deep, and I have to figure out a way out of it.

After I change into my swimsuit, a navy one-piece with a golden V across the chest, the coach walks over to me. The bandage is still tightly bound around my arm from earlier.

"You can't do any arm exercises for two days after you get the implant," she explains. "The doctor should've told you that."

"She didn't, but thank you," I say, happy that I can deal with this another day.

She gives me another look. "Go change into your uniform. You can sit on the bench with the others."

I sigh in relief, grateful I don't have to explain that I'd sink straight to the bottom of the ten-foot-deep Olympic-sized pool.

Quickly, I'm back in my uniform and sitting in the bleachers when another girl sits heavily beside me. I turn to look and it's the girl from earlier, the pregnant girl. Her eyes are vacant and she looks stoned as she hands a note down to the teacher.

"I'm on my period," she says robotically. "Can't swim today."

The teacher makes a face and mutters something about menstruating being no excuse. After she leaves, I turn to the girl, touching her arm gently. She recoils as if I've hurt her. "Sorry," I whisper. "Just... I saw you earlier. In the infirmary. Are you okay?"

"I'm on my period," she repeats like a broken record. "I can't swim today." She stares straight ahead while I try not to cry.

Lindsey struts out, making sure the bottom of the suit is stuck in her ass, showing her cheeks. Several dudes glance her way, and she seems to like the attention. She looks at me, narrowing her eyes, then makes a beeline toward Darius. I keep my gaze forward but watch her force herself onto his lap.

"Save it," the coach yells, blowing a whistle. Like synchronized swimmers, they jump in, using their allocated swim lanes. It's hard for me not to watch him, watch his muscles flex in the water, or watch the droplets trail down the crevasses of his chiseled abs when he stands to the side, waiting his turn. Randomly, his gaze burns into me, but I try to ignore him, pretending like he doesn't exist.

Class ends, and I wait for him to fetch me from the bench. Pretty much everyone has left the gym, even the haunted girl who was sitting beside me, but Darius hasn't appeared yet, and neither has Lindsey. The thought of her touching him makes me prickle. Is this jealousy? No. I don't care about Darius Prince. He's the biggest prick I've ever met.

Soon, Lindsey walks past me, smiling wide.

“Hey, bitch,” she says, spitting in my direction when she’s close.

“Hey, Cum Thief,” I throw back effortlessly. I lift my finger to the corner of my mouth, motioning that she has something there. She rolls her eyes, but when she walks past me, she checks. I hold back a smile.

Everyone is gone, and I sit impatiently on the bench, waiting for my owner. Ten minutes tick on, and Darius finally makes his way from the locker room.

He walks over to me, unamused. “Thought you were too good to swim today?”

He lifts a brow, and we continue making our way past the large pool.

“No. It’s not that. The coach said-.”

Before I can finish, he’s pushing me into the pool as hard as he can. I reach out for him, horror in my eyes, and I let out a scream as my body slams against the water.

CHAPTER 30



DARIUS

I laugh as Birdie disappears under the surface of the water, fully clothed. I was looking forward to seeing her perky little ass in a pair of high-cut racing bathers, and her sitting on the sidelines has me annoyed. As I walk away from the pool I expect splashing, or to hear her call me a bastard at the very least, but it's silent.

Bored, I grab my phone out of my bag, scrolling through the endless notifications. There's a party this weekend. Lindsey has sent me a photo of her pussy. The housekeeper has texted to let me know dinner is in the oven whenever I want it. I check the news. My stocks are up a little today. Swell.

That's when I notice the silence. It's.... deafening.

I turn around and realize Birdie hasn't come up yet.

I wait... and wait... and as I watch her sink deeper, it eventually occurs to me that she might not be able to swim. *Fuck.*

Panic, the type that smothers and chokes you, grabs onto me. I dive into the water and swim to the girl sinking helplessly toward the bottom of the pool.

Fuck fuck fuck.

I snake my arm around her body and use every bit of strength I have to bring her to the top. Lifting her, I place her on the side of the pool, realizing she's not fucking breathing.

“Fuck!” I yell. I begin chest compressions. I put my mouth to hers, blowing air, then back to compressions. I look around, and there’s no one here to help.

Everyone’s gone.

“Come on, Birdie,” I say, willing her to breathe.

I’m a fucking idiot for not recognizing the signs sooner. How many minutes was she under?

Eventually, she comes to and begins coughing up water and I turn her on her side until she’s emptied her stomach. She lies there for a second and relief floods through me as her eyes flutter open.

“Birdie?” I help her sit upright.

She’s pale, trying to catch her breath, not saying a word. She’s in shock, stunned. When her eyes meet mine—full of anger and fear—a knife twists in my chest.

“Fuck you,” she murmurs and tries to stand, but is unsteady. I grab a hold of her, not allowing her to fall or escape me.

“I’m taking you to Lilith.”

Birdie chokes on more pool water. “No.”

With a swoop of my arms, I pick her up and carry her. She doesn’t try to leave but droops almost lifelessly in my arms like a ragdoll. Her cold, wet skin presses against my bare chest and I hold her tight.

I walk through the academy grounds with her in my arms, and I don’t give a fuck who sees me right now. I’m texting Lilith.

DARIUS: Birdie needs a doctor. Are you still on campus?

SHE REPLIES ALMOST IMMEDIATELY.

LILITH: I'm already at home. I'm getting in the car now. Meet you at the infirmary.

DARIUS: I'm bringing her to your house. I drive faster than you.

SHE SENDS ME A THUMBS-UP SIGN.

Right now, I need to take Birdie to Lilith so I know she's okay. There's no telling how much fucking water she swallowed. How long she was without oxygen?

"Put me down," she demands. "I don't want anyone to see you carrying me."

"I don't give a fuck what you want," I bark.

She slams her fist against me, but she's weak.

We make it to the Bentley, and I set her on her feet, opening the door. Birdie slides inside and when I turn around, I see Lindsey headed for us. Great. She's walking toward me with a scowl on her face and has her princess posse behind her.

"What are you *doing*, Darius?" There's judgment in her tone, judgment I don't fucking like.

"I'm leaving." I meet her eyes as her face hardens.

"Taking your wet dog home?" Her friends encourage her with a laugh as folds her arms over her chest, trying to make her tits look bigger than they are. She smirks and keeps talking shit. "Does your bitch do tricks for you, too?"

"You're a cunt," I say flatly, walking past her, knowing I don't have time to punish her. Lindsey grabs my arm and tries to jerk me back.

"Remember you're *mine*, Darius. I don't know what you're stupid infatuation with that trash is, but it needs to stop. I don't want to see you touching her in public anymore. It's embarrassing. People are already starting to talk after the stunt you pulled getting her classes changed."

I lean forward and whisper in her ear. “Know your goddamn place and go fuck yourself, *Lindsey*. I don’t play by your rules. I will ruin you if I have to, cum thief.”

“You wouldn’t.” She gasps loudly and when I take a step back, her eyes are wide.

“I would. I’ve got the pictures to prove it.” I meet her eyes, then jerk my arm from her grip, walking away.

As I make my way around the car, she lets out an ear-deafening shriek that echoes off the brick walls of the building. While she continues to scream and make a scene, her friends console her, shooting daggers my way.

One word from me and she’ll be ostracized by every person on this island. And she knows it.

Lindsey Collins *always* gets her way, except when it comes to me. Her family’s name holds no power compared to mine.

I start the engine. Birdie leans her head against the seat and closes her eyes.

There’s so much I want to say, but I swallow it down.

Within ten minutes, I pull into Lilith’s driveway and walk Birdie to the door. Grabbing her hand, I turn her around to face me. Her angry eyes meet mine and I feel something dangerous swirling between us, something I shouldn’t feel, something I force away. Time stands still for a moment before I ring the doorbell.

“I’m really fucking sorry.”

A dazed smile touches her lips. “Words I thought I’d *never* hear you say. Funny. It was almost over my dead body.”

The door swings open, and Lilith looks between us. “What happened?”

“He tried to drown me,” Birdie says tiredly.

“I didn’t know she couldn’t swim,” I protest.

“Birdie, come in,” she says, stepping to the side and allowing Birdie inside. When I try to enter, she blocks me.

“You can come back later.”

Lilith stares me down like she’s ready to murder. I wouldn’t put it past her. Unspoken words pass between us, and as I open my mouth to speak, she slams the door in my face. I deserve it.

I get in my car and head back to Valmont to grab my shit.

The parking lot is empty. I go to the gym and grab all of my stuff, just trying to waste time. Lindsey finds me again and I’m shocked she’s still here. I throw everything in my trunk, ready to get the fuck back to Birdie, to make sure she’s alright.

“Darius.” She places her bottom lip into her mouth, still pouting. Her blonde hair blows in the breeze. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, reaching for my hand, pulling me toward her.

“For what, exactly?” I raise my brow, waiting for her to admit her faults. Something she *rarely* does.

“For being jealous,” she says.

I cross my arms over my chest. “And?”

“I see the way you look at her,” she mutters.

“And you’re sorry for what else?” I repeat, ignoring her statement.

“For being a cum thief,” she whispers.

I narrow my eyes. “I could end this relationship in a snap, Lindsey, but I know your sick fucking daddy would punish you. So, I’m trying to keep this shit up for public appearances for your sake. Do you understand? You know that’s all this has been since you tried to trap me, so don’t act shocked.”

Her expression changes and I see the real her, the one she hides behind a mask. She drops the act. “People on the island aren’t stupid, Darius. You still care about me and I know you’ll change your mind. You wouldn’t be treating me like this if she wasn’t here.”

I laugh and move forward, grabbing her arm. “This has everything to do with you and your actions. And all actions have consequences.”

“You’re right. It hurts when I hear what everyone is already whispering about the two of you.”

I lean her body against the car, and she parts her legs. “And what is *everyone* saying?”

Her back presses against the cool metal and my arms are on either side of her body, trapping her in. She’s into it. She wants this. Her breathing increases and the last thing I want to do is give her any pleasure. No more of that. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“That you’ve fucked her already,” she says meekly.

I trail a finger down her cheek, wrap my hand around her throat, then continue down her body. Her breasts are rising and falling.

“Business is business,” I growl, lifting her skirt.

“We all know she’s your slut. Promise me you won’t touch her in public.”

“Touch her like this?” I palm her ass, then bring my fingers around, splitting her open before shoving one inside. She’s drenched, soaking fucking wet. She tries to kiss me, but I don’t allow it. Riding my fingers, she begs for more, begs me to let her come, and wraps her arms around my neck.

When her breathing increases, I pull away. “You don’t deserve to come. Little thief.”

“You *love* me, Darius! Tell me you love me.”

I try to feel something for her, *anything*. I imagine sliding my fingers inside Birdie’s tight cunt, but being softer, gentler, listening to her soft moans as she begs me to fuck her. My dick grows hard and Lindsey notices, pulling me back to my reality, making me remember I’m with her. Making me remember how much I don’t want her.

“Fuck me,” she pleads, but she already knows the answer is no.

I won’t give her the release she’s dripping for. Ever.

We're a fake couple. A temporary one. A facade to make her pervert father keep his hands to himself until she's old enough to escape his house.

“Remember who's in control here, Lindsey. Don't ever fucking question me again or I'll tell everyone what you did,” I warn. “Understood?”

She nods, then I climb inside the car.

Before I drive off, my phone buzzes, and I pull it from my pocket.

Lilith: She'll be okay. You'll need to watch her throughout the night.

Relief floods through me, but one thing is for certain—this can never happen again. Birdie *will* learn how to swim.

CHAPTER 31



BIRDIE

*A*s soon as my body hit the water, I knew my fate.
I was going to die the way I had always feared.
I was going to drown.



When Darius picks me up from Lilith's, he can't meet my eye. On the way home, I say nothing. I keep quiet, even when I notice a large cemetery with VALMONT written in iron on the archway. It's clean and kept up, unlike the shithole where I buried my mother. I make a mental note of where it is, only a few blocks away from the Prince Compound.

Once we're inside the mansion, I look at Darius, and for the first time ever, I catch a hint of remorse. He's cut from the same cloth as Javier, and he's dangerous. But right now, as he stands before me, I see something else, something more human.

He hesitates and clears his throat. "I'm sorry."

Shockingly enough, his apology seems sincere, at least on the surface. Darius isn't the kind who apologizes for anything.

But right now, he's looking at me differently than any man has ever looked at me before. I ignore him, heading upstairs, too exhausted to get into any kind of conversation with him right now.

When I open my bedroom door Rebel runs toward me, his little paws clicking against the marble floor. I bend down to pet him, accepting all of his licks. When I stand, he stays at my feet, not leaving my side as I go to the bathroom to shower off the pool water.

I feel like shit, beat down, and worn out. Once I'm clean, I change into a pair of cut-off jeans and a t-shirt.

"Are you okay?" Darius asks, leaning against my doorway.

"What do you think?"

"I'm keeping a close watch on you for the rest of the evening. Don't leave my sight."

"Absolutely not."

He shrugs. "Sorry. Doctor's orders."

"Oh my God, get out!"

Darius enters, forcing me to sit on the bed. "Quit acting like a brat. Have you ever heard of dry drowning? If you got too much water in your lungs, you could still fucking die in your sleep. This isn't a game, it's serious."

I roll my eyes at him. "I'm not going to die in my sleep."

"Do you want to risk it?" he asks. "Are you really that careless?"

"Careless? Did you conveniently forget how I made my way to the bottom of that goddamn pool?" Rebel runs out of the room, obviously freaked out by our rising voices.

"I wasn't aware you couldn't swim."

"That's because you didn't ask. I'm an object, a piece of property. Something you *own*," I remind him as if he's forgotten. I'm constantly reminded. And I don't like the way my blood rushes when I meet his cold gaze.

Then, he laughs.

The bastard actually laughs. “You really are a silly girl, aren’t you?”

He’s close. Too close. The smell of his cologne is intoxicating. *No. Fuck. This guy almost killed me today!*

“Why are you laughing? Are you crazy?” I ask between clenched teeth.

Reaching forward, he places his palm on my face and gently caresses my cheek. My breath hitches and it takes every drop of strength I have left not to lean into his warmth. The warmth I hate my treacherous body for craving. I smack his hand away.

“Oh, Birdie,” he mutters. His voice is a low rumble in the otherwise silent room. Leaning in, he breathes in deeply before tucking damp strands of hair behind my ear. “You make me crazy.”

Butterflies swarm in the pit of my stomach. Swallowing hard, I close my eyes, realizing I’m holding my breath. He’s suffocating, and yet it feels right in all the wrong ways. This shouldn’t be happening, not after he practically killed me. Not after he bought me. “I hate you, Darius.”

“Hm.” It’s almost as if he’s smiling. “Love and hate. They’re not that different. Interchangeable. Four letter words.”

I lick my lips, my mouth suddenly dry. Darius runs his fingers through my hair, roughly tugging my head back. Forcing my chin upward, he lets his lips trail down my neck. “I hate you, too,” he whispers. The pain of his grip, the way he’s tugging at my hair, causes a trickle of pleasure to pool between my thighs.

It’s fucked up that I like this. That I want to own *him*.

“Get out,” I whisper.

His hot breath on my skin drives me crazy. But then, in a snap, he releases me and stands. “Dry-drown, for all I care,” he says, leaving me alone. I suck in air, the heaviness leaving the room with him.

I survive the night. No dry-drowning to get me off this island. The next morning comes quickly and I get up and go through my routine. We ride to school together in silence. There's no violent touching at breakfast, no throttling my neck in the car. I suppose Darius has decided to give me a break after the shit he pulled yesterday, nearly killing me. The more I think about it, the angrier I become. It's slowly eating away at me.

I go to my first class and Darius shoots a smirk my way but I look past him, pretending he's invisible. Each class is exactly the same. Him sitting behind me, or beside me, and me ignoring him. I expect him to be a smart ass or force me to talk to him, but he doesn't. I'll take his mercy while I can get it.

After school, I walk to the parking lot, and Archer comes up beside me. Darius shoots him a murderous glare, but surprisingly enough, he doesn't threaten this guy. He lets me talk to him without acting like a caveman or snapping.

"What are your plans next weekend?" Archer asks.

"Oh, well, I've got a lot of potential things on. Yeah. I'm just *so* popular."

He chuckles and Darius groans. "You're going to the Founder's Day boat party, right?"

I look over my shoulder at Darius. "I have no idea what I'm being forced to do."

"It's an academy tradition of sorts. Anyway, you should come. It's a good place to meet people. Maybe get to know everyone on a different level."

I shrug. "Maybe."

"Yeah, maybe your owner will let you come out and play," he says, and Darius glares over at him.

"Walking on thin fucking ice," he warns..

Archer laughs, not intimidated whatsoever. I like him. He's funny. "Anyway, hope to see you there."

"Yeah, me too," I tell him and he moves to his Range Rover.

I get inside the Bentley and Darius looks at me. “Any other man talks to you that way, he’s dead.”

There’s venom in his tone when he says it.

“Why does Archer get a free pass and no one else does?”

“Because I *like* him.” He grits his teeth.

“You mean you like how his Doctor mommy does favors for you under the table? Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

He turns his head toward me as he revs the engine. “You have no idea.”

I shrug. “Sure. Whatever.”

He shakes his head but doesn’t explain further.

When we get home, I drop my books in my room, then change.

Darius meets me in the hallway.

“Are you ready?” he asks with a towel draped over his shoulder.

I try to walk past him because I don’t know what he’s talking about. Quickly, he reaches out and forces me back toward him until I crash into his chest.

“Your swim lessons start *today*.” He gives me a pointed look.

“Let me go,” I tell him, trying to wiggle free from his grasp, but it’s pointless.

“You don’t have a choice. Now, put on your bathing suit and meet me outside by the pool. Or you can swim naked.” Darius’ eyes slowly slide up and down my body. “Your decision. Unless you want me to decide for you?”

I want to scream out and tell him to go fuck himself because I know what he’d choose. And the last thing I want to do is play in the pool after yesterday. But I change into a two-piece swimsuit, knowing I can either go willingly or be forced to. It’s easier this way.

When I walk outside, he's on his phone typing furiously. He looks up at me, his eyes raking me from top to bottom, noticing I'm wearing a bikini. "You should wear that more often."

He sets his phone down.

"I hate the water, Darius. You can't change that," I state. He takes off his shirt, showing his sun-kissed body and chiseled abs. His biceps flex as he crosses his arms over his chest and gives me a smirk because he caught me looking, and he can tell I like what I saw.

Bastard.

"Come here." He curls his finger. I stay firmly in place, afraid my body will betray me.

"Now," he growls.

I begrudgingly move toward him and he holds out his hand. Every part of me tells me to run, except for my thudding heart. I reach out and take it, and he slowly guides me toward the shallow end of the pool. Then he walks us up to my thighs. This is the furthest I've been in the water since I was a small kid.

I think of how it will feel when it covers my shoulders, and my face, and then eventually swallows me under again. Panic wraps an invisible hand around my throat and squeezes, ripping the air from my lungs. I feel like I might hyperventilate.

"I can't do this," I whisper, turning and scrambling out of the pool. I'm almost out when a hand grabs my ankle, stopping me.

"Sit," he commands, pointing to the top step, and like his bitch, I do. Because I need to calm down. I need to get a grip.

As I catch my breath, I stare into the crystal-clear water. The sun hangs lazily in the sky but I'm grateful for the sunshade that stretches over the pool.

My heart continues to pound like it might beat itself out of my ribcage. I'm having a panic attack.

Darius notices and places his hand on my shoulder, an act to calm me. “My mother was never around after my dad died. She pretty much abandoned us as teenagers. She popped pills and watched reality TV while we raised ourselves. To keep my mind busy, I swam. I became the strongest swimmer on the island. Davina and I both. It’s another reason why I know my sister is still alive.”

“I don’t know anyth—,” I try to say. But he lifts his finger and places it against my lips, stopping me.

“We’re surrounded by water, Birdie. Not knowing how to swim makes you weak. It makes you very fucking easy to kill.”

I scoff.

“Makes you stubborn, too.”

“Why do you even care if I can swim or not?” I ask.

He shrugs. “There’s fear and there’s *fear*. The first kind is mental. The second is physical. It leaves a scar, a reminder of something that could kill you. You can physically swim. You’re strong. Strong enough to break Rafe’s nose.”

I chuckle. “Almost forgot about that.”

“Your hang-up with water is up here.” He points to his temple.

The shame of never learning to swim swirls inside me, holding me captive just like the hands that were supposed to hold me tight with love, not with the certainty of death.

“My mom had a mental breakdown when I was little,” I say, uneasily. “She was a young, poor, nearly homeless, single mother just trying to survive.”

I pause, only able to circle the edges of this memory. If I get too close to it—if I touch it head-on—it steals the breath from my lungs and turns my world a murky black.

“I was four,” I begin, chewing on the words that feel like poison in my mouth.

Rafe's face swims in my mind as I attempt to cobble together words that will explain what happened. I think of that dressing room in the mall, the way he spoke about his mother being shot sixteen times, the violence, the blood. Maybe that's why he was kind to me. Perhaps he saw some of the violence in my eyes the way I saw it in his. Our mothers brought us into worlds that weren't safe. And then they offered us up to the treacherous nights, almost like a challenge to the world: Do your worst.

"She'd have pills delivered in the mail in anonymous packages. She needed to medicate after I was born. She got really sick. Psychosis. She was admitted to the hospital a few times. She started writing nonsense on the walls in crayon, bible verses that didn't exist. She was scary. Then one night, as she was giving me a bath, she tried to drown me with her bare hands. To get rid of me. I reminded her of something she didn't like. I was reaching for her, crying as she held me under. If it wasn't for Justin, I would have died that night. So excuse the fuck out of me if I don't like water. Call it weakness. Call it whatever you want."

His jaw clenches and I see something flicker behind his eyes.

Rage. Anger. And something else.

"I don't want your pity, Darius."

"It's not pity, little birdie," he says. "It's understanding."

I look away from him, not wanting to be pinned in place by him. Darius holds his hand out to me. "Do you trust me?"

"No." I don't even wait a beat before answering.

He laughs. "Good. You shouldn't. But today, you're learning how to swim, and it's not an option. So, come on."

I grab his hand and he helps me stand. Slowly he leads me further until the water is up to my chest. My nipples are hard pebbles through the thin material of my bikini top, and he notices.

Darius places his firm grip on my waist and brings us deeper, to a spot where I can't touch the bottom of the pool. I

begin to panic.

“I’ve got you, Birdie. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.” And somehow I know he’s not just talking about the water. There’s more behind his words. Almost like a promise as he holds on to me.

“If you find yourself in water and you can’t swim very well, the first thing you do is float.” He places his hands under my ass and upper back, lifting me until I’m lying flat on my back. I feel safe, but I shouldn’t. I trust him, but I don’t know why, after everything he’s done.

“Breathe slowly. Be calm,” his voice is low and soft.

I close my eyes and listen to his instructions. I suck air in through my nose and slowly let it out through my mouth. I’m lost in my thoughts. Replaying old memories, the good ones, while listening to Darius breathe.

The only thing that brings me back is Darius’s baritone. “See, you’re doing it on your own.”

His hands are no longer on me, keeping me above the water, and I open my eyes and smile. When I think too hard about it, I begin to sink, but he’s right there waiting for me, suspending me with his hands as if by magic. We move to the shallow end, and he makes me float and move my arms. An hour passes, and he pushes me to keep trying until I’m able to do it successfully on my own.

Once my fingers are pruned, he steps out of the pool, looking like a Greek God, as droplets of water stream down his chest. He grabs a towel and wraps it around me before drying himself.

I want him to kiss me.

I so desperately want to feel his lips brush against mine and get lost with him. Taking a step forward, I nearly trip on wet pavement, but Darius quickly catches me before I fall.

He holds me in his arms, studying me with concern. “You good?”

“I’m good,” I confirm, my cheeks burning.

CHAPTER 32



This is getting dangerous.

I wanted to kiss that motherfucker. What is wrong with me? Am I insane? Did I hit my head on the side of the pool and get brain damage when Darius pushed me in yesterday?

The truth is darker, buried deep down inside me. I can't fully comprehend it yet, the way something has awakened in me. Some kind of darkness. A craving for pleasure that defies the laws of my contract with Darius. Maybe, *probably*, I'm desperate to reclaim control of some small part of my existence. I've always let life drag me along in the undercurrent, being tossed around by riptides, crawling through the shallows when the weather was merciful... only for a tsunami to smash into me, unbidden.

A strange analogy for a girl who doesn't like water. Maybe I'm thinking like this because I've just been in a pool with the man I detest, the man who holds my life in his palm to crush whenever he feels like it. He's in control of everything. Where I live. What I eat. He owns my virginity, and by extension, my body. My sexuality. None of it is mine. Even the birth control implant in my arm is because I'm here with him, on this fucking island. I hate it. It makes my arm itch like crazy, reminding me I'm marked, property of Darius Prince.

I think it was easier when he was only awful to me. When he was a straight-up asshole to me. When he hurt me. Something about me almost drowning yesterday has changed him.

Guilt. He's guilty.

I don't know how long that guilt is going to last, but I do know this might be my only chance to get under his skin. To try and move some of the chess pieces myself. To somehow get me off this island and out of this hellish limbo of when-will-he-fuck-me. I'm tired of waiting. Of being surrounded by these fake people who look at me like I'm nothing. I'd rather go back to being with all the other nothings in Santo Christo.

I just want to finish this. I just want to go home. Seeing that pregnant girl in the medical clinic, the way she was dragged back into that procedure room, probably to have an abortion she didn't want... the empty eyes she had after, sitting beside me as we watched the rest of the Valmont students swim laps...it sparked an urgency in me. There's something deeply wrong with the people on this island. The way they govern their people—*women*—is inhuman.

So, it's time to take matters into my own hands. It's time to get the fuck off this island.

Darius heads to his bedroom after we've toweled off from the pool, and a moment later I hear the shower turn on. I give him some time to undress, and then I tiptoe into his room.

It's usually locked. I guess he's let his guard down a little. Maybe he's decided that since he almost killed me yesterday, I'm allowed free rein of his house. Apart from his sister's room, of course. That's been locked after he caught me in there. Not like I've given the handle a jiggle every time I walk by it to test or anything...

I wander through his bedroom. It smells like Darius... it smells *good*. Shut up, I tell my traitorous body. We're not here to lust after him. We're here to end things, once and for all.

The bathroom door is slightly ajar, steam billowing into the bedroom. I push the door tentatively, stepping into the bathroom to be greeted by Darius, naked and turned away from me as water streams down his body. Quietly as a mouse, I reach for the bow-tied strings at the back of my neck, holding my bikini top up, pulling one so that the knot comes undone.

I'm intending to surprise him... but he surprises me first. Two surprises, actually. The first is the sight of him gripping his cock tightly in his hand, a bead of precum glistening on the tip. He's been jerking off. I wonder if he's been thinking about me while he does it. Surprise number one actually looks pretty good. So good that a wave of desire grips me, causing a strange sensation across my pelvis, and a flood of wetness that pools in my bikini bottoms.

The second surprise isn't so great. In his other hand, Darius holds a gun. And before I can fully comprehend what's going on, he's got the barrel pressed against my head.

My eyes snap from his rock-hard cock up to his face at the precise moment my bikini strings loosen completely, the triangles of fabric covering my breasts falling down so that I'm exposed, my nipples hard with anticipation. I'm not sure who is more shocked—or more aroused.

“What are you doing?” he asks, the words seemingly lodged in his throat as he looks down at my tits. He lets go of his cock, at the same time flicking on the gun's safety, then sitting it on the ledge behind him, out of my reach.

I swallow thickly, feeling exposed and in mortal danger at the same time.

“Umm... I thought I would shower in here. With... you.”

His shoulders lower, and he takes a moment to fully appreciate me with his eyes. “Your bikini top seems to have fallen down,” he says, one side of his mouth lifting in an amused smirk.

I'm not very good at this. “Uh-huh,” I say lamely. God, I'm so irresistible, with my awkward answers. How will he ever resist my feminine wiles? *Ugh.*

“You need help fixing it?” he offers. I can't stop stealing glances at his erect cock. I've seen it being shoved down Lindsey's throat, and the hard outline of it through Darius's pants, but I've never seen it like this—up close and far too big to ever fit inside me. How am I going to do this? He's too big.

Javier could barely get a finger inside me. Darius is going to rip me in half.

Well, he'll rip me in half and then send me home on the next ferry, with his cum still leaking out of me. Isn't that what he said, back in the bathroom the day he tried to force me to swallow his cum?

"Birdie," Darius says. "You never seen one of these before?"

My eyes meet his as a flush creeps up my neck, across my cheeks. My lack of an answer is the only answer he needs. He steps forward, closing the gap between us, reaching around me to find the remaining strings holding my fallen bikini top around my ribcage. He gives me a devilish smile as he pulls those strings, tossing the thin material onto the shower floor.

My breath hitches in my throat as he grabs my hips, pushing me toward the wide ledge at the far end of his huge shower. He walks me backward until my ass hits cold tiles, and then he hoists me up effortlessly, my tiptoes still just able to touch the floor.

"What are you doing in here?" he asks again, his tone more menacing this time. Suspicious. Fuck. What am I doing in here? My grand plan—to get him to fuck me—is unraveling. I can't even speak. All I know is that I want him, and I hate that I want him. I lick my lips, and without even thinking, I lean forward, taking his cock in my hand and gently licking the tip.

A strangled sound releases at the back of his throat, and as he threads his hands through my hair, I open my mouth wide enough to take just the head past my lips. I've never sucked a cock before. Is it meant to be like sucking a lollipop? Like swirling your tongue around a melting ice cream in the heat of a summer's day? I don't know, but that's kind of what I do, alternating between those two actions until he abruptly pushes my head away.

At first, I'm embarrassed, thinking I must be doing it wrong, but then I look up and see his face. "Too close," he mutters, batting my hand away from his cock and grabbing my

closed thighs, parting them insistently, lifting under my knees so that my heels come to rest on the edge of the tiled ledge I'm sitting on. He rips my bikini bottoms off—easy access, with strings that tie at the sides, and then I'm completely naked and at his mercy.

“Fuck,” he says, dropping to his knees and gripping my thighs hard enough to leave bruises. He leans in without hesitation, licking me from my asshole, over my soaked pussy, before settling his tongue on my tight bud of nerves. He gently sucks my clit, drawing lazy circles around it with his tongue, and I'm moaning so loud the whole island can probably hear me.

He works me until I'm painfully close to an orgasm, and then he pulls away, bringing his mouth up to crash against mine. I can taste myself on his tongue, mixed with the precum I just licked from him, both of us kissing like we're trying to devour each other.

I yelp when he pushes a finger inside my pussy. “So wet,” he says against my mouth, his thumb pressing my clit again. “Think I can fit two?”

I nod eagerly. I don't know. I want to find out.

Kissing me again, he pushes two fingers in. I groan, feeling so incredibly full, my virgin pussy stretching to accommodate his fingers fucking me, in and out. “Oh, fuck,” I yell. I'm losing myself in this man who stole my life away, this deplorable fucking villain, and I've never felt more dark desire than I do in this moment.

“What are you doing in here,” he asks a third time, his fingers pumping faster.

“Fuck!” I cry. “W-wanted to be with you. Wanted y-you inside me.”

He stops kissing my mouth, his kisses trailing down my neck, each one violent enough to cause a bruise as he marks a line from my mouth to my collarbone. He takes a nipple into his mouth and sucks, biting down gently, his elbows pushing my knees as wide as they'll go.

“You want me to fuck you?” he asks. “You want my cock inside your little virgin pussy?”

I nod furiously. *Yes, I do. Because it means I'll get to leave this fucking Island.*

But also... just because I want him inside me. I want him to fill me up with his cum, to make me break apart, to bite me so I bleed. Rafe warned me this was an island full of predators, and that I shouldn't be anyone's prey, but in the grip of this monster, I want to be preyed upon. Let him break me like we're animals. Like I'm running and he's finally caught up.

“Just the tip,” he murmurs, pulling my hips so that my ass is half-hanging off the ledge. He angles me so I have a better view, as he lines up his cock and presses it against my pussy. I don't even care that it'll hurt. That I'll probably—definitely—be bleeding after he seats himself inside me. I just want to be full of him. I want to be fucked, to have him rut into me, to feel that cock of his hit all the nerve endings deep inside me that his skilled fingers can't reach.

“See that?” he marvels, as my throbbing pussy practically sucks the tip of his cock in by force. It's as if my body wants him so badly it's trying to draw him in. It doesn't hurt, with just the tip seated at my entrance, especially not with the way Darius is rubbing his thumb against my clit. I'm moaning and crying and I can't even remember my own name.

“Holy fuck,” Darius says, gripping his cock, jerking the length with his fist. “Your pussy is drenched. Feel how it's pulsing around my cock?”

I nod eagerly, pushing my hips forward, trying to get him deeper. I'm on the brink of coming and at the same time, I feel so empty—I want him to push himself inside me, to break me apart.

“Fuck me,” I say breathlessly.

His expression changes from burning, unbridled lust to cold calculation as I reach the peak of my climax. I cry out just as Darius pulls the tip of his cock from my pussy lips and aims, hot ropes of cum landing on my pussy, on my clit, on his

fingers as he continues to drag my orgasm from me with his touch. Finally, he shudders, squeezing the last drops of his own climax onto my pussy as he regards me with a look of derision.

I slump back, utterly exhausted, as Darius towers over me.

“Nice try,” he whispers. “But I’m kind of disappointed in how little self-control you think I have, baby.”

I’m panting, the aftershocks of my orgasm still firing, my mind a blank slate of sex-crazed bliss. I don’t protest when Darius brings his fingers back to my swollen slit and starts to spread around the cum he just spilled all over me.

“Still a virgin,” he mocks. “Did you really think I’d just fuck you and end our arrangement because you put your wet cunt in front of me?”

I don’t think. I just act. Before I can stop myself, my balled fist flies through the air, striking Darius square in the mouth, blood flying from his lips as his head snaps to the side. He leaves his neck turned like that for a moment, then two, his tongue darting out to taste the blood I’ve just drawn.

Like a fucking psychopath, he slowly turns his gaze back to me. “Did that feel good? Hurting me?”

I nod, tears pricking at my eyes.

“You’ve marked me, baby. Good for you. See this?” he presses on the birth control implant in my arm. “And this?” he taps his fingernail against the silver bracelet on my wrist. “These are the ways I mark you. But the best way of all is marking you with my cum.”

Rage burns in my chest. I sit up on the ledge, closing my legs, looking at Darius’s hand as he wedges it between my knees. “Uh-uh,” he says, pushing my knees apart again. “We’re not finished. Unless you want to be finished?”

I eye him suspiciously. “Are you going to fuck me?”

“Fraid not,” he replies. “Don’t take it personally. I would love nothing more than to break your cunt right now. But I have other needs for you.”

He moves his finger through the slick cum coating my skin and brings it to my lips. Without thinking, I open, tasting him, sucking his fingers clean. He looks... surprised.

“You want my tongue on your pussy?” he asks as if he’s asking if I’d like a glass of water. So casually lethal.

Just as casually, I nod my response.

“Words, baby bird.”

“Yes.”

He grins, his mouth still bleeding as he brings it down to my tight bud and gives it a lick. He doesn’t seem to care that his own cum is literally everywhere down there. “You’re not gonna fight me?” he asks.

I settle back, dazed as I shake my head. “No,” I whisper, surrendering to the man I despise, leaning up on my elbows so I can watch his tongue lap at me. I grab a handful of his hair and pull his mouth closer, grinding myself against his bloody lip as he wrings another orgasm from me.



HE LEAVES ME THEREAFTER, aiming the shower head at my spread legs. “Ah!” I gasp, the jets of water stinging as they hit my thoroughly tongue-fucked cunt. I’ve started to like the way Darius refers to my cunt. It sounds fucking filthy, and it suits the situation perfectly.

Exhausted, I drag myself to my feet, washing cum and blood off me, lamenting that I am still a virgin as I angrily towel myself dry. With frustration bubbling in my veins, I wrap the towel around me and storm into Darius’s bedroom. He’s wearing boxer shorts and reading something on his phone.

He tosses his phone to the side and sits up when he sees me. “Ready for round three?” he asks, and I can’t tell if he’s

joking.

“I don’t want to be here anymore!” I explode, angry tears blurring my vision. “What’s it going to take!?”

His expression is icy. “You know what it’s going to take. Information.”

About his sister. Right.

“I don’t know anything about your fucking sister!” I scream.

He doesn’t reply. He looks.... Bored.

“This is my life,” I try to reason with him. “I’m a person. A human being. With feelings. Don’t you care about any of that?”

More silence.

“You don’t care. Well, I bet you’ll care when I fuck one of your little friends at that ridiculous academy and tell everyone it was you who did it. I’ll be off this island and you’ll never see me again.”

That hits. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Yes, I would,” I whisper. “I’m going to tell everyone what you did. How you paid for me. You bought a teenage girl. You piece of shit.”

“That would be very unwise,” Darius says, his tone menacing. “We have a deal. A deal you agreed to, a contract signed in blood. You act like you were tricked, but you agreed to this! It’s not my fault you can’t read a fucking contract.” He slides off his bed and approaches me, violence in his eyes. “What was it, ten pages? A person’s word is their honor. An oath signed in blood is the highest kind of commitment. And you act like I’m some kind of fucking pervert. You know why I bought you. Not because I want to fuck you. I bought you because I’m trying to find my sister, and you’re the answer.”

“How am I the answer when I don’t know anything!?” I plead.

He balls his fists up as he approaches me. I stand my ground. He can hit me. He can beat me to death. I don't care anymore. It'll be one way to get off this fucking island, in a body bag. And I hope I get buried in a nameless grave. Fuck getting a proper burial, or a funeral, or hell, even a coffin. Let the bugs eat me. At least I'll be fucking dead.

I've never wanted to die before. Not when I was hungry in that trailer park. Not when I had to walk to school in shoes that had holes in them. Not when I worked a shitty waitressing job that barely covered school books. Not even when my mom died.

But right now, I want the earth to swallow me up. I want all of it to just stop, forever.

That's when I remember the gun Darius had on the bathroom ledge. He took it with him when he left the bathroom. Where is it? I scan the room, looking for the matte black pistol, but I don't see any sign of it. And then, I do, underneath his pillow.

Stupid fucking hiding spot.

I charge for it, Darius immediately guessing what I'm up to. He dives for me, but I'm closer to the bed, and my fingers grasp the butt of the gun even as Darius knocks me flat on the floor. I spin on the ground, crawling away from him as I lift the gun.

He puts his hands up in surrender, looking unimpressed. "Really?" Idiot thinks this is about him. He thinks I'm going to aim the gun at him. I bring the gun up to my temple instead, placing my finger on the trigger as I try not to cry.

"I don't want to be here anymore," I whisper. "I didn't agree to a year. It's too much. It's too long. And I don't know anything about your sister."

I start hyperventilating as I apply pressure to the trigger, knowing that if I wait, I'll chicken out. And then I'll be trapped here forever, for real. There won't be a second chance at a bullet or a sharp blade left lying around. I'll be leashed even tighter than I am now. No. I have to escape. I pull the

trigger all the way, squeezing my eyes shut, sobbing as I flinch at the oncoming bullet...

But the bullet never comes.

Blinking in disbelief, I meet Darius's stunned gaze. I pull the trigger again, but nothing. I scream in frustration and pull it a third time, just as Darius tackles me to the ground, his body pinning mine to the floor as we fight for the gun. He wins, of course. He's bigger, faster, and stronger than me. I cry as I blindly scratch at his face, blood welling up under my fingernails as I wound him. He grabs me in a bear hug, pinning my arms to my sides like he's my own personal straitjacket.

"Jesus Christ, you tried to shoot yourself in the head," he says, sounding stunned beyond belief. I'm still fighting against his grip, but I'm getting so tired, and he's so strong.

"Please just do it," I beg him. "Just kill me. Please just do it."

His dark eyes are shiny as he looks down at me, trapped in his impossible embrace. "No," he says, bringing a hand up and pushing my messed-up hair out of my face. He tucks it behind my ears, his touch tender, almost reverent.

"Do it," I urge him. "Take me out on your boat and feed me to those goddamn sharks. Drown me in the pool. I don't care. Just let me go."

"I'm sorry," Darius says, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "I'll stop, okay? You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. But you have to stay on the island with me. At least until the contract is up."

It's then that Rafe's words come back to me: The ledger. Demand to see it. Insist on an audit. It's a right anyone who signs a blood oath has to be granted. That's how I'll get off this fucking island. By getting back on that boat with the devil who started all of this.

"Fine," I reply. "Then I want to see the auditor. I want to see my debt on the ledger. I want to see the blood oath I signed."

Darius has been played by the rules of his own elite society, and he damn well knows it. He eases off of me, getting to his feet and snatching his phone off the bed. Thumbing through until he finds what he's looking for, his fingers move at lightning pace, as he fires off what I assume is a text message. Still staring at the screen, he leaves the room, his gun firmly in his other hand.

I hear a key being turned in a lock, and then he's in the bedroom beside this one—Davina's bedroom—rummaging through and slamming drawers. A minute later, he's above me again, tossing a black pantsuit on the foot of the bed. "Get up," he commands. "Get dressed. I don't think you understand what you've just done."

CHAPTER 33



The journey from Valmont Island to Javier's floating casino slash auction house is tense; Darius focuses on steering his speed boat along the quickest path through the choppy sea, while I apply makeup from his missing-possibly-dead sister's abundant collection. Oh, and I'm wearing her clothes too, a black tailored suit jacket that buttons between the breasts and matching cigarette pants. The whole thing is finished off with a pair of blood-red Manolo Blahniks, shoes I've only heard of in TV shows, but that I'd never be able to afford in my lifetime. For a guy who didn't want me anywhere near his sister's stuff, he sure has been generous with kitting me out in her best things. Maybe it's because I just tried to shoot myself in the head in front of him. Or, maybe it's because he's afraid of whoever this person is we're seeing to view my contract—the auditor.

My stomach does a nervous flip as we dock beside The Riverwood. The massive superyacht is anchored off the coast near Hermosa Beach tonight, far enough away that you couldn't hope to swim to shore, sharks or no sharks. It's a different atmosphere than the last time I stepped foot on this ship; I guess not wearing cutoff jean shorts and a cartoon t-shirt probably helps. Rafe greets us at the ship's rear dock, holding a hand out to steady me as I jump from speedboat to yacht as gracefully as possible whilst wearing high heels. He leads us through the labyrinth of hallways and stairwells that I've become accustomed to now, though I still couldn't find my way back off this ship if I had a map and a compass. Just as we're approaching Javier's office, Rafe stops us suddenly.

“What?” Darius asks.

“You should know, the auditor can’t make it.”

“Why not?” Darius barely conceals his irritation.

“Because she was killed last night. Nobody’s claimed responsibility yet. Until an interim auditor is sworn in, the witness to your contract has the authority to act as a temporary auditor for your contract only.”

I’ve remained silent until now. “I don’t even know who witnessed my contract,” I protest. At the same time, Rafe opens the door to his father’s office, revealing Javier sitting behind his desk, Faye the dutiful daughter perched on the edge of the desk by his side.

“Hey, baby bird,” she beams. “Want a lollipop?”

“You’re the one who witnessed my contract?” I ask Faye. “Isn’t that like, a conflict of interest?”

Faye waves her hand. “Only if I make it one. Which I didn’t.”

Javier finally speaks, addressing me as if we’re the only two people in the room. “Birdie,” he greets me. “Here. Your contract to read through. Did you bring a lawyer?”

I snort. “It’s a little late for that, don’t you think?”

Javier smiles, glancing over at Darius. “I don’t know. Is it?”

Ugh. He’s asking if we’ve fucked. “Nope,” I say. “That’s why I’m here.” I glance around at everyone in the room, then back to Javier. “Does everyone need to be here?” I ask.

Javier flicks his hand dismissively at the room. “Give Birdie and me a moment to go over things,” he orders. Rafe leaves immediately, and Faye takes a little longer, giving me a playful jab in the ribs with the stick end of her cherry lollipop as she walks past me. It’s a wonder her teeth haven’t rotted out of her head with the amount of candy she seems to get through. When Darius doesn’t move from my side, Javier clears his throat pointedly.

“It’s fine,” I tell Darius.

His eyebrows practically hit the roof. “Is it?”

“What’s he going to do?” I challenge Darius. Of course, we both know what Javier is capable of. After hesitating, Darius finally sets his jaw, walking out of the room without meeting my eye again. As soon as he’s gone, Javier gestures to a stack of papers on his desk, each one individually bound between clear laminated sheets thick enough to prevent any damage to the signed documents.

He slides the documents over to my side of the desk and motions for me to sit. I lower myself into the same seat I was in when I first came to visit him when he told me the story of the cat and mouse in partnership. That seems like a lifetime ago. I barely remember who that girl was.

“Let me know if you have questions,” he says, sitting back in his chair.

“Thanks,” I say, fighting the urge to roll my eyes. I’m so sick of everyone’s bullshit, and it’s far too late at night to be out reading complicated legal contracts about auctioning one’s virginity.

“I take it the contract hasn’t been fulfilled yet?” Javier inquires. “I mean, otherwise, why would you both be here?”

“It hasn’t been fulfilled,” I confirm. “He says he has a year to do it. I didn’t agree to a year.”

Javier makes a face. “I’m afraid you did.”

My stomach drops; this is what I feared. “Show me.” and then, “Please.”

Javier eyeballs me as he flicks through the laminated contract pages, stabbing his finger at a clause on page seven.

(legal lingo that says she cannot leave the property of her buyer until the contract terms have been fulfilled).

“My signature’s not even on this page,” I protest. “I didn’t agree to this.”

Javier leans over the desk, tapping the top corner of the page. “You signed up here,” he says. “See? Birdie Moore. I’m not a complete savage. I didn’t make you sign all ten pages in your blood. The rest is in pen.”

“Why don’t I remember signing these extra pages?” I ask him. “Could it be because I didn’t sign them at all?”

Javier frowns in mock horror, putting a hand to his chest as if I’ve offended him. “That’s a serious accusation, young lady.”

“It’s a serious contract clause to forget, don’t you think?”

Javier pulls out his smartphone, presses a few buttons, and then hands it over to me. It’s a video of me, I realize. But it’s not from the day I signed the initial contract. It’s from the night of the auction. It’s from the time when Rafe brought me into the office when Javier insisted on kissing me while, unbeknownst to me at the time, Faye was sucking his dick under the desk. And judging by this video, I was high as fuck while scribbling my signature on the extra papers that now make up this contract.

“I was drugged,” I whisper, looking at each page in horror. “I didn’t read any of this. I definitely didn’t understand it. I could barely even walk. I didn’t agree to these extra things. This isn’t fair.”

“Life’s not fair,” Javier responds, standing as if to signal our meeting is over, “And yet, here we are.”

“Making me sign a contract while I’m high doesn’t count,” I snap.

“Can you prove anything you’re saying?” he challenges.

He knows I can’t.

“Then the contract stands.” He waves his hand dismissively.

“I need to get off that island!” I insist, standing so abruptly that I almost knock my chair over. “I can’t stay there.” I don’t know what possesses me—maybe it’s the red high heels giving me the audacity—but I circle the desk, coming to stand in

front of Javier. He's a tall, imposing man, with broad shoulders and a stare that would probably make small children cry. I'm not a small child, though. I'm a young woman, the kind he claims isn't his type, the kind his son says is exactly his type.

I put a hand on his chest, feeling his heartbeat steadily: *thump, thump, thump*. He looks amused by my sudden bravery, but there's something else in his eye, too. A glint of desire. I saw it before when he was checking my hymen in that horrible medical room below deck. I saw how he fought back the urge to fuck me that day. Will he fight it again?

"You could do it," I say haltingly. "You told me what you'd do to me if you had the chance. He won't touch me. You could still do it the way you wanted."

Javier looks... I don't know. I can't get a read on him. He looks down at my hand as if it's a cockroach on his expensive linen suit, plucking it off with two fingers and letting it drop to my side.

"I should cut your hand off for touching me without permission," he says. "But somehow I find myself becoming fond of you, so I'll let it go this once."

"Javier. Did you hear what I said? Remember? You said if things were different you'd fuck me in front of a crowd and let them watch me bleed, or something. Whatever. You want to do that?"

He slaps me across the face so hard I see stars. I stagger back, holding my burning cheek, but at least I don't fall on my ass this time.

"I would never violate a blood oath," he says. "If he wants you for a year, be thankful. It could be worse. The other men who bid on you... let's just say, you'd be well used up by now. You'd be begging for a bullet in your pretty head."

"I tried to put a bullet in this pretty head before we came here," I snap, shoving his chest with both of my hands, as hard as I can. He's a wall of solid muscle, and he doesn't even budge. "My fault for not knowing how a safety switch works, I guess."

He grabs my wrists, shoving me so that I'm sitting on his desk. "Why would you do that?" he asks. "Is living in the lap of luxury really so terrible?"

"Yes," I answer honestly. "I'm trapped. My life is over. I'd rather be dead."

Javier begins to pace in front of me, seemingly weighing up a difficult decision. Finally, he stops in his tracks, facing me once more.

"I'm going to tell you something," he says.

"Okay?" I reply slowly.

"The ledger," he says. "You saw it tonight. The protection Eve paid for wasn't just for herself. It was for you."

Her debt was to protect me?

"From who?"

Javier tilts his head as if recalling something unpleasant. "People who would kill her, and you, if given the slightest chance."

"God, why do you always speak in such vague riddles?" I snap. "Just tell me. Was somebody after us? Who?"

"People from her past."

"Still being super fucking vague, dude."

"You have to understand, your mother didn't grow up around here. Around Santo Christo."

"That is earth-shattering information," I deadpan. "Can I go now?"

He grabs my jaw between his thumb and forefinger, squeezing roughly. "Your mother grew up with her family. Her very wealthy, extremely powerful family. On Valmont Island."

That... *is* earth-shattering information.

"You're lying," I seethe, but there's no conviction behind my words.

"She found out she was pregnant with you, and she left to protect you. But you've been there. You know. People aren't

just allowed to leave. Death is the only way. So she—we—staged her death. There’s a grave there with her name on it. Her family still thinks she’s buried there, all these years later. And apart from Justin, I’m the only person in the world who knows she got away.”

“There are no Moores on the island,” I reply. “You’re making this up.”

He has to be making this up. So why does it sound like he’s telling the truth?

“Her real name wasn’t Mia Moore. Her real name was Eve.”

I swallow back bile. “Eve what?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. But be careful little Bird. Once you know... once you see, you cannot unsee. And that island—once it has you, it will never let you go. Once those people find out who you really are? Not even I will be able to help you.”

He fishes in his pocket and pulls out a small silver trinket, the kind you would snap onto a charm bracelet. “This is a signal jammer,” he says, sliding the silver charm into my pants pocket. “If you need to go incognito for a short time—if you need to look for answers without being followed—you put this over the bracelet’s lock. You understand?”

My mother’s real name was Eve.

I nod, unsure whether I should thank him or hate him. Maybe both.

CHAPTER 34



BIRDIE

Darius drives us back to the island on his speedboat in silence, the sky above us as bruised black-and-purple as my fucking heart. Dark clouds have formed in the distance, ominous and leaden with rain that looks like it'll be torrential. I don't know if it's the information I've just gleaned from Javier or the choppy water on our return, but either way, I'm ready to puke by the time Valmont Island comes into view.

Darius hasn't dropped the smug look from his face since the moment we disembarked from Javier's super yacht and stepped onto his speedboat. I want to slap the look right off his face.

It physically pains me to know he was right.

I was tricked. The contract I signed said everything he claimed it did. Darius has a year.

A year.

I want to cry. I want to scream.

But who'd care? *No one.*

After we walk inside the house, Darius moves forward with a pep to his step. I follow him as far as the kitchen, lingering near the massive temperature-controlled glass room full of every kind of alcohol one could imagine.

When he whistles for me to keep up, that's when I speak up. "God, I hate you."

He spins on his heels. "You hate me when I'm right? Because that's all the time."

I groan. “You’re insufferable.”

“And what would that make you? A fucking delight?” He chuckles. “No, darling. You’re a fucking disaster. A wildfire running rampant with a smart ass mouth and a tight little, wet cunt that drips for me and me only.” He takes a few steps toward me and I straighten my stance, not cowering down to him.

He’s so close that it takes every bit of strength I have not to lean forward and rake my fingernails down his cheek.

“Now, say you’re sorry,” he mutters, his voice sounding dangerous.

“No,” I grind out.

He chuckles, but it’s a warning. “Defying me must turn you on. It’s the only explanation as to why you do it so damn much.” He runs his fingers through my hair, tightly grasping it at the scalp. It’s more pleasurable than painful.

“I need a drink,” I say. “A stiff one. After reading that contract, it’s the least you could do for me, don’t you think?”

“I can think of something stiff you could drink from,” he offers, snickering when I make a face. “Okay, okay.” He takes my hand, dragging me into the aforementioned cellar, running his fingers down a line of dusty wine bottles.

I shake my head. “Spirits,” I say. “Wine isn’t going to fix this.”

He gives me a curious stare before shifting his attention to the vast supply of hard liquor shelved on wooden racks. There must be hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of alcohol in this room. More than a funeral would cost. More than even my virginity.

“Now, what would a girl from a trailer park enjoy the most...” he scans the racks. “Cheap bourbon to loosen you up? Maybe you will be sucking my dick after a few of those.”

“Sure,” I say. “Whatever. Bourbon. Whiskey. It’s all disgusting. Just give me something to make this hurt a little less.”

He shrugs, selecting a bottle of scotch from a high shelf and carrying it to the kitchen, motioning for me to follow. I watch as he takes two tumblers, pouring three fingers of scotch into each.

“Is that the dog scratching?” I ask, covering my mouth with my hand. “Oh, shit. Don’t hurt-”

Darius is already disappearing up the stairs, two at a time. I grin, fishing the tiny pill from my cleavage that Javier so kindly gifted me, and use my fingers to crush the chalky tablet into dust over Darius’s scotch glass, giving it a quick stir with my finger. I would have preferred to be drinking vodka, but I needed a darker fluid to make sure any bits of powder that didn’t dissolve completely are disguised. Darius charges back down the stairs, just as I’m lifting my un-drugged drink to my lips, making a face as the scotch burns my mouth and throat. “Gross,” I choke out. Darius grins, downing his in one shot and topping his glass up with a fresh pour.

“You better not have hurt my dog,” I warn him.

“The dog was fast asleep on your pillow,” Darius rolls his eyes. “I don’t know what the fuck you think you heard.”

I shrug. “Must have been my imagination.”

“Okay, well,” Darius says, almost... stammering. He’s nervous, I realize. “I was thinking about how we need some new rules,” he says. “First rule is never, ever try to hurt yourself again. Do you hear me?”

I nod tiredly. *Rules are made to be broken, right?* “I’ll do my best.”

“I’ll stop being such a fucking bastard in return for your promise that you won’t try to hurt yourself again.”

Out of nowhere, I slap him. Open-handed, across the face. And he just... takes it. “Are you going to try drowning me again?” I whisper angrily.

“No.”

I punch him in the jaw. My fingers throb as I shake my hand. “*Fuck!* Are you going to have your girlfriend spit your

cum in my mouth again?”

At that, he hesitates briefly. *Shame*. “No.”

I push his shoulders so hard, his head slams back against the metal refrigerator door. He still doesn't resist me. Doesn't even grab my wrists to stop my assault. “Are you going to lock me in a bathroom and force me to cum again?” I cry.

He makes a choking sound in the back of his throat. He brings something out of his pocket. My bikini bottoms, are now dry, as he drops them on the floor between us. “Not unless you ask for it.”

A thrill pulses through me as I look at the bikini bottoms, as I remember what we did in the bathroom just hours ago. I was desperate, sure, and I was trying to trick him into fucking me, but God, did I love it at the same time. His tongue on my slit. The tip of his cock snug between my pussy lips, about to impale me, the way he bit at my nipples as I tried to pull him inside me.

“You're thinking about it, aren't you,” he breathes, stepping closer, erasing the space between us as the hard ridge of his erection presses against my thigh. “About the shower.”

I meet his eyes and I don't even have to nod, right before his lips crash into mine. We walk backward until my ass presses up against the wall in the hallway. Our breathing grows ragged as our tongues twist together in a fiery moment, setting my body ablaze. If I'm a wildfire running rampant, he's the trees as I burn him down. His teeth and lips graze and suck my neck as his hand slides up my shirt, pinching my nipple. I gasp, my greedy pussy clenching, begging for him. I push him backward until his back slams into the refrigerator, the ice machine dispensing cubes all over the floor as he kisses me so hard, I wonder if he's trying to suck my fucking soul out through my lungs.

I pull back and punch him in the face; he moves to the side too slowly, and my fist connects with the side of his skull.

It's only a striking glance of a blow, but it still sends him to the floor, his knees giving out from underneath him. His

hand fists my hair as he falls, pulling me to the floor with him, his back coming to rest against the refrigerator as I land awkwardly in his lap. He blinks heavily, looking up at me through hooded lashes.

“What...” he starts, “...the fuck... have you done.”

I stand up long enough to tear my pants down my thighs, kicking them into a pile in the corner. The jacket goes next until I’m wearing just a thin tank top and panties.

I straddle him, my knees hitting the hardwood on either side of his thighs as my fingers tear at his belt. He tries to wrench my hands away, but the drug has obviously started working its magic, and he’s boneless, devoid of strength, completely at my mercy.

“What did you give me!?” he roars. I just smile.

I make quick work of his pants, unbuckling and unbuttoning and unsheathing until he’s sliding to the side, with his cock in my hand.

“Stop,” he protests, but at the same time, his hips are driving forward, as he fucks himself against my closed fist.

“You’re so hard, baby,” I snap, angry tears biting at my eyes. “You might say no, but your body’s saying yes, isn’t it? How does it feel, to be the one with no power? To be touched and violated without your consent?”

He lolls to the side again, my thighs straddling him the only thing stopping him from slipping to a lying position on the hardwood. I grab his chin in my free hand, kissing him as he tries to fight off unconsciousness, moaning into his mouth as I jerk his cock with my fist.

“Does that feel good?” I mock.

“Mmm,” he moans. “S-so good.”

Vengeance pulses inside me, just as my pussy pulses with need. It’s the same steady beat of my heart, the same dark poison flowing through my veins. Darius watches in horror as I lift my hips up, pulling my panties to the side, my drenched slit pressing against the fat tip of his cock, splitting me in two.

“Just the tip, right?” I whisper into his mouth as he stares back at me in horror.

“You took everything from me,” I rage, readying myself for the pain. He won’t end this, so I’m ending it, for the both of us. “You ready to break my pussy, Darius? You ready for me to go back to the trailer park full of your cum?”

I hover there, my quad muscles screaming in pain as I will myself to take what I need, the way the world has taken everything it’s ever wanted from me. Tears stream from my eyes as I stay there, because I can’t do it, I can’t force him. It’s rape. I’d be *raping* him. And even though I know he’d enjoy the ever-living fuck out of me bouncing on his cock until he came deep inside me, he’s drugged. He’s about to black out. I can’t do that. *I can’t*.

“Damn it,” I swear, angling my hips away, sitting on Darius’s lap so his cock is resting between our bellies, instead of forcing it inside me as I’d planned.

“S-okay,” Darius says, squeezing my arm. Comforting me. “You’re too good. It’s not a weakness. Just means you’re not a monster like me.”

I’m not a monster, am I? And that’s to my detriment. I’m not a Javier. I’m not a Darius. I’m Mia Moore’s daughter. I’m Eve Somebody’s daughter.

“Fuck!” I scream, pushing myself off him and grabbing at the pants in the corner. I’m sobbing as I pull them on, as Darius slumps to the floor, his eyes fluttering shut.

I dig in his pants pocket for his car keys.

“Where.... Going?” he mutters.

I don’t answer him. I just rip the keys from his pocket, run barefoot to the garage, and a few minutes later I’m speeding down rain-soaked streets, headed for the dead center of town. The little cuff Javier gave me is snapped onto my bracelet, meaning Darius can’t track me.

As I’m gliding down the street, mansions, and glimpses of ocean whizzing past, the car starts talking to me in a posh British voice.

Anti-theft system activated a voice that sounds like Emily Blunt's coos at me. *Please exit the vehicle when it comes to a stop.*

What the fuck?

The car slows on its own. "No!" I yell, smashing my palm against the steering wheel. "Keep going!"

I force the accelerator down, and the car jumps to life for a split second—only to brake to a complete stop the next. My head snaps forward, my forehead smashing into the steering wheel as the delicate bone structure of my temple takes the full force of a sudden stop from sixty miles an hour to zero. No airbags deploy. That would be too kind for a thief.

I black out for a second, and when I come to, my face is jammed against the horn, blood pouring from a cut on my forehead.

Please exit the vehicle when it comes to a stop, the voice repeats.

That motherfucker somehow regained enough consciousness to hit whatever button or code he needed to stop his car remotely. Fuck!

I peel myself off the steering wheel and sit upright, opening the door and tumbling out before it decides to lock me in or something. I'm surprised it doesn't to be honest, but I guess the system is designed for minimal damage to the car—they'd rather a thief run away than smash the windows to escape. The rain is heavy now, bolts of lightning hitting close enough to make the entire island light up. I'm bleeding, barefoot, and wearing a thin tank top and pants, but I don't care. I hit the ground running, trying to remember the way to those ornate gates that had VALMONT carved in iron, my feet protesting as I run over gravel and rocks and god knows what else. I run and I run until finally, I'm where I need to be.

The place where Javier told me I would find answers.

The place where my mother is supposed to be buried.

The golden archway has VALMONT written above it and there are several plaques cemented into the grassy ground,

outlining the history of the place, along with several large statues.

They're scary as fuck and seem to loom over me in the dark. The black sky and the deluge of rain make them look more ominous than they should. I stumble around, reading headstones, not even sure what I'm looking for, but answers have to be here. Eve. Where is Eve? There must be somebody called Eve buried here. Supposedly buried here. I find the Prince's family plot and spot Darius' dad's headstone, alongside a newer headstone that reads Davina Prince. Something about that almost drives me to my knees. Darius is still clinging to the belief that his twin is alive, but she has a headstone and a death date, and a little round photo just like the rest of the dead buried here.

I walk swiftly down the twisting paths, getting deeper into the cemetery. Nobody called Eve. Was Javier lying? This island hasn't been settled for that long. There are at most a hundred graves here. Why can't I find hers?

At the back of the cemetery a circular rose garden blooms. This is the place where people inter ashes—I guess not everyone is picky about needing to be buried in a coffin. There's a bank of tiny plots big enough to house single urns, and beyond that, a giant statue of a female angel, almost life-size, carved from marble. Her arms are outstretched, wings unfurled behind her as she appears to pray up to the sky. She's beautiful. She's familiar.

This is a grave, I realize, my heart beating faster. It's a family plot, but the angel is atop one particular person's grave.

Eve Valmont.

Taken by the sea, the memorial plaque explains. *Never forgotten.* The years of her birth and death put her at age seventeen when she disappeared.

Eve Valmont.

Her date of death is seven months before I was born.

Eve VALMONT.

I fall to my knees, and they crack against the cement slab covering Eve Valmont's grave. I look up at the towering angel dedicated to my *mother* and I begin to sob. A strangled scream comes from deep inside my chest as I angrily smash my fists against the stone. I sold my virginity—it might as well have been my fucking soul -to pay for my mother's pitiful final resting place when she had one all along? I let myself be dragged to this island, the one place she warned me never to go.

I thought I was doing the right thing. For *her*. When all she did was warn me to stay away. She demanded it.

Here, now, I finally understand my fate.

Once the island has you, it never lets you go.

Icy rain pelts at my bare skin as I hold myself up against the stone, blood dripping steadily from the cut on my forehead onto my mother's empty grave and spreading like a wound of its own along the tiny veins that fissure through the white marble.

That's the last thing I see before everything goes black; the sky lighting up as a brilliant bolt of lightning strikes close by; and my blood, another wasted sacrifice to the woman who bore me, dripping steadily on her grave.

Mia Moore. Eve Valmont.

Birdie Valmont.

CHAPTER 35



I managed to disable my car remotely before Birdie could get far. Even as my vision blurred and I dragged my heavy body through the house, army-crawling toward my laptop in the study downstairs, I was cursing Birdie's fucking name. That bitch drugged me. And when I find her, I'm going to choke her to death with my bare hands.

That's the last thought I had before I blacked the fuck out.

When I wake up, I can't tell how much time has passed. Only that it's storming outside. It takes a few moments before everything comes back to me—the scotch, the way Birdie tried and failed to fulfill our contract to escape me. The way she stole my keys and escaped me anyway. I can't find my fucking phone, and I suspect she's hidden it somewhere. Luckily my laptop is still open in front of me, logged in to the Bentley's remote access page.

I log on to the app that tracks Birdie's bracelet, but the map just shows her last known location, three hours ago: right here in this kitchen. It's usually live, so for it to not have any data for the past three hours has me flipping the fuck out. It doesn't help that whatever drug she slipped into my drink is still in my system, and I'm not thinking—or moving—particularly fast.

I locate my phone—and I turn it over and over in my palm, knowing I have to call the one person who's probably not going to help me. Fuck. Oh well, here goes nothing. I thumb through my contacts until I get to the right number, hit dial, and hold my breath.

“What do you want?” the voice on the other end snaps.

“Archer,” I reply. “I need your help. Birdie’s missing.”



I knew if I’d called Lilith, she would have denied what I already know: Those implants in every girl’s arm on this island aren’t just for birth control. They’re used to track the girls, too. GPS locators to make sure if they try to leave the island, they won’t get very far. It should have been easy to find Davina, in that case, the moment we realized she was missing, dead or alive. But when Archer confided in me the truth about the implants and gave me her location, all I found after scouring the bottom of Valmont Bay was the little match-stick-sized device itself, no sign of my sister.

So, Archer, it is. I know he’ll help me. He has a soft spot for his long-lost cousin Birdie, even though she has no idea who he actually is to her.

And yet... he’s hesitant.

“What if she doesn’t want to be found?” Archer challenges me. I hold my pounding skull with one hand, pressing the phone into my ear with the other. “Look, she stole my car and went for a joyride in this thunderstorm. That was three hours ago. The car barely made it a mile down the road. So where is she? I need to know she’s safe.”

“Again,” Archer says. “What if she doesn’t want to be found?”

“Jesus, fuck,” I explode. “Do you have any idea what kind of danger she’s in? What that motherfucker Javier would do to her, given half the chance? She could be halfway to fucking Mexico by now with his shithead brother and every minute

you don't find out where she is, you're wasting time. You of all people should understand how much danger she's in."

Archer is silent for a moment. Seems my words have hit a nerve.

"I'll look for her," Archer says finally. "But I'm not telling you where she is unless she says it."

"She signed a blood oath that says she stays with me."

Archer laughs. "Man, you think I give a fuck about some blood oath? One that my-" he stops himself. "One that that piece of shit put together? No. I'll go looking for her, and if she wants to be found by you, I've got your number."

I open my mouth to reply, but the line goes dead. I text furiously.

Darius: Make sure you tell me as soon as you find her safe.

Archer sends back a thumbs-up emoji. The texting equivalent of *sure thing, fuck you*.

I pace the hallway. Fuck this. I'm not waiting around. I snatch a set of keys from the hall table and head for the garage, wondering if my sister's vintage Impala will even start after this long. It does, mercifully, but I can't say I'm overjoyed. I hate this damn car. It's almost fifty fucking years old, has absolutely zero traction control on the road, and has no modern conveniences. No proper heating or cooling, not even a damn defroster to unfog the front window, given it clouds up the second I back the loud as fuck machine out of the garage and into the storm raging all across the island.

Shaking my head, I curse my sister silently as I roll down the window to let cold air rush in, clearing the foggy windshield but letting rain in at the same time. Icy pellets of water drill into the side of my face and arm as I steer the ancient tank out of our street and onto the main road that wraps around the island. It's quiet out here, being further away

from the main part of town. Davina's car growls obscenely loud as I steer carefully on the slick asphalt, headed for the spot where my Bentley's app shows a blinking spot—my car.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, I see my car up ahead. The driver's door is wide open, and the hazard lights blink furiously. I press the brakes, steering onto the shoulder behind my car. The rain is torrential as I get out of the Impala and circle the Bentley, looking for signs of life. Signs of Birdie. Nothing.

Then I see blood on the steering wheel. *Fuck.*

I look around, wondering where she could have gotten to from here on foot. Living on an island means everything is technically walkable, but it's a big island—walking from one end to the other would take many hours. And in a storm?

Where are you, Birdie? What have you done?

I slide back into the Impala and start driving, dialing Archer at the same time. I don't know where I'm going, only that I need to find her.

Archer picks up on the first ring. "Yeah?"

"I found blood in my car, Archer," I say desperately. "Her blood. Tell me where the fuck she is."

As I'm talking, I see headlights driving toward me. "The cemetery," he says. "Is that your sister's car I can see up ahead? I'll meet you in there."

The cemetery? Why the fuck would she-

Oh, no.

A sinking feeling seizes my stomach as I gun the engine, speeding toward the cemetery. I pull into the small parking area and stop the car right in front of the gates, throwing it into park as I book it into the cemetery. Running straight for the back of the lot. I know exactly where she's going to be.

And I'm right.

Rain pounds my skin and hers as I take in the girl I'm trying my hardest not to catch feelings for, sprawled out face-

down on her mother's empty grave, dead to fucking rights. "Birdie!" I scream through the torrential downpour. She doesn't move. I rush to her, kneeling on the hard stone as I turn her over, wincing as I see blood trickling from a head wound. That explains the steering wheel, I think. Red rage grips me as I realize it's my doing, this injury—I stopped the car while she was driving it, and sent her face slamming straight into the hard steering wheel.

"Birdie," I cry, cradling her in one arm as I push her sodden hair from her face. She's so pale. Dangerously cold. As cold as death.

I pick her up, cradling her in my arms as I carry her to my car. I load her into the backseat, and then I'm tearing back up the road, homeward bound.

I get her out of her sodden clothes and into a hot shower. I leave her underwear on, because fucking Archer is pounding his fist on my front door. I dial his number, and he picks up straight away.

"She hit her head," I explain. "She's been in the goddamn rain for hours. So stop pounding on my fucking door and go home. I'll fix this."

Before he can say anything else, I hang up. The pounding on the door doesn't start up again. Is he looking for a way to break in? If he decides to smash his way in through a window, I'll crack his fucking skull open.

I toss my phone on the counter and look to Birdie, slumped at the bottom of my shower. Still so cold her lips are blue, and she's shivering. The hot water isn't doing the trick. Biting back a growl of frustration, I wrap her in a towel and carry her to my bed, where I lay her down. I gather all of the blankets I can find, layering them on top of her, but it's still not enough. Fuck.

Time for the nuclear option, I guess. I strip out of my own wet clothes and slip under the pile of blankets, my hands finding her hips and drawing her into me. I curl myself around her, hugging her to my skin, trying to warm her frozen body with my own.

Eventually, I must doze off. I'm not sure how long I sleep for, but when I wake, it's to Birdie struggling in my grip.

"No," she screams, violent sobs escaping her as she pushes me away. "You *knew*," she says with venom in her tone.

I reach for her in the giant bed, trying to pull her into my arms.

She throws her fists at me, a mess as she cries out. "Why didn't you tell me? I hate you!"

"I would have," I admit.

I don't know what she says next, it's inaudible, but she leans forward, falls into my arms, and holds onto me for dear life.

"S-so cold" she whispers, sucking in air as if she's hyperventilating, still shaking.

"It's okay," I say softly, knowing now isn't the time to be a dick. "You're going to be okay," I tell her, hoping she believes me.

Being this close to her is dangerous territory, but I can't deny her. I can't deny my need to comfort her. Birdie draws back, sees that neither of us are wearing anything, and her eyes go wide.

"They were wet," I explain, and she nods. Opening my arms, she crawls into them, her warm skin pressed against mine.

"Hush little birdie, don't say a word..." I softly whisper.

"Don't," she snaps and tears fall down her cheeks, landing on my chest and rolling down. "My mom used to sing that nursery rhyme to me."

I gently run my fingers through her damp hair as she lies across my chest. "I understand."

She listens to the sound of my heartbeat as her long eyelashes flutter closed.

I can't remember the last time I felt this way about someone.

Never.

Birdie Moore...Birdie Valmont is my *weakness*.

She will be my undoing.

We stay like this for hours and I hold and soothe her until she falls asleep. She writhes, and jerks, and mumbles. The girl is restless, haunted by nightmares that I would happily take away if I could. I hold her tight, wake her when she screams, and rock her back to sleep when needed. It's a never-ending cycle, one I'd go through all night if I had to, but eventually, she settles.

I wake up holding Birdie against my chest, my hard cock rests against her back. She moans, rubbing her ass against my length, and I pull away. I don't know if it's late or early, but the sun hasn't risen yet.

I squint at the clock on the wall, it's barely past midnight.

She rolls over on her side and her eyes flutter open. Moonlight splashes in from the windows, and I can see her soft features and long lashes. She's gorgeous.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'm sorry for not telling you and for treating you like shit."

She nods. "I..." her voice cracks, her throat seems raw from the screaming she did in the cemetery. Birdie swallows. "I'll never be able to leave here."

"No," I admit. "You won't. And not because of who your mom is, Birdie. Because I'm not allowing it. You belong here."

"I'll never belong here," she says, angrily, and I understand her frustration.

"You're a Valmont, Birdie. Do you have any idea what..." I trail off because she begins to tear up. This isn't a conversation for now, not when the shock of it still lingers.

"Javier knew the whole time. I'm sure he was already planning a way to exploit you somehow, use you. Now, you're safe," I promise her. She doesn't look into my eyes, and I move her chin up to where she locks with my gaze. "I'm not

letting anything happen to you. I'll protect you, Birdie. Or I'll die trying."

She sits up, pulling the duvet with her to cover her breasts. "You said the same thing about your sister."

I let out a sigh. "I know. But she was somehow *more* defiant than you."

This makes her crack a smile. "I really don't know anything about Davina. I promise, Darius. If I did I wou—."

"I know." I crash my lips against hers, stopping her mid-sentence. Our tongues and mouths explore one another and the kiss ignites something more—a burning need. A desire so deeply rooted that with each whimper, I'm pulled further into the abyss of her.

She's greedy, as our tongues dance together in a passionate tango, and I'm already worked up. My hand wanders down her body, memorizing every curve and dip of her, memorizing *her*—the way she feels, and smells, along with the groans that release from her as my palm slides against her inner thigh.

She gasps, desperately seeking my hands.

"I need you," she whispers, allowing her head to fall back on the wooden headrest.

My fingers brush against her clit and she moans out.

"So fucking needy," I say, kissing her, as I push two fingers inside. She widens her thighs for me, dripping with desire.

"Yes yes," she hisses, grabbing at my wrists, rocking her hips against my fingers. It's no longer an invitation, but rather a demand.

As I tease her cunt, she groans out with ecstasy.

"Please, Darius," she begs, her whimpers making my cock so hard, it hurts.

"I need to taste your sweet cunt," I admit, moving off the bed and standing at the end. Quickly, I grab her ankles sliding her toward me admiring her. The duvet falls away, completely

forgotten, as her beautiful naked body lies in front of me. With heat in her eyes, she impatiently waits for me to feast upon her.

I drop down to my knees, spreading her thighs wide. She tries to close them, so I slap my fingertips against her pussy, causing her to yelp before rubbing a few circles against her clit.

“Be a good girl, and let me admire your beautiful cunt,” I growl. I need to claim her. I need to make her mine. The desire to have her, to own her, to keep her is so animalistic I can barely contain myself.

But I don't want to fuck her, I want to satisfy her.

Birdie relaxes as I peel her lips open, looking at her swollen little clit and dripping wet entrance.

“This is mine. *Only mine.*” I kiss her inner thigh, lazily sliding my lips up to her mound, before splitting her open and flicking my tongue against her bundle of nerves.

She fists the sheets, her body instantly responding, as she grinds against my face. I keep sliding my fingers in and out of her greedy cunt and eat her like my last meal. I pick up the pace and pressure, savoring her pants, matching the rhythm of her moans.

“Darius. Oh god,” she says when I tongue fuck her, licking and sucking every bit of her dry.

“You're so fucking wet,” I tease, enjoying her more than I should.

I don't want to give in to her pleas, taking her clit between my lips and sucking. “I'm not letting you come yet, my greedy girl.”

“*Please,*” she whispers and I pat her pretty pussy again.

“Trust me,” I explain, pushing away so she can't create any friction against my face. “The wait will be worth it.”

“I trust no one,” she admits, being cheeky, and reaching down and sliding her fingers over her clit. It's a fucking sight

to see, her touching herself, looking at me like she wants me to split her in two.

I stand, knocking her thighs apart with my knees, and grab her hand and pin it above her head onto the mattress.

Hovering above her, I meet her eyes. “You’ll come when I fucking tell you that you can come.” I slide my hands down her slick slit. “Don’t defy me or I’ll leave you dripping fucking wet with your arms and legs bound so you’ll never get your release. I’ll bring you to the brink until the sun rises, leaving you high and dry, robbing you of what your body craves.”

Our mouths slam together then I trail hot kisses down her neck until I meet her hard nipples. I suck on each one, twirling and teasing them. Taking my time, I explore every inch of her with my mouth and hands, then I open her thighs again, seeing how her pussy has soaked the sheets.

I lick her lightly and she lets out a frustrated sigh when I stop.

“You’re so close,” I hum against her clit, licking, then stopping, licking, then stopping.

“Fuck you,” she seethes, her breathing rapid, her nipples hard as peaks, and her body glistening from being brought to the edge over and over.

I continue my assault, sliding my tongue from her wet pussy hole to her clit, back and forth between the two.

“Do you want to come?”

“Yes,” she hisses.

Another lick. “Are you close?”

“Painfully,” she whispers with an urge in her tone, her back nearly hovering over the bed it’s so arched. I place my finger inside her and her breasts rise and fall. When I remove it, she nearly screams with frustration. I chuckle, then roll my tongue over her clit again as I slowly slide one soaked finger into her ass. Her pussy clenches and juices slide down her crack that I eat up.

“Darius,” she roars, grabbing her nipples and tugging at them. “Fuck.”

“Yes, play with your beautiful tits, my bad girl,” I say, my cock so fucking hard. It’s throbbing. It needs to feel Birdie’s tight little pussy wrapped around it.

I pull away.

“Nah-ah. You’re *not* allowed to come, yet,” I say against her slit wearing a smirk as she loses herself in the sensations, her pretty little pussy winking. She’s so fucking close, right on the edge. If I blew on her clit, she’d lose it, so I time it just right. But damn, she tastes so fucking good. Sweet. Like honey mixed with salt. I continue to painfully work her, giving her two digits in her cunt and one in her ass. She’s still teetering, I can taste her pre-come, the thickness of her juices makes me want to draw it out even longer.

The euphoria has taken over. I can see it in her eyes. I can taste it as I continue to tease her.

“Come for me,” I demand, giving her permission to fall over the edge as I pump her slowly with my fingers and devour her.

She desperately comes, her body losing control. She fists my hair, enjoying the way my tongue dives deep into her, lapping up every fucking drop. When she’s completely ridden out her high, she tries to push away, but I’m not done. Not yet. Not until I’ve had my fill.

Her heart rate ticks rapidly in her neck and she’s enjoying it as her body shudders with satisfaction. Then, I give her another orgasm. She screams out, her back bolting off the bed as she cums again.

She’s breathless. She’s beautiful. She’s *mine*.

When I stand, she meets me with hooded eyes, full of desire. Her hair is a sexy mess. And she’s smirking like the fucking goddess she is.

My cock throbs at the sight of her perfect body, hair splashed out across the black silk sheets. She watches me hungrily, licking her plump lips, silently urging me toward her.

I climb onto the bed and she scoots up toward the headboard. I kiss her and she claims my mouth, enjoying the way her pussy tastes.

“You’re beautiful, my bad girl,” I pinch her nipple.

I possessively run my fingers through her hair and she moans into my mouth as I suck on her bottom lip.

“Claim me, Darius.”

I like the sound of that—claiming her virgin cunt as mine.

“You don’t know what you’re asking for,” I warn.

But she doesn’t listen. Why would she? She *never* does.

Birdie grabs my cock and strokes it several times before moving onto her hands and knees. She gracefully licks the glistening pre-come from the tip, showing me the silvery string on her tongue before taking me into her warm, hot mouth.

I run my fingers through her hair, guiding her all the way down. She hollows her cheeks, only gagging a few times, but she doesn’t stop. Her mission is to pleasure me and I approve.

The sound is music to my ears.

I rub my hand across her ass, smacking it, and she squeezes her thighs together as she pumps my shaft.

“Slow down,” I hum, she’s building me up too fast, and I’m not ready to come, not yet. Birdie looks over at me, her eyes still filled with pleasure, and I know she’s still riding the high of the orgasms. My favorite drug.

“Lie down,” I demand, and she pops her lip together with a smirk. She puts her head on the pillow and I study and search her face.

“I don’t care about the fucking contract, Birdie. Even if I fuck your dripping wet cunt right now, I’m still not letting you go.”

She smiles then leans up to kiss me.

“You’re mine, Birdie Moore. That bracelet will never leave your wrist.”

She meets my gaze. “Promise?”

“A promise I’ll never fucking break.” I position my saliva-coated cock at her entrance, running my thickness through her wet folds, then tease her clit with the tip. She rolls her hips, creating more friction.

“You like that, don’t you?” I ask, smirking.

“*Yes yes yes*,” she admits, then lifts her legs, pressing the heels of her feet into my ass.

“Tsk, Tsk.” I give her barely an inch of me and she gasps. “You don’t know how much you can handle.”

She adjusts her body, not taking her eyes from me as I slowly continue to glide inside of her.

“Are you okay?” I ask, hovering above her, meeting her gaze.

She nods, biting her lower lip, widening her thighs so she can take more of me.

I pet her hair, and kiss her eyelashes and lips. Not forcing myself into her, wanting her to enjoy her first time, not letting it be some nightmare. Birdie Valmont deserves more than that. She deserves the fucking world.

There is pleasure in pain, but not right now, not for her first time.

She winces, and I stop. “We don’t have to go any further,” I say, gently caressing her cheek.

“I want you,” she says with a sigh. “All of you.”

Her pussy clenches around me, and it’s so fucking tight, I think I see stars.

I can’t deny her. I can’t deny myself.

She continues panting. “Take me, Darius Prince. You *own* me.”

I lean down and whisper in her ear before giving her the rest of my hard as fuck cock. “You’re goddamn right about that.”

CHAPTER 36



BIRDIE

*K*iss him, pour myself into him as he continues to gently guide himself inside of me. It's tight, the pressure of his thickness presses against my walls. I try to keep repositioning myself, to make it easier to take him, because right now it's all I want.

We don't rush. I can feel the heat of his body above me, inside of me, as he slides further in.

Darius Prince is mine. Completely. Forever.

I pant as he gives me the rest of him, and I feel so full like I might burst from the inside out.

"You good?" He whispers. Something he typically asks as he holds onto me tight, like he'll never ever fucking let me go.

"Perfect," I say, my cunt throbbing around him.

He meets my gaze, then trails kisses down my neck, nipping at the sensitive skin below my ear. Shivers crawl all over my body as butterflies swarm me. This is happening.

"Darius," I say his name, as I scratch my nails down my back.

"Mm," he says, enjoying himself, soaking inside of me, as we fit together like two puzzle pieces. Our jagged edges, a complete match.

Darius rocks in and out of my tight hole. And I think I'm experiencing a euphoria, a high I've never felt before.

When I readjust, he slightly picks up my pace, my walls clench around him with every thrust he gives.

“Darius,” I say again, his name falling from my lips like a whispered prayer. “*Choke me,*” I nearly beg.

He stops moving and his face turns to stone.

“Birdie,” he growls.

“I...I...want to feel that again,” I admit, knowing how he brought me to the brink of blacking out while finger fucking me in the bathroom.

“I know you won’t hurt me,” I tell him. “Not right now at least.”

A smirk plays on his lip and his arm bolts forward. He grasps my neck, adding pressure to my windpipe. I scream out his name. “*Fuck me, please.*”

I appreciate him wanting to go slow, but I’ve been fantasizing about this moment since the day I met him.

The world fades then comes back again and there’s a tight build inside of me. He squeezes harder, I see the hidden rage swirling behind his eyes, that part of him he only shows the world, the part of him I also crave.

“Harder,” I demand, and then, my body tightens, and so does his.

We exchange silent conversations. “Cum inside me.”

I want to feel his warm cum inside me. I want to feel it run from my cunt he’s claimed.

He squeezes even harder. I’m gasping. My body builds, then the tension of the orgasm coils tighter and tighter.

His body tenses and I know he’ll spill inside me any second.

We come together, warmth filling me. Our moans ring out into the darkness. Darius removes his grip from my throat and kisses me.

“You might have bruises. At least they’ll know you’re mine.”

“I think they know, I say, sucking in air, needing to breathe as my heart rapidly pounds. He pulls out of me and I lie there, more satisfied than I’ve ever been.

“Tomorrow, when you’re so damn sore you can barely walk, I want you to think of me and how I own every fucking inch of you, now, and forever. How I’ve claimed you.”

I slide my hand down to my pussy, pushing two fingers inside, scooping up his warm cum mixed with mine, then I place it in my mouth and suck.

“I think you’ve got it all wrong. I own *you*, Darius Prince.”

He smirks, the darkness returning to his eyes, and I’m wildly aware of what just happened. “The contract,” I whisper.

“It’s invalid when you say so,” he admits.

I slide the cuff that Javier gave me from the bracelet and set it on the nightstand next to the bed. “I guess you have me for at least a year.”

“Maybe we can work out a deal for longer.” He grabs a handful of my ass and pulls me closer.

“Just don’t piss me off.”

“Impossible,” he says, and I lie my head against his chest, listening to the flutter of his heart, as I return to earth.

I have no idea what I’m doing, but if I’m stuck on this fucking island, I might as well enjoy it.

After I’ve caught my breath, Darius stands up and pulls me with him to the bathroom. He draws a warm bubble bath and slips inside, waving me to join him.

“I want you to soak. It will help,” he says.

I sit in front of him, leaning my back against his chest as he gently washes between my legs. I throb for him, my body nearly begging for more. But I can already feel where he’s been, what he’s claimed. I close my eyes, relaxing in the warmth.

“You’ll sleep in my bed every night now.”

I chuckle. “And what other ridiculous rules?”

“I get that cunt whenever I want.”

“That’s already a rule. Any others?”

“If I guy even looks at you the wrong way or says one damn word to you, I’ll fucking kill him,” he seethes.

A thought crosses my mind. “Even Archer?”

I turn to look at him.

“He’s your cousin,” he finally says.

My mouth falls open. I hadn’t had the chance to really work out what being a Valmont really meant.

“And Lilith?” I ask.

“Your aunt. Your mom’s sister.”

I think of the first time I met her. The familiarity I felt when we were face to face. Then I remember the reaction she had when she saw me at the infirmary. And how she was so kind to me and worried when I nearly drowned.

It makes sense, now.

It all makes sense. They’re *family*.

Something I didn’t realize I still had. Until now.

CHAPTER 37



ONE WEEK LATER

“Are you almost ready?” Archer asks from the doorway of my room at Darius’ house. He offered to take me to the boat party since Darius is tied up with business. I was shocked when Darius suggested it.

“Yeah, ten minutes,” I yell from the bathroom, still in my robe, and hear him grumble something under his breath about meeting me outside. I’m still shocked that I have an aunt and cousin that I never knew about. However, it’s made being on this island more dangerous than it ever was before. I don’t fault my mother for not telling me, for ultimately wanting to protect me. She’s probably rolling in her grave knowing I’m here right now.

I’m sorry, but I don’t let the guilt consume me.

While I’m really nervous about this Founder’s Day celebration, I’m excited too. I’ve only heard about the crazy parties that happened on these waters, and now I’ll get to experience it firsthand. Darius decided at the last minute that we’d attend, something I didn’t expect.

I look at myself in the mirror, glancing at the bracelet as I pull my hair into a ponytail. Things have been different between Darius and me, and I wonder if he feels it, too.

At this point, I thought I would’ve been released by now. Any other man would’ve fucked me senseless, fucked me until I bled, and freed me. But not Darius. He’s keeping me as his own, his pet, regardless if I’ve fulfilled the contract. However,

that's something we haven't told anyone, yet. It's our secret. And I know this metal protects me.

But it's not lost on me how he looks at me.

What we're doing is dangerous, a game we shouldn't be playing.

One where we both lose in the end.

A white sundress hangs on the back of the door with a white two-piece bathing suit to wear underneath. This was a gift from Darius. The note that was left on it *demanding* I wear it to the party. I look at the tags, reading the name of the designer clothes. The dress alone cost five grand, the bathing suit, two and a half. It's not lost on me that this outfit cost more than my mother's funeral.

Once I'm dressed, I take one last glance at myself in the mirror and tuck my cherry chapstick into the pocket in the dress.

Is this what Darius wants?

As I walk into my large room, I grab a few treats and toss them to Rebel who's sitting on my floor.

"Ready to go?" I ask, grabbing the leash and snapping it around his collar. The two of us meet Archer in the Range Rover, where he's impatiently waiting.

"A minute longer, and I'd have left you," he glances over at me with a smile and takes off.

"You wouldn't have." I pause, wanting to ask him all the questions because this is the first time we've been alone without anyone around to overhear our conversations. "How long did you know? From the moment I arrived?" I ask.

He laughs. "Yeah. Once mom saw you, she knew. Called me immediately. Told me to watch you."

"How'd she figure it out?" I ask, confused.

"She said you looked just like Eve when she was our age. Mirrored image."

The thought of that makes me sad for some reason.

I turn around, glancing at Rebel as he sits in the back seat. It doesn't take us long before we're at the harbor.

The thought of being on the water makes me nervous because anything could happen. After learning more about Darius' sister and the *accident*, I've been unsettled. At least I can float if I fall in.

"Have you ever been to a party like this before?" Archer asks as the shoreline comes into view.

"No," I admit, shocked by the amount of million-dollar yachts and beautiful speed boats in one area.

"You're in for a surprise," he says.

After we park, I open the door for Rebel to jump out the follow Archer to a boat that glitters in the mid-afternoon sunlight. The engine roars to life. I sit in the seat next to his and we leave the harbor.

I still can't believe I'm hanging out with my cousin. However, it's something we have to keep hidden. Archer, Lilith, and Darius know I'm safe—as much as I can be—as long as my secret is safe.

"So, when we arrive, we'll tie up to another boat. Everyone swims in the middle and there are a few party decks too," he yells so I can hear him. "My yacht is already on the water tied up! Can't wait for you to see it."

His yacht? Wow.

I think every student from the academy is here and the boats range from large to gigantic. Billions of dollars float in this tiny area.

Archer slows, making his way between two vessels that still seem to tower over us. We offload and we're greeted by Chelsea, a girl that follows Archer around like a lovesick puppy.

"Archer!" she says. "So glad you're here."

He acts unimpressed and brushes past her. She's trying too hard.

We walk across the different boats, an island of its own.

The sun beats down on me and I wish I had sunscreen. I spot some on one of the tables and begin to apply. Rebel stands on the hull of the boat, barking then turning around with his tongue lazily hanging out of his mouth. As I continue to struggle to reach my back, strong hands rub against my shoulders.

Quickly, I turn around.

Darius's smirk paired with his sinister eyes, makes me grin. I knew he'd find me.

"You're here," I say, turning toward him.

"You doubted I'd show?" He forces me to look at him. "I'll always come for you, Birdie."

Is it a warning or threat?

He takes the bottle from me and unties my bikini top. I hurry and grab it before I give everyone a show.

"Good girl. Don't want anyone seeing what's mine," he whispers against my neck causing goosebumps to travel up my spine. Darius squirts lotion on his hands, rubbing the cool cream against my skin, taking his time as he touches every inch of me. I close my eyes, relax and imagine the look on his face. The way he touches me, rough and careful, dangerous and protective at the same time.

Once he's finished, he squeezes my shoulder and I turn toward him.

"Going to tie me up?" I ask.

He tilts his head at me and I see a sparkle in his eyes. "Yes."

I lift my brows.

"Right," he says, tightening the strings around my neck and back.

He keeps me close and I pull Rebel to walk. Archer gets the hint and leaves us alone. His fingers dig into my side. "That dress fits you perfectly."

“Apparently, you know my size.”

“I’ve got every inch of you memorized,” he tells me.

This big dude named Darrell, passes me, looking me up and down. Darius cracks his knuckles and I grab his hand and squeeze it. “I’m not going anywhere,” I say.

I can tell he’s not in a good mood, and I want to know what he was up to before he was here. I want to ask, but I’ve learned that he talks when he wants to.

“Darius,” a guy in a kayak yells, stealing his attention away from me. “Come see this shit!”

Darius waves at the guy. I think his name is Christopher and he’s older, but I’m not entirely sure.

“You’re coming with me.” He looks at me over his shoulder.

I can see the large party and all the people on the yacht across the way.

I give him a smirk. “You sure you want to be seen with the trailer trash from Santo Christi at this high-class rich kid boat party?” I taut, looking past him. Music echoes in the distance and I see people non-stop climbing up the ladder on the side of the yacht.

With two steps, he’s bending over and lifting me to my feet, making sure to smack my ass. It stings, causing a spark of pleasure to course through me. I yelp and laugh then glance at Rebel who’s wagging his tail.

Darius bends down and pets him. Then he grabs my hand and pulls me across the way. He turns and glances at me, and I see *want* swirling around. If we were the only two people on the water right now, I’d kiss him, allow him to steal my breath away like he does when we’re alone. The way he makes me feel should be illegal.

Darius is my drug, and I’m scared of getting addicted to him because the high never lasts. Will I always be chasing what I feel right now? Is it a figment of my imagination? Then

there's the potential that he could kill me as easily as the drugs that took my mother.

"You shouldn't be holding my hand," I warn. "People will talk."

He leans into my ear, his mouth brushing against the shell of it. "Not sure if you've noticed, but I don't give a fuck what anyone says or thinks." The rasp in his voice has me squeezing my legs tightly together.

My heart rapidly beats and I don't know if I'll be able to stop myself around him. I've had a taste, a tease, and I want more.

"What is it?"

I swear he can read my mind.

"You have a girlfriend. I'd like to not be hated," I admit.

"She knows her place."

A breathless sigh escapes me and the mood turns more serious. "What are we doing, Darius?"

He takes three large steps until we're face to face again, and carefully brushes the hair from my shoulders, revealing the softness of my neck. As if he's a vampire, he leans in and sucks against my skin, marking me with his lips. He bites and teases until pleasure mixes with pain. I grab his shoulders, holding onto him for dear life as I get lost in his lips. Eventually, he finds my mouth, swirls, and twists his tongue with mine.

When we pull away, we're breathless.

"You didn't answer me," I say.

"I did. You just weren't listening."

He kisses me again, rougher this time. I nearly lose my footing, falling into the abyss of him, tasting his tongue. Darius is greedy and ravenous, rough than soft, giving me a little bit more of him with each passing second. By the time we pull away, I feel as if I'm floating.

He interlocks his fingers with mine and Rebel follows. Tons of people are drinking and I'm surprised there's not some sort of surveillance here to watch the rich brats. There's not even a lifeguard.

We enter the bar area and several people stop talking when Darius goes behind the bar and makes himself a drink. He commands attention without trying, like royalty. Darius returns to me, handing me water. His arm brushes against mine and his closeness causes me to smile.

"Darius!" I hear a high-pitched voice say from across the room.

Lindsey picks up her pace, her tits bouncing in the bathing suit that barely covers her nipples. She jumps up on him, wrapping her legs around his waist and arms around his neck, and kisses him. Watching her place her lips on his, when mine were there minutes prior, makes me rage. Maybe all of Darius' women know their place.

Darius sets her down and then glances over at me with a lazy grin.

"Hey." He rests his arm on her hip, and it's so natural.

This is what true jealousy feels like. It overwhelms me.

"I've been waiting for you all day," she coos, positioning her body between us. Rebel barks and she turns around and makes a face as if she's disgusted.

"Gross. Why is that *dog* on board?" She looks at me, then down at Rebel. "I meant *dogs*."

I create space between us before I punch her in her face. Darius scolds her, but once a mean girl, always a mean girl. Nothing will change the way she disrespects people, not until she's humbled.

I turn my back toward them, focusing my attention on bright-colored bottles of liquor. At the end of the bar, there's a stool, and I make myself comfortable. Rebel lies at my feet.

"Look who decided to join us," one guy says.

“Want a drink?” Another asks, but I notice the way he looks at my bracelet. At times it’s a curse, but right now it’s a godsend. It’s an invisible force field protecting me. A line, that if crossed, means torture.

Darius moves across the room and chats with Lindsey privately. While she talks, his gaze is on me. Jaw locked. We hold a silent conversation as Christopher asks me if I want a drink.

I nod and am handed a shot. Raising the glass in the air, I stare at Darius and shoot down the liquor. It tastes like rubbing alcohol and burns. I grab a small bottle of orange juice and chug it down.

“Want some whiskey?” Someone else asks, lifting a bottle that looks very expensive. I’m sure someone’s mommy and daddy won’t be pleased when it’s gone.

“Yeah,” I say, almost enjoying the way the first shot made me feel. However, I should’ve eaten something beforehand.

Right before the shot is poured, Lindsey walks behind the bar. “Let *me* make you a drink. An apology for being such a bitch.”

She smiles sweetly as she grabs two glasses, and mixes different alcohols and juices together. When she’s done, she has two glasses and slides a pink drink my way.

“I’m sorry for disrespecting you,” she says, bending over the bar, not leaving anything to the imagination for any of the guys sitting beside me. I’m sure Darius forced her to apologize. I want to tell her to go fuck herself, but there are too many people around, and I want to have a good time.

I grab a drink, the one closest to her, and we toast.

“To truce,” she says, sweetly, clinking the edge of hers against mine.

“To truce,” everyone repeats, looking at me, waiting for me to agree.

It feels like an initiation, and it’s the first time they’ve not all turned their back on me.

“To truce.” The words leave my lips like poison and I chug the tasty drink, giving in to peer pressure.

Lindsey smiles and before walking away, she speaks. “Glad we’re on the same page.”

I laugh because that will never happen.

CHAPTER 38



*B*irdie excuses herself and heads down the hallway toward the bathroom. I follow behind her, then wait for her as she goes inside. In the distance, the group we just left chats about beer pong on the upper deck along with a pool party. When she finally steps out, I push her against the wall, caging her in with one arm.

She pops a brow and adjusts the silver cufflink on her wrist. "I didn't ask for an escort."

"Doesn't matter. You belong to me," I whisper against the shell of her ear and her body instantly reacts to mine.

"That's because you *paid* for me," she reminds me. My lips crash against hers and I feel as if I'm drowning as she runs her fingers through my hair, tugging.

I shouldn't be doing this knowing Lindsey almost lost it back there. She was jealous, and her jealousy is poison. She lets her emotions rule her. Regardless if our relationship is for appearances only, she'd make a scene if she caught Birdie and me fooling around.

However, the urge to have this pretty pussy right here is too strong. The risk of it is well worth the reward.

I slide my tongue into her mouth and press my hard cock against her. She notices, leaning against me, letting out little whimpers. As I move my hand under her bathing suit top and play with the hard peak of her nipple, a deeper moan escapes her.

Making my way under the sundress I picked out just for her, I dip a finger inside before circling her clit. She holds onto me, steadying herself. She's soaking wet, holding onto me like her life depends on it, "We'll get caught."

"I don't give a fuck," I tell her, gazing into her sparkling eyes. "Do you want this, my bad girl?"

"Yes, please," she begs.

Birdie makes me want to lose control because I need her like I need air. I give her exactly what she needs, until she's breathless, and losing herself on my fingers. When I pull them away, I place my fingertips in my mouth, tasting her. "My favorite flavor," I say, kissing her.

We grow breathless as our tongues twist together, and she laughs against my lips. I pull away, searching her face and she smirks, palming my thick cock through the outside of my board shorts. She's pleased by how hard she makes me.

"You sure you own me? Or do I own you?" she questions.

"I'm *never* letting you free, little bird." I fucking ache for her.

"Don't make promises you can't keep," she quips. "I better get going. Don't want your girlfriend to get mad."

"I'm ending it with her," I admit, then slowly slide my lips across hers one last time. She tastes like cherry lip balm and orange juice.

"That's your choice," she says when we pull away, but I can see a flicker of something behind her eyes. *Victory*. "Try not to act like a caveman today."

A bark of a laugh escapes me as Birdie walks away, looking over her shoulder. After a few minutes, I return to the chair I was sitting in on the other side of the bar. I keep an eye on her from a distance, along with the boys who swarm around her like sharks who smell fresh blood.

One wrong move and I'll break their wrists. I clench my jaw thinking about it.

At least the silver bracelet acts as a reminder for anyone who tries to touch her. It's a mark and they all know what it ultimately means—she's claimed. She's *mine*.

Birdie looks over at me, our eyes meet, and I slowly shake my head. It causes her to smile, knowing she's defying me and the underlying rules I set in place as she flirts with some rando.

“Pay attention to me,” Lindsey whines and I give her a forced smile. I need to end this charade sooner rather than later.

Once she's bored with me, Lindsey sashays behind the bar. I watch her whisper something to Birdie then pour light pink liquid into several glasses. She's a snake, though, and I can see her jealousy beginning to boil to the surface. After they clink their shots together and drink every last rosé colored drop, Lindsey drifts toward me, her tits bouncing and on full display. A lazy grin sweeps across her plump lips as she gives me those *fuck me* eyes.

When she's close, she grabs the hem of my shirt. “We need to talk.”

I keep my eyes on Birdie even though Lindsey is determined to pull my attention away.

“Not now,” I tell her, knowing this isn't the time or place to have this discussion.

She loudly pouts, loving attention whether it be good or bad. It's obvious she craves it. But I don't want to have this conversation right now.

I hear someone say something about Heath and my jaw clenches. Quickly, I drift to my thoughts about my sister and Heath. This is the first water party I've been to without them, and it feels...*wrong*. The three of us would always get into so much trouble together. Last summer feels like a lifetime ago, and I can't believe how carefree and invincible we were, or so we thought.

“You're embarrassing me,” Lindsey whisper-hisses. “The least you can do is talk to me privately.”

Her chest rises and falls and I know that if I don't give her what she wants, she'll make a scene and I'll ultimately be the one embarrassed. When she begins to lose control of her emotions, I give in.

"Fine," I tell her, standing and going to Birdie.

I lean in, whispering in her ear from behind. "Don't leave this stool. I'll be right back."

Birdie turns around and meets my eyes then she narrows in on Lindsey who's impatiently waiting behind me. "Hurry back."

Someone tries to hand me a bottle of whiskey and I don't take it. My shitty mood stops me from having any fun. When I get like this, drinking only makes my temper flare and it would be best for everyone if I didn't.

I've dreaded this gathering for the last month, but I'm here because of Birdie. I want her to have fun. So I pushed my emotional bullshit to the side and brought out the boat, regardless of how much it pained me. I haven't been able to enjoy being on the water since Davina went missing. Brings up too many terrible thoughts.

"Are you coming?" Lindsey barks, sarcastically.

"We can talk here," I tell her, as we stand in the hallway outside of the bar. I don't even remember who this one belongs to, but it's tied directly to mine. Actually, there are about twenty of them all tied together, so it's like its own floating island of luxury boats.

"No, there's zero privacy, Darius. You at least owe me that after how you've been behaving." She's using her nagging tone, the one that I'm used to hearing when I don't do what she wants.

I sigh and look over my shoulder at Birdie who's still on the stool. "Make it quick," I say, following her off the gigantic yacht onto another. We cross until we're several boats away and we're alone.

Lindsey sits on a leather couch inside a private lounge area. I take the seat beside her and we stay silent for a few

moments. The sounds of music drift from the other boats in the distance as the water crashes against the side. The tide must be rolling in because the waves grow more choppy. Chatter echoes and I'm captured by my thoughts.

"What's your problem?" She quips.

"Nothing." But it's a lie. This morning I woke up missing my sister. Davina was my second half, the person who's been by my side since birth. Not having her around or even knowing if she's still alive is destroying my life. It's consuming me. I don't care what the newspapers say, until there's a body found, I won't stop searching for her.

Turning to me, Lindsey places her hands in her lap and starts crying. "I've lost you, Darius. I've lost you to that *bitch*."

I let out a sigh, and I don't know how to react. Comforting her would only give her false hope that I care, and I don't. "Don't try to rewrite the narrative, Cum thief. I've never felt anything for you. It was just fucking, business as usual," I admit, hating that she's playing dumb.

Her bottom lip quivers and she quickly grows hysterical. "You're lying! You know we would've gotten married if it weren't for that two-dollar whore showing up on this island."

"I can't do this anymore."

"Are you...*breaking up* with me?" She whispers, being overly dramatic with her expression.

"Glad you're on the same page."

"I really thought there was a part of you that loved me, Darius." She reaches over and sweeps her palm against my cock.

"Stop," I tell her, grabbing her wrists. "We're over, Lindsey."

"The least you can do is explain why. You owe me as much, you bastard! We were the future of Valmont Island, Darius. You and me. Everyone knew it, too. Even the

Empyrean.” She grows more heated, her voice rising to a higher octave.

That much is true. When the Empyrean wants specific people together, it happens. It’s like a fucked-up arranged marriage, but that’s the unspoken law of the island. The powerful get married, have kids, and create others who will inevitably take their place. This way, the island continues to survive and descendants live out the ultimate legacy of power and control.

Being controlled, and having my future already written for me, has me wanting to run away from this place and leave it all behind. Money doesn’t matter without freedom, but I can’t leave until I find my sister. I can’t be controlled, not by the island government, not by anyone. I follow the rules when I need to, but will break them if I have to.

She stands and starts pacing. “Explain. Fucking explain or I’ll ruin you. My father—.”

“Watch your threats,” I warn, in a low growl. “Remember what you did. One meeting and that fucking uterus of yours will be cut out within twenty-four hours.”

Hysteria is the only way to explain her reaction as she screams, calling me every name she can think of.

The meltdown has begun.

“You fucked her, didn’t you?” She threatens. “You’re a cheating bastard who fucked the daughter of a whore.”

“Enough,” I state. “Don’t think you were any better than her. You were nothing more than a good dick-sucking with a small trust fund. You don’t have a fucking compassionate bone in your goddamn body, and I don’t trust you. This has nothing to do with Birdie, and everything to do with *you*.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket, but I temporarily ignore it.

“Take it back,” she seethes. “You don’t mean that.”

I stand and try to walk away, and she grabs me, digging her sharp nails into my skin. “Let me go, Lindsey.”

My phone buzzes again and when I pull it from my pocket, she grabs it from my hand and throws it overboard.

“What is wrong with you? Psychotic bitch,” I hiss and that’s when I see the sneer spread across her plump lips. Then I narrow my eyes when her phone rings. She answers, a deep voice mutters on the other end, and she hangs up, laughing. Her demeanor completely changes from hysterical to pure evil bitch.

That’s when I know she’s done something.

I move forward, grab her wrist, then take her phone.

It buzzes in my palm. “Unlock it,” I demand.

“No,” she hisses.

Quickly, I reach my hand up to her throat, squeezing her windpipe. “Unlock your fucking phone or I’ll kill you right here, tell your daddy how you drank too much and fell overboard. They’ll never fucking find your body, Lindsey.”

“Just like your sister,” she struggles to get out and I feel such an immense surge of anger that the world around me begins to fade to dark. Davina never liked her very much and always hated the fact that we were together.

She gasps for air, and I could take her life right here, right now. I want to see her suffer for talking about Davina that way. It was a low blow, when her knees begin to buckle, I let go. She falls to the ground in a heap and grabs her neck, gasping for air. Each hollow breath she struggles for gives me satisfaction. No one talks about Davina like that. Especially *not* her.

I just hate that I lost control because she likes to bait me, to always play the victim, when she’s typically the instigator.

Her phone buzzes again and I try several different codes. Her birthday was the six digits I needed. “Really? Are you that stupid?”

Lindsey snarls. “You’re the stupid one.”

I see a picture of Birdie, surrounded by several dudes. She’s half-undressed. They’re standing around her, posing like

she's a game kill. My vision blurs. I'm so fucking angry I can barely control myself.

"What have you fucking done?" My hand trembles.

She chuckles. "You'll find out soon, enough."

Granting her the same favor, I toss her phone into the water, hearing it thunk in the distance.

"Fuck you," she screeches. When I walk to the other side of the boat, that's when I notice we've drifted from the party. My jaw clenches as I begin to put the pieces together. She pulled me away on purpose. It was all a part of her sick game.

"Your jealousy controls you. You don't think before you act. Fucking pathetic," I spit, furiously, knowing I need to save Birdie. "You do know you've messed with my property," I warn.

Something flashes behind her eyes, and I think she realizes what this means.

"There are rules, Lindsey. You'll pay. And that's a promise. I will ruin your goddamn life."

"You already have," she throws back. "She got what she deserved."

"And you'll get yours," I say. "If something happens to her, I will take it to the leadership or I'll fucking kill you myself."

"Is that a threat?" she asks.

"It's a goddamn promise. Your phone records will be pulled and your child-molesting daddy won't be able to save you this time."

With that, I grab the back of her head, smashing her face into the boat's smooth wall. She crumples like a rag doll, knocked the fuck out.

Not wasting any more time, I dive overboard. Adrenaline bursts through me and I swim toward the party of tied-up yachts like my life depends on it. Right now, Birdie's does, because Lindsey handed her to the wolves.

CHAPTER 39



BIRDIE

Four or five guys surround me. I don't remember their names. They're a few years older and quiet, but there's something about them I don't trust. Honestly, I trust no one, thanks to my mother.

"Tell us about the mainland, Birdie," one of them asks, smirking over the rim of a whiskey glass. They've never cared to know anything about me before now. And this isn't a conversation any of these trust fund kids could handle. They don't understand what it's like to go hungry or fight for every fucking thing you have. Handmade tailored clothes are sewn just for their bodies, their compounds have so much food inside of them, it could feed the entire West side of Santo Christo. Instead of being rude, I roll my eyes and scoff.

"Huh?" I force out, quickly forgetting the question. The boat feels like it's rocking or maybe it's just me. Reaching forward, I try to grab my champagne glass but it's too hard to concentrate as my vision blurs. A rough palm slides up my inner thigh and I try to push them away. My eyes go heavy. I try to speak, but my tongue is like an anchor weighing heavy in my mouth. I'm brought back to the night I was sold to Darius, and the tracers I saw in the lights. I was rolling, and the same energy shoots through my veins again, but it's also different. Like it's dragging me down into the deep pits of hell and there's nothing I can do to escape its hold.

I'm losing control, all inhibitions are slipping. I'm scared.

"You feel good, Birdie?" Jeffrey whispers into my ear, rubbing his hand on my back, and he inhales my hair. His fist

reaches my scalp and he pulls my head back, forcing his dog breath on me.

“Stop,” I mumble and try to turn around to see if Darius is close by, but I nearly fall to the floor when I do.

“What did you do?” I slur, my vision blurring. Whatever they’ve given me is a riptide of a drug, and it pulls me under into a deep void of nothingness.

I hear someone say GHB. Another voice laughs.

I want to scream.

I try to call for Darius or Archer, but instead, the world shifts as I’m lifted from my bar stool, and carried away. As we go downstairs into one of the private rooms, everything fades to black.



MY DRESS IS FORCEFULLY REMOVED from my body. The straps that kept the thin material attached to my body snap like twigs. I open my eyes as my bikini top is torn from me. The thin strings break and as it’s tugged away from my body, leaving me fully exposed, it causes a rope-burn sting. Turning my head, I see a room of men surrounding me, hard, and stroking themselves.

I’m on full display for these perverts.

My jaw is jerked forward as one of the random guys hovers above me, kissing me roughly, grabbing a handful of my breast. He brings his wet mouth on mine and I hate the way his unshaved scruff grazes my skin. He smells like sweat, and booze, with a mix of expensive cigars and cologne.

I try to push him away as my bikini bottoms are snapped.

I’m naked on a couch as they circle jerk, each waiting for a turn.

“She’s not wet enough,” he complains, ramming himself inside me anyway as these sick fucks watch. His thumbs dig into my hips and I know I’ll have bruises as he pumps inside of me.

I groan, the pain would be blinding if I could see.

“Yeah, you moaning, baby?” The bastard gloats. “Feel good?”

It hurts.

It’s painful.

Then darkness.



I go in and out of reality several times.

A different guy on top of me, fucking me like a rag doll. Some are rough. Some go fast. My hair is pulled. My titties grabbed. Nothing is off-limits to them.

I don’t know how many rounds they each take, but it feels like an eternity passes.



I’m awake again.

I can’t move.

I can't scream.

I'm a prisoner.

My body aches. I'm trembling.

What did I do to deserve this hell?

This bracelet was supposed to protect me.

Darius. Where is he? Where am I?

He promised me! He promised he'd protect me.

My vision blurs, but I hear the sick bastards give each other high fives. Something they do after a good golf game.

"Can't forget a picture," someone says.

They sit me upright, posing with me like a mannequin for their fucked up photo.

It's for bragging rights.

The pain of them raping, dehumanizing, and stealing what dignity I had left, threatens to rip me in half.

I want to go home.

What is home?

I miss my mom. Momma.

I wish I could cry out for her. She'd tell me everything will be okay, little bird. You're strong. You'll get through this.

It will be okay, right?



I only thought they were done.

I guess that was only round one.

Or was it two, already?

Either way, they throw me back on the couch and widely part my legs.

I wonder how many other girls on Valmont Island have had the same thing happen. It's obvious I wasn't the first. But I promise you, I'll be the last.

I'll kill them.

I'll kill every last one of them, shove their tiny dicks down their throats right before I slit them, and watch them bleed out.

I'll hunt them like animals and will make them pay if Darius doesn't get to them first.

The rules this island made were never mine to follow, and I'll seek my revenge, consequences be damned.

Maybe they'll kill me. Maybe they'll give me the escape I desperately crave. That's the very last thought I have before I drift away from this cruel reality one final time.

CHAPTER 40



Lucky I'm a decent swimmer because the current is strong tonight. It's not helping me get to the boat where I last saw Birdie any quicker. In the end, it's easier to hold my breath and swim deeper below the surface, kicking as hard as I can, my arms pulling at the depths with every stroke. I have to find her. I have to save her. Even though, judging by what I saw in that photo on Lindsey's phone—it's too late to stop what's already begun. They've violated my girl. They've started something.

And now I'll finish it.

I'm finally at the boat where I last saw Birdie. This yacht is a big motherfucker, two stories high, several bedrooms nestled down in the twin hull. It belongs to Zade Miller, and if he's one of the guys in that grainy photo I saw on Lindsey's phone, I swear to fucking God I will burn this boat right where it sits in the water, with him and the rest of those sick fucks on board. I haul myself up the access ladder as quietly as possible and swing up onto the boat's rear deck, desperately wishing I'd brought my gun. Doubt it would have survived that watery journey anyway, but my hands still hunger to hold a weapon that can end lives at the pull of a trigger.

No matter. I'll knock some fucking heads together with my bare hands and slit some goddamn throats with the small switchblade I carry on the water, *always*. Speaking of... I shake droplets of salt water from my hair as I withdraw the knife from my belt and open it with a satisfying click. Holding it by my side, I creep forward into the boat, sticking to the

shadows as I make my way toward the cabin, passing several drunk Valmont students in various states of dress. Nobody pays me any attention. *Idiots*, I think, all so desperate to get their dick wet that they haven't even posted a lookout. That mistake will literally be the downfall of them all.

Whoever touched her is going to suffer tonight. And at the end of the carnage I'm about to wreak if Zade Miller isn't part of the little gang who defiled my Birdie? I'm going to owe that motherfucker a brand new boat because the blood I'm about to spill isn't ever going to be able to be washed from this one.

There'll be too much soaked into the decks, into the leather seats, into the fucking walls themselves to ever fully get rid of.

Tristan Caldwell, star linebacker for the Valmont Vultures, is the first fucker I see. He's watching a video on his phone as he leans against the wall in the galley's kitchen area. He snickers to himself as the video plays. I hear slaps and grunts and male voices laughing in the video, and then the anguished moans of my sweet Birdie ring out, a cruel, bitter symphony if ever I heard one. Tristan doesn't even know I'm there until I've got the blade at his neck, pressing hard enough that a thin trickle of blood ekes its way from his skin down to the collar of his polo shirt. He drops his phone on the slick hardwood floor. He swallows shakily as his eyes slowly make their way to meet mine. He's terrified.

"Hey, Tristan," I greet my first victim of the night. "You should probably pick that phone up and show me what's so funny."

He's got at least fifty pounds and several inches of height on me, but the guy is as stupid as a bag of rocks.

"Slowly," I warn, taking the blade away and pointing it down at the phone. "Good boy. Bend over. Give me that."

He does, not taking his eyes off me as he awkwardly bends down and retrieves his cracked iPhone, handing it to me. His eyes are begging for mercy, but I'm pretty short on mercy right now. What I do have is vengeance and plenty of it. My heart pumps with it, my blood sings with it, my every movement is dictated by it.

I just have to find her first, and then I'm going to make everybody pay.

I choke back an anguished roar somewhere at the back of my throat as I see two things at once: First, the video image of my beautiful Birdie being pinned down by two guys whose faces I can't see, her head hanging off the edge of the bed as Luke Reynolds, aspiring actor and head of the drama club, skull-fucks her so hard I can see her throat swell every time he thrusts into her. On the bed, Trent Hargrove, the fucking valedictorian of Valmont Academy as well as a serial heartbreaker, is fucking Birdie's limp body as if she's a ragdoll. As if she's dead. Is she dead?

The second thing I see is the red LIVE icon blinking in the corner of the screen.

This isn't pre-recorded. This is streaming. This is happening *now*.

A fist flies toward my face, and I sidestep the blow just in time for Tristan to tumble back to the floor, landing heavily. I set the phone on the counter, leaning it against a six-pack of beers that somebody forgot to put back in the cooler, so I can still see what's happening on the live stream as I grab a handful of Tristan's hair. I yank him up to a sitting position, wrapping my hand around his face and smashing the back of his skull against the kitchenette so hard the wood splinters.

"Where is she?" I ask. Tristan shakes his head, dazed. "Not here," he chokes, smirking. "Another boat."

"Which boat?" I urge. When he doesn't answer, I run my left thumb along the soft spot where his shoulder and arm connect.

He throws a football with his right arm. So that's exactly where I sink my blade, in the meaty part where muscle and tendon attaches his prized limb to his body. His eyes bulge, and a wet stain appears on the front of his boardshorts. Dude's pissed himself. *Good. Be scared. Be fucking terrified.*

"Whose boat!?" I roar, twisting the blade in his shoulder.

He screams, but no sound comes out. I've already got two fingers at his throat, stabbing in and crushing where his vocal cord folds are housed, rendering Tristan completely mute. He can still breathe, for now—but I've essentially internally ripped out his throat without spilling a single drop of blood. His hand is around my wrist, clutching painfully, but I don't mind the pain—I relish it.

“I'm gonna say some names, and you're gonna squeeze my wrist as hard as you can when I get the right boat. OK?”

He nods weakly, desperation in his eyes as he eagerly awaits my next words. Tristan's parents aren't part of the Emyrean table. I guess he didn't understand just how lethal my academy training actually is. Well, he fucked around and found out, didn't he?

I think of the guys in the video, of all the boats I've seen today.

“Trent Hargrove.” He tries to shake his head, a pitiful, tiny sob managing to bubble from his throat. “Luke Reynolds.” Another shake of the head. I reel off three more names, and the fear in Tristan's eyes grows evermore as the right name doesn't come to me.

I twist the knife a quarter-turn in his shoulder, the tearing of tendons a meaty pop. “Whose boat!?” I repeat. He's starting to pass out, blood spurting from his shoulder. *Shit*. I've hit something major. Still, Tristan is trying his damned best to be helpful. Too little, too late. He grabs at my arm with his left hand, his fingers tracing against my shirt.

Letters. Initials. He's tracing someone's initials.

“A?” I guess. He nods, tracing the second initial. “V,” I guess. He nods again. My heart sinks.

“Archer Valmont,” I mutter. Tristan nods, flashing me a weary thumbs up, and then his barrel of a body sags to the side, bleeding out beyond me now.

Birdie is trapped on Archer's boat? Her cousin Archer?

I leave Tristan to die, wiping my blade on my t-shirt with one hand as I collect his phone with the other. Luckily I'm

dressed in all black, and the red stain doesn't show. I slink to the rear of the yacht, scanning for other vessels in the dark, my eyes finally landing upon the one I'm looking for. Tied up across from the one I'm currently on, a leisurely fifty-meter swim away.

Summer's Eve. The name of Archer's—of Lilith's—boat. Named after Birdie's mother, I presume. *Fucking ironic.*

Folding my knife shut, I stashing it in my belt. When I reach the edge of the boat, I slip silently into the ink-black ocean, making sure Tristan's phone is muted as I hold it out of the water.

I swim toward the scene of my most brutal crimes—the ones I'm yet to commit.



There are two guys standing in the galley of Archer's boat—neither of them Archer. Both of them are rendered unconscious by my hands as I literally knock their fucking heads together. Neither of them even see my face before they hit the ground, out cold.

When I get to the room, at first I think she's dead. The live stream is a couple of seconds delayed, but it doesn't matter. I pocket the phone and extend my blade once more, readying for the final fight.

I don't kill any of them; at least I don't think I do. They don't deserve so swift an ending. They haven't paid yet for what they've done, but they will. Once I'm done, less than ninety seconds have elapsed, and all four of the monsters who were participating in the brutal attack on Birdie are in a heap on the floor. Broken jaws, gouged eyes, smashed in noses, and

so much blood. I soak the floor in their blood, and the walls, and myself. By the end, they're a pile of unconscious, bruised, bleeding bodies, set aside for me to punish further once I've tended to Birdie.

Birdie.

"Fuck," I choke, stumbling over to the bed, to her.

My little bird. My sweet, innocent Birdie... is *broken*.

Blood seeps from between her spread legs, smeared along her thighs, mixed with cum as it pools beneath her on the duvet. I press my finger to her neck, holding my breath, waiting for the flutter that will tell me she's alive.

And she is. *Barely*.

I put my ear to her mouth and wait. Her chest isn't rising and falling as far as I can see, but I'm pretty beat up. I'm trained, but I'm not a goddamn assassin, not yet, at least. I've sustained some injuries myself, but none that will kill me in the next few hours.

She's breathing. Ever-so-faintly.

Relief floods every cell in my body as I repeat that in my head: She's alive. She's alive. *She's alive.*

I check her injuries. Her throat is bright red, the skin under her chin all the way down to her collarbones marked with the indentation of handprints. She's been choked. Strangled. And that's probably the least serious thing they did to her poor battered body. As for her mind? I'm not sure that she will ever recover from something like this.

She's naked and injured, and I need to get her to a doctor, fast. All I want to do is gut each and every fucker who hurt her. But first, she needs medical attention.

I'm wrapping Birdie in a bright pink beach towel I found in the galley when I hear a banging noise. It's getting louder. More insistent. A muffled yell accompanies the sound. *Where the hell is it coming from?*

I search the boat, being careful not to take my eyes off Birdie for more than a few seconds.

The floor. The sound is coming from the floor.

There's a square access hatch to the storage port, cut into the hardwood planks that line the bedroom. The hatch opens right next to the bed where Birdie lies. I locate the edge of the lid and yank it open, revealing a small, dark hole filled with extra rope and lifejackets.

And on top of all of that.... Archer. His eyes peer up from the darkness, so much like Birdie's. Of course, they're related. Of course.

Shit. He's been beaten black and blue, tied up, and thrown down here, a dirty piece of duct tape over his mouth. I yank him out of the hold, my hands grabbing under his arms and pulling his near-dead weight up into the bedroom. I rip the tape from his mouth, and he winces. One of his eyes is swollen shut, and a line of dried blood streaks down from his nose, trailing down his chin, seeping into his white t-shirt.

"I tried to stop them," the words come out in a garbled rush. "I tried, man, fuck. There were so many of them. I'm so sorry."

I grimace as I look him over. "I can tell," I say, surprised he's still alive after trying to take on at least four guys who all train just as hard and long in the gym as Archer and I do. I take my knife—still bloody—and cut him free of his bindings. He looks at the pathetic pile of unconscious bodies and shakes his head. "You crazy motherfucker." But he's impressed.

"Can you stand?"

Archer nods, clambering to his feet.

"Good," I say. "I want you to sit with Birdie and make sure she's okay. I have some cleaning up to do."

He eyes me curiously. "What are you gonna do with them?"

I take hold of Luke's ankles and start pulling him along the floor, a thick streak of blood smearing along the hardwood in his wake.

“I’m going to drop them in the fucking ocean for the sharks. And then we’re going to get my girl to a doctor.”

Not my property. My girl. She’s *mine*. Not because of a fucking contract. Because I can’t imagine a life without her, not now that she’s been thrust into my orbit.

Archer nods, wrapping the towel tighter around Birdie’s shoulders, pulling her protectively into his chest. “She fought like hell,” he says softly, his voice breaking with emotion. “Like a warrior.”

I almost double over at the way his words stab me in the gut. *Like a warrior*. This is my fault. She wouldn’t be on this island, in this life, if it weren’t for me.

I make quick work of the sick fucks who hurt Birdie. Including the two guys who were in the galley when I arrived, and I toss six of them overboard. A few of them wake enough to try and fight me, but rage is a peculiar thing. It demands blood. It craves payback. And it fuels violence.

None of them are dead when they hit the water, but some are pretty close.

As for what happens to them once they’re off the boat? I don’t know, and I couldn’t give less of a fuck if I tried.

Archer cuts the ropes tying us to boats on either side, guns the engines, and soon we’re speeding away from the rest of the tie-up party, headed toward the refuge of Valmont island, toward Lilith and her magical Doctor’s bag of tricks.

I don’t let go of Birdie. I hold her in my arms, clutching her to my chest as she continues to cling to life.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, looking past the horrors of what they’ve done to her, seeing the beauty underneath the blood. She’s alive. That’s all that matters. Everything else can be dealt with.



Everything else can be dealt with... except, possibly, the fucking cops waiting for me at the Valmont Island dock.

Archer slows as we motor into the harbor. He sees them, too. “What do you want me to do?” he asks from the command console at the front of the main cabin.

Fuck. I stare down at Birdie, my arms aching from holding her so long, even though she’s light as a feather. It must be all the assholes I tossed into the murky depths. Some of those fucks weighed over 200 pounds. It doesn’t matter, though. My arms might be aching, but I’m cloaked in a numb resignation, a kind of temporary respite from the abhorrent violence and unrestrained rage I’ve just doled out in record amounts. By the rules of Valmont Island, I should be taken out to the meadows and shot for what I’ve done. Rules are rules.

But we have other rules, too. An eye for an eye is a popular one. Rarely enforced, but often spoken fondly on at Empyrean Table meetings.

“You want me to cause some kind of a diversion, buy you some time?” Archer calls out. “You can take the tender, circle around the island to your place.”

By tender, he means the smaller, inflatable lifeboat that hangs from the back of his yacht. It’s big enough to fit eight people comfortably, more in a genuine emergency, and it’s got its own outboard motor and emergency supplies.

I’m about to agree with him and carry Birdie to it when a helicopter cuts a swift path through the sky above us, then another. We’re going fast, but a marine police vessel passes us, sirens blaring, headed toward land.

My stomach twists uneasily. I know what they're here for. Those six guys I dropped in the ocean? Looks like someone conveniently fished them out. Some of them, anyway. I'm not sure they've all been located.

"Looks like the diversion caused itself," I call to Archer. "You want to swing around and take us to my place?"

He's already doing it. I clutch Birdie to me like my life depends on it, like I might die without her. That's how it feels.

Fuck. When did I become this person? When did I start caring?

When did I start *feeling*?

"It's okay, Birdie," I murmur. "It's all gonna be okay."

CHAPTER 41



DARIUS

Lorenzo DiCastro, a junior deputy with Valmont Island's private police department, is waiting for us when Archer pulls his boat up to the dock in front of my house. Archer ties off against the pier, but he doesn't step onto the dock. He comes back into the cabin, his eyes shifting between me, Birdie's unconscious form in my arms, and Lorenzo.

"I don't think we can drop him in the ocean," Archer says.

"No," I agree. "People would probably notice. Let me talk to him. Can you get Lilith on the phone in the meantime? Birdie needs a doctor." Neither of us acknowledges how severe Birdie's injuries are, but... fucking hell. She's bleeding a lot. I can feel the wet stain of blood seeping from between her thighs, soaking the bright pink towel I've wrapped around her.

Archer nods, fishing his cell phone out of his pocket and dialing. I hoist Birdie higher in my arms and walk to the edge of the boat, where Lorenzo watches me.

"Lot of people looking for you, Darius," he says.

"I figured."

He looks uneasy as he studies Birdie more closely.

"I'm supposed to bring you in."

I don't say anything.

"Is she okay?"

I shake my head. "No."

He swallows noticeably, gesturing to the large red stain concentrated at the juncture of her thighs. “That’s a lot of blood.”

“They did a lot of damage.”

“She-they...” For a cop, you’d think he would be more versed in the language of sexual assault.

“They pinned her down and raped her,” I confirm, my words monotone despite the depravity they contain. “Live streamed it. I caught the highlights. She needs a doctor.”

“I have to arrest you, Darius,” Lorenzo says, his tone almost apologetic. “You’ve broken Empyrean rule. There are five guys in the hospital and more missing because you took things into your own hands.”

“What would you have done if you were me?” I ask him.

Time ticks painfully away. With each passing moment, Birdie loses more blood.

“I’m not you, though. I have to bring you in.”

I nod. “I agree. You have to bring me in. So let’s make a deal.”

He snorts. “You’re not buying me off. I don’t do that.”

“No, I’m not buying you off. And you do have to bring me in, but first, you need to give me time. Give me until dawn. I swear to you on my sister’s life; I will come with you peacefully when the sun rises. But right now, I have to make sure this girl doesn’t die right now, in my arms. Do you understand?”

“She needs to go to the hospital,” Lorenzo insists. “She needs doctors. At the very least, she needs a rape kit.”

“Who works at the hospital?” I quiz him. Time ebbs by. So fucking slowly. Come on, man, get a fucking clue. I’m going to have to spell it out for him. “The guys who raped her? One is the son of a surgeon at Valmont Memorial. Another is the son of the fucking hospital administrator. And one is the son of the goddamn Mayor of the island and a member of the

Empyrean table. Any rape kit that is collected is going to get conveniently lost or be done incorrectly.”

Lorenzo’s jaw tightens. He’s a good guy. A purveyor of justice. He’s a better person than me. That’s the only reason I haven’t set Birdie down gently on the ground and slit Lorenzo’s throat. It’s the only reason I’m attempting to appeal to his sense of righteousness.

“Just let me get her home, okay? That’s all. Let me fix her as best I can. Let me get someone to do a rape kit and take it to the fucking FBI. You let me do that and I swear to you, I’ll come out with my hands up once it’s done. I swear on my life. On her life. On Davina’s life.”

Something in my impassioned plea hits right. Thank fuck. I really, really didn’t want to have to kill a cop, especially one who is actually a decent person, from what I can judge. Lorenzo eyes me uneasily. “I can hold them off for a couple of hours at most.”

“Thank you. You’re a good man, Lorenzo.”

Archer reappears, stepping onto the dock and helping me carry Birdie across the threshold, ensuring we don’t slip and drop her in the ocean.

As we’re walking the hundred meters to the back door of my house, I hear Lorenzo speak once more. “Don’t you fuck me on this, Prince,” he warns. “I won’t be so nice next time.”

“See you at sunrise,” I throw back over my shoulder, carrying Birdie to my house. I give Archer the keypad code and he unlocks the gate, holding it open for me.

A few minutes later, we’re inside, and I’m laying Birdie at one end of the white marble table in the dining room. Archer gently pushes a cushion under her head as he speaks. “My mom is trapped inside the fucking hospital,” he says. “Whole place is locked down, security armed to the teeth. Nobody in or out.”

I turn and give him a scathing look. “And? Your mother is a trained fucking assassin, Archer. You’re telling me she can’t evade some rent-a-cops?”

Archer pales. “The Empyrean table just held an emergency meeting. They voted to call in outside security.”

“Well, my invite must have been lost in the mail,” I seethe.

Archer shrugs. “Majority rules. You know what this means. Whole Island is locked down. Off-site security was mobilized. We’re trapped.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to will panic from rising in my throat. My heart is hammering in my chest and I feel like I weigh a thousand fucking tons. I’m still full to the brim with fury and violence, but my adrenalin stores are starting to wane... I feel fucked up. Drugged, almost.

“Call Lilith back,” I bark. He dials, and I snatch the phone from his hands.

“I can’t talk right-” Lilith begins.

“It’s Darius,” I cut her off. “We’re on island lockdown?”

She hesitates a moment. “Yes.”

“There are people listening to you right now?”

“Yes, that’s right. You have to let the dog out or he’ll make a mess. Do you understand?” She’s making it sound like she’s having a regular, casual conversation with her son instead of a forbidden chat with the guy who just maimed seven of the island’s most cherished young men.

“Okay. I’ll play pretend. Birdie isn’t okay. She’s been...” I can’t even say the fucking words. “She’s been raped. She needs a doctor. You can’t leave the hospital?”

“There is absolutely no way I can come home to get you dinner,” she says cryptically. “I think there are some restaurants still delivering. I can order you something to be delivered?”

Yeah, I need something delivered. “Blood bags,” I tell her. “I’ve done my advanced medical training. I know how to transfuse someone.”

“Okay.” she replies. “That all you want?”

“The guys who did this to her. They’re about to end up in your infirmary, if they aren’t there already. Can you hear the sirens?”

“Too late.”

Fuck. “They’re already there? Alive?”

“Yes. Mostly.”

Fuck!

“I need you to keep them sedated for a few hours. Once they’re awake, I’m going to be arrested. And Birdie will be all alone. A sitting duck. Pardon the fucking pun.”

“I can do that,” Lilith says. “Should buy you four or five hours.”

“There’s a video of what they did,” I tell Liith. “Is it enough?”

“I’m in a storage closet. I’ve got two minutes to talk freely. So... talk fast. Are you asking me if a video is enough for the police?”

“I’m asking you, is the video evidence of a rape enough for the Emphyrean table.”

“You’re taking this to the table?” Lilith sounds shocked. “Good. Okay. The video is good, but it’s not enough. You’ll need physical proof as well. Her clothes. Swabs. Photos of her... injuries.” She whispers the next part. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m invoking Emphyrean rule.”

Emphyrean rule is like the Old Testament. It’s the Island’s original version of crude justice. An eye for an eye, and all that kind of glorious bloodthirsty stuff that makes forgiveness and turning the other cheek sound positively dull. It’s archaic and technically illegal, but I don’t give a fuck. Nobody gets away with what they did. *Nobody*.

“Darius...” Lilith whispers.

“She’s a Valmont, Lilith. They’ll hang for what they’ve done to her.”

There's a long silence. A pronounced breath in, and back out. "Okay. Yes. Good," she replies.

"There's an officer on his way to the hospital," I add. "You need to give him a paper evidence bag for her things. A rape kit. Pack a few, in case I fuck up the first time. I'll send Archer with the evidence bag. I don't trust anybody else. He'll bring it directly to you. Okay?"

"You're going to collect evidence? You shouldn't have to do that."

"No, I shouldn't. But there's nobody else."

While I've been on the phone, Archer has been gathering supplies. A first aid kit. Sheets. Towels. For some reason, every piece of linen in this house is fucking white. The marble table is white. The blanket I've laid over Birdie is white. Everything is fucking white, and her blood just looks even brighter against it all.

I rummage around the first aid kit, fixing Birdie up as best I can. She has a deep laceration on her cheek that will probably scar. I glue it together carefully, Archer helping me hold the wound shut, and then I apply sterile strips to make sure it stays sealed shut long enough to heal. We repeat the process on each injury, some shallow grazes that need only alcohol to disinfect, others deep gouges. There's a deep wound near her belly button that I hadn't noticed before, too caught up in the rest of her injuries, but this one almost looks like a stab wound.

"This was Luke," Archer says, pointing at it. "He used her own knife on her when she resisted."

I should have slit his fucking throat and tore his eyes from his skull. I will, as soon as humanly possible. "This one needs stitches," I say, reluctantly reaching for the surgical thread and single-use needle. It's a high-end first-aid kit, what can I say.

The moment I stick the threaded needle into her skin, Birdie wakes up. Or... she startles, her eyes flying wide open as if she's in a fever dream. "It's okay," I murmur, trailing my fingers down her cheek until her eyes flutter shut once more.

That's when it hits me. What I feel for her. I can't say it, I can never say it, but I think I love this girl.

And it's terrifying.

I focus on stitching her up, as fast and as neatly as I can. The job is crude, but I've seen worse. At least this one isn't on her face. Just as I'm placing the final stitch, Archer's phone buzzes on the table.

Lorenzo's here, and he comes bearing a bag of gifts. Archer fetches it from the front door, toting a massive plastic sack full of everything I've requested from Lilith. I focus on pulling out each item, handing some over to Archer, assembling some myself. Archer takes her blood pressure as instructed by his mother in a text message, and it turns out she doesn't need a blood transfusion just yet. That's a small relief. Archer takes the bags of cold blood and clears a spot for them in the refrigerator, while I ready myself for the worst part.

"You sure you want to do this?" Archer asks. "Maybe I could—"

"Nobody is fucking touching her but me," I snap. "I'm sorry. Here. Take this suture kit and try to fix that face of yours. I'll call you if I need you."

I don't want him to see what Birdie's about to endure. Even unconscious, it's her dignity. I have to protect it. I have to at least try.

I take the photos first, with my phone. Her wounds. The angry red handprints on her neck are blossoming into purplish bruises.

The place where they violated her. Where they rutted into her like animals and left their DNA as evidence. Fuckers didn't use condoms. They wanted to mark her with themselves.

I cry when I swab her, my shoulders shaking as I tamp down the anguished noises that are trying to burst free from me. Tears blur my vision as I hold my Birdie's knees apart and swab inside her for evidence. I want to be sick as I'm forced to look at the way they've hurt her, the tears in her delicate skin,

the drying remnants of semen that, even now, continue to seep from her, along with blood.

When I'm done, I want to die. I place everything in two paper bags. One for Lilith, and one for someone else. It's not that I don't trust Lilith—I do. But she's one person on an island teeming with corruption. I have a backup.

Walking to my back door, I place the paper bag just outside. In the distance, Rafe appears as if by magic. He's not really magical. He's just a licensed scuba diver, and right now he's cutting across my backyard in the dark, a thick plastic satchel in his hands. He takes the evidence and drops it into the waterproof satchel, attaches the thing to himself, and without so much as a word exchanged, he's gone. A copy of the video is already sent to his phone, thanks to the screen record feature I utilized on Tristan's phone. And the paper bag now in his custody is for the FBI, in case the Empyrean table tries to fuck Birdie over in a bid to save their precious sons.

Insurance. Worth every penny of whatever he decides to charge me.

“Archer.”

He appears in the hallway, not a single stitch in his face. “Here.” I hand him the other bag. “For your mother only, do you understand?”

He nods.

“You got a gun?” I ask.

“At home, sure. Didn't really think I'd need to be packing at a fucking tie-up party.”

“You and me both,” I say, opening the temperature-controlled wine cellar and retrieving a pistol hidden in a carton of Glenfiddich reserve. “Here.”

He checks the clip and stuffs the gun into the space where his shorts meet the small of his back. “I'll get Lorenzo to drive me,” he says.

“Good idea. You wouldn't get a block in my car without being shot at.”

We exchange a look, and then he's gone, the front door slamming shut in his wake.

CHAPTER 42



DARIUS

I watch as Archer helps himself into the passenger seat of Lorenzo's cruiser. After a tense exchange, he slams the door shut, and they're gone.

Now, it's just Birdie and me. She still hasn't roused, apart from that brief moment when I was stitching her face. Ignoring the pooled blood and semen on the dining table, I scoop Birdie up and carry her upstairs, straight to the bathroom. Not mine. I don't have a tub—I opted for a bigger shower instead during the latest remodel. Davina wanted a claw foot bath under her shower head, and that's what she got. It'll be easier to hold Birdie steady in the high-backed tub. Entering through Davina's bedroom, I try not to drip blood as I haul Birdie into the bathroom. More stark, gleaming white tiles ready to illuminate every drop of blood spilled.

I turn the shower faucet on and adjust the temperature, balancing Birdie in one arm. I have to briefly lay her on the floor on a thick towel so I can strip my bloody clothes off. I ball them up and toss them in the furthest corner of the room. Tomorrow, if they let me post bail, I'll burn those fucking clothes.

When the water is warm, I lift Birdie into the tub, sitting myself behind her. I haven't put the plug in the sinkhole. I don't really want either of us to be bathing in the remnants of cum and blood still clinging stubbornly to Birdie's thighs and inside her. Taking the hand-held showerhead and a bar of soap, I wash Birdie gently, and reverently, making sure to clean every trace of blood from her battered, bruised body. I soap

her arms, her breasts, and her stomach. I wash the blood and semen from her thighs. Red-tinged water runs down the drain, each patch of clean skin a blessed relief. Washing away their crimes. Even though nothing I do will ever take away what they've inflicted on Birdie.

When I've washed everywhere else, I turn the pressure down so the water is just a trickle. Steeling myself, I aim the weak jet of water between her legs, using my fingers and the water to wash her broken, swollen pussy. It's not enough. There's still cum inside her. As gently as I can, I use my fingers to scoop sticky white blobs from her, making sure it all disappears down the drain.

She wakes suddenly, her entire body stiffening as she claws at my arms, her fingernails drawing blood.

"No!" she screams. "Stop! Let me go!"

"It's me," I say firmly, hugging her arms like a straitjacket as she thrashes. "Birdie, it's me. I got you. I got you."

The fight goes out of her as she recognizes my voice. She looks down to see the last of the last of the blood-tinged cum still leaking out of her. "Don't look," I beg her.

She can't look away though. Mesmerized and saddened, she slumps back against me.

"Still some in there," she croaks, taking my hand and motioning for me to keep going. I use the weak jet of water to wash away the rest as best I can.

Once Birdie is clean, I wrap her in thick towels and carry her to my bed. She grabs my wrist as I turn to leave the room.

"Stay," she says, panicked.

"I'm just getting you water," I soothe. "I'll be one minute."

She lets go, nodding. She still can't look me in the eye. God, the swirl of feeling for this girl... I push it down, deep down, and lock it away. Taking the stairs two at a time, I snatch up the pill packets Lilith sent over, as well as a glass of water. I'm back in less than a minute, setting the water and pills by the bed. Birdie's eyes drift over to them.

“No pills,” she says.

“Emergency contraception?” I hold up one, and she takes that one faster than he can finish saying the words. She’s got the implant in her arm, but one can never be too careful in times like this. I hand her the glass of water and she chokes the pill down, struggling to drink. A memory of her being throat-fucked with her head hanging off the side of the bed flashes in my mind, and I push that deep down, too. No wonder she’s having trouble fucking swallowing, after what they did to her. I busy myself with taking a second pill from its bottle and holding it up to her. “Oxycodone, for the pain.”

“No.” She stubbornly sets her jaw, refusing.

“Birdie,” I plead. “Please take the painkiller.”

“No drugs,” she rasps. “I want to feel like myself.”

“Take it,” I growl.

“My mother was a drug addict!” she argues, her yell whisper-quiet, her eyes finally meeting mine. Anger and shame duel for prime position inside her irises. “She died of a fucking overdose! I’m not taking anything!”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. “But... the pain.”

She gives me a knowing look as her cheeks flush pink. “You know how to take my pain away. Kiss me.”

I slip into the bed beside her, naked as well, leaning down to kiss her mouth.

“Not there,” she says quietly. So quietly, I almost don’t hear her. Did she mean to say that out loud?

“Birdie?” I trace my fingers gently, so so gently, down her stomach, cupping her poor, bruised pussy softly. “You want me to kiss you here?”

Tears stream from her eyes. “You don’t have to do that,” she says, balling her fists tight by her sides. “I’m dirty. They made me dirty.”

“You’re not dirty, baby, You’re beautiful. You’re mine. Can I kiss your pussy?”

Her cheeks are blazing red now, but she nods. My brave girl. I crawl under the blankets, positioning myself between her thighs, touching my tongue to her red, swollen clit. It looks sore. Like they slapped and pinched her there, repeatedly. Her entire body jerks the moment my tongue makes contact. I pull back, and she makes a frustrated sound, moving her hips closer to my mouth.

I try again. A gentle touch, a worship at her altar. I lap at her, so softly, and soon she’s fisting the sheets, her entire body seizing up as she has the most intense orgasm I’ve ever seen.

She collapses against the pillows, catching her breath as I push the blankets off me and lay beside her again. I’m not trying to be turned on—I’m anything but horny at this horrific moment—but my cock has a mind of its own, and pressed against the outside of Birdie’s warm thigh, it stiffens of its own accord. “Sorry,” I mumble, shifting position. Birdie’s hand shoots out, her fingers wrapping around me as she squeezes.

“I need you inside me,” she says.

Horror engulfs me as I think of the damage those monsters inflicted upon her just hours ago. “Birdie, they’ve hurt you. You’re bleeding.”

She cuts me an accusing stare. “I heard you on the phone. They’re coming to arrest you. You’re not leaving me here with any trace of them still inside me.”

I want to scream. I want to tear my fucking hair out. “Birdie, I can’t.”

“Can’t, or won’t?” Silence hangs in the air between us. I don’t know how to respond to that.

“You don’t understand,” she weeps. “It’ll never be all gone. Never be all washed away. It’s like poison. They’ve poisoned me. And now you’re going to leave me. You can’t leave me like this, with them still inside me.”

Out of desperation, or perhaps a misguided sense of duty, I force myself back to where I was just kneeling before her, licking her clit. She spreads her thighs wide, tilting her hips so I have a clear view of her pussy.

It's just as bad as when I had to take photos for the rape kit. What was pink and bare and slick with arousal yesterday, is now swollen and bruised and bleeding. Broken.

“Birdie... it's bad.”

She slams her fists against the mattress. “Don't you dare make me beg. Don't you dare.”

I swallow thickly, meeting her gaze. “Okay.”

I don't want to do this. For a moment, I think I might need to pop a viagra or something to be able to perform. But then I see how my okay makes her anxiety dissipate, and I remember that I'm falling in love with this girl. I'll do anything for her. I'd die for her. I'd kill for her. I'll do this for her.

I line up the tip of my cock with her pussy, pushing slowly, gently.

She screams, pain contorting her face as she grips my arms, her fingernails digging deep, spilling my blood. I stop, the tip barely seated between her pussy lips, but she won't let go of me. “Birdie, we should stop,” I plead.

I feel her heels graze my hips as she draws me into her.

“Fast,” she hisses, “Like ripping off a bandaid.”

Tears burn my eyes as I push into her, her swollen pussy barely letting me enter. She screams and cries but locks her legs around my waist at the same time. It's tighter than the first time, tighter than when she gave me her virginity. It hurts me, but it must be excruciating for her.

“Take the painkiller,” I urge.

She guides my fingers to her clit instead. “No.”

“God, Birdie,” I moan. I can't move. It's too much. Frustrated, she pulls away, and relief hits me. It's over.

Only, it's not over. She turns over, on hands and knees, and backs up until she's pushing herself onto my cock. She buries her face in the sheets, muffling a scream, her body locked up as she pushes herself back onto me, back and forth, back and forth. Turning her head to the side, she bites my hand, hard enough that it breaks the skin. I don't care. Let her hurt me. All I've ever done is hurt her. Even when I was trying not to, all I've done is cause her pain. Even in this very moment, I'm hurting her.

"Touch me," she begs, pushing herself back onto me. I'm close. I'm disgusted with myself that I'm close.

Reaching around, I find her swollen bundle of nerves and press light circles.

"I'm close," I choke out. That seems to be enough to send her over the edge. She clenches around my dick, and I grab her hips, slamming into her as we orgasm together. As I fill her with my cum. As I override any trace of any of those motherfuckers ever raping her.

Birdie falls face-first on the bed, my cock sliding from her as she curls up in a ball, one hand cupping her pussy to keep my cum inside her. As I catch my breath, I look down at her, realizing she's passed out.

She's not unconscious this time, though. Just sleeping. Peaceful. Beautiful.

I'm staring at her when my phone buzzes. Anxiety grips my stomach as I look toward the window, and see the first wisps of sunrise on the horizon.

I already know who the text is from before I pick up the phone.

Lorenzo.

He's on his way to arrest me.

Fuck.

A few minutes later, after kissing a sleeping Birdie goodbye, I'm dressed and sitting on the bottom stair in the

kitchen, watching the front door down the cavernous hallway
as I calmly await my fate.

CHAPTER 43



*M*y lawyer finally fucking bails me out of my holding cell, twelve hours after I'm arrested and taken to the Valmont Island Police Station station for processing. I would have been free earlier, but bullshit political games are always at play on the island. The parents of the guys I fucked up all want me locked up, the key thrown into the ocean. They can't keep me, though. I post a million dollars bail and get Lorenzo to drop me off at home, where I expect to find Birdie still curled up in my bed, or perhaps in the den watching TV to try and block out the silence.

But the house is empty.

My little Birdie has flown the nest.

"Fuck," I roar, picking up a vase and hurling it at the wine cellar's transparent glass. The vase shatters, the cellar glass cracks, and I don't feel any better.

Was it all a lie? Is she gone, the moment I've turned my back? Has she scurried home to that dirty fucking trailer park already?

I trusted her. I was falling for her. And she's abandoned me?

Maybe. Or maybe something worse. I grab my phone from the kitchen counter and thumb to the tracking app, the one that connects to her bracelet.

It's on. It's working. It's showing her at the dock.

I glance at the clock. Midday. The ferry to the mainland will be leaving soon. Can I make it in time and convince her to stay?

I shove the phone in my pocket and run to the garage, starting my car and tearing out of the place like I just stole the damn thing.

A few minutes later I'm skidding to a stop at the port, double parking the Bentley as I run to the ferry ticketing booth.

There's no ferry, though. That's when I remember—the island is on lockdown. Nobody in or out.

I pull my phone out, looking at the GPS signal coming from Birdie's bracelet. It's definitely showing that she's here. So why can't I see her? I move to the spot where the GPS dot is flashing, searching the ground for any clue, and that's when I see it.

The bracelet. It's lying on the pavement as if it's been dropped by accident. But this is no accident. The only way to open this bracelet is with the key I have.

The key Javier Marin gave me.

I stare at the bracelet. It's been opened with a key. It's undamaged. There's no way somebody forced this off Birdie's wrist. It was unlocked with a key, plain and simple. I look to the ocean, squinting as I see a large vessel sailing away.

A superyacht with a large silver anchor painted on the back. I stagger back, staring at the bracelet in my hand in disbelief.

Did she leave me? That easily? After everything?

I hear movement behind me, and pocket my phone, using my free hand to take out my gun. A groan comes from behind a dumpster, and I tentatively step around to see where it's coming from.

Or *who* it's coming from.

Archer Valmont is in a broken heap for the second time in the last twelve hours. He looks almost dead this time, though.

“Birdie,” he gasps, and it’s then I see the bullet wound through his torso, a clean entry and exit wound, both gushing blood that spreads a dark stain across his shirt. “He took her.”

I fall to my knees, rolling Archer onto his back as I apply pressure to his gunshot wound with my hands.

“Hey man, it’s okay,” I reassure him. *It’s not okay.* “It’s okay, stay with me, Valmont!” He’s so fucking pale, and his eyes roll back in his head before snapping shut.

“Hey!” I slap his cheek. “You gonna let a little bullet kill you? Stay with me, man. Where’s Birdie? Who took her?”

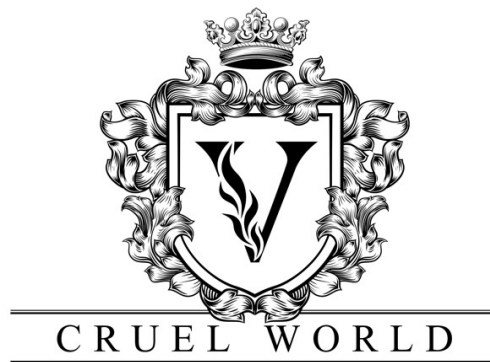
His voice is barely audible. “Who?” I press him.

“Javier.”

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