

The Cruel Captors Series  
Book 2

CRUEL  
*Captor*

GINGER  
TALBOT

# CRUEL CAPTOR

GINGER TALBOT

Cruel Captor: Book Two of the Cruel Captors Series

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## AUTHOR NOTE

This book was previously published under the title *The Trials of Tamara*. Some elements have been changed.

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

Gray Manor Press hopes you like *Cruel Captor*.

## PROLOGUE

*One word frees us of all the weight and pain of life: That word is love ~ Sophocles*

### *Tamara*

Not so long ago, Joshua Smith kidnapped a girl. A frightened girl who had no idea of the true evil that exists in the world.

He chained me up, whipped me, and locked me away in a dark cellar for weeks on end. He made me dance on an electric plate until I fainted. He bruised me so badly that I could barely limp to the breakfast table. He wrapped a choking collar around my neck and hobbled my ankles with chains so I'd know who owned me, so I couldn't escape him—not even in my thoughts, not even for a second.

The way he tortured my body wasn't the worst thing he did to me, though. That wasn't what broke me.

He also kissed me and stroked me and showed me pleasure like I'd never known before. He made me come so hard that I saw stars. He praised me for my strength and my kindness and bravery. He chased away nightmares that had haunted me for a decade, and lifted a heavy darkness from my soul. He held me

in his arms and made me feel like the most beautiful, special girl in the world...only to thrust me away from him in contempt and hurl me back into my lonely prison cell.

He pulled me into his arms and grasped me tightly, then spun me away from him again and again, until I was dizzy and desperate. He stripped away my defenses and invaded my heart and mind, made me crawl for him, made himself my whole existence, my reason for breathing. I lived and died for his approval. I cried oceans of tears for him, but it was never enough.

Despite everything he did to me, I searched deep in my soul for forgiveness, because holding on to the hate was poisoning me from the inside out. I thought I saw the good inside, hidden by thick scars and the walls he'd erected over the years. Now I believe that I was wrong all along. Joshua Smith is exactly as he appears—a cruel steel machine with a fistful of knives where his heart should be.

But he's finally pushed me too far. He's committed the one unforgivable sin, and I realize at last I will have to stoop to his level if I want to survive him.

I'm not a broken, frightened girl anymore. Now I'm a woman. A very angry woman, who knows her own worth and who will not be trifled with anymore. A woman with nothing to lose.

What's that ringing in my ears? Was it me who fired the gun?

It must have been, because I'm clenching it in my sweaty, shaking hand.

I hear gurgling. I smell blood. I close my eyes and search for peace.



This feels familiar. I've come full circle from the night when I saw Joshua as he really was for the first time. The night when he took me.

I open my eyes and look down, and I see what I've done, and feel nothing but emptiness. Not the release I sought.

"Are you sorry now?" I ask, but there's no answer. It's much too late for that.

# CHAPTER ONE

*Six months earlier...*

The throbbing of my foot and nose wrenches me awake, and I lie silent for a moment until I get my bearings.

My thoughts are fractured, floating, confused...until they fly back together and collide with a bang that sends a wave of dizziness sweeping through me.

I remember my Jaguar gliding to a stop as I pumped my foot uselessly on the gas pedal. Charlemagne had sabotaged it. He was controlling it remotely from somewhere nearby. A bitter smell burned my nostrils, and I heard a hissing of gas from the car's air conditioning vents. I tried to open the door, but the locks wouldn't function.

I sucked in my breath and scrabbled for my gun, which lay on the seat next to me. I was going to shoot out the window, but whatever gas he'd pumped into the car worked too quickly.

And that was the last thing I remember before I woke up here.

*Where is here?*

I open my eyes and struggle into a sitting position, bracing my hand on the frost-rimed carpet of leaves. It's late afternoon. The sun is melting into a bloody lake of fire on the horizon, and my breath makes puffs of vapor in the chill air. October in upstate Maine is bracingly cold.

I can't breathe through my nose. My hand flies to my face, and I feel crusted blood. The clouds are drifting from my mind, and I remember that Tamara broke my nose.

I'm wrapped in a blanket and I'm nude. And I'm alone. No Charlemagne.

No Tamara.

My heart thuds painfully against my ribcage.

*What is he doing to her right now? Must find her. Must save her.*

My hand bumps against something hard and plastic. I look down and I see a cell phone lying in the leaves right next to me. It's not my cell phone; my brother must have left it for me.

My throbbing foot is neatly bandaged. That wasn't mercy. Neither is the blanket. My brother wouldn't let me bleed out or freeze to death out here when he's got such fun things planned for me...and Tamara.

I know how he thinks, because it's how I think. A quick kill is never enough. If someone deserves killing, then they deserve killing the right way. Slowly, with heaping helpings of pain and terror rammed down their throats until they vomit.

Charlemagne wants me alive but panicked. It's why he's left me in the middle of the woods, naked. It'll take me a long time to make my way back to civilization, and he knows I will be torturing myself every step of the way, imagining what he's doing to her.

I swallow a rush of nausea and grab the cell phone. It's fully charged, but there are no bars. There wouldn't be any cell phone reception out here, and even if there were, I wouldn't use the phone to call for help. My brother will be monitoring every call made from this phone. He'll also be tracking its location anytime I get a signal.

I see there's one message. I press the button, and my blood freezes in my veins. The message is a picture of an unconscious Tamara, just her face, with a ball gag in her mouth. Her face is slack and her mouth is stretched obscenely around the bright red rubber ball. A message plays across the screen:

*If you tell the police, I will find out immediately, and I will start mailing you body parts.*

My Tamara.

*What is he doing to her right now?*

As I stumble to my feet, I picture the things he did to the social workers; those women who visited our cabin in the woods and did nothing to save us.

Our oldest brother even slipped one of them a note, but they were intimidated by my father, and they didn't do a fucking thing to save us. They didn't even interview us separately. Instead, they spoke to the whole family with my father sitting right there in the room. Then they went back to town and reported that we were just one big wholesome, happy, pioneer family living out in the woods.

And years went by, and my father killed my brothers off one by one, and brought girls back to our cabin and raped them in front of us, and then killed them too.

Charlemagne remembered those women who failed us. He nursed a grudge. When he was in his twenties, he tracked down the social workers who had left us in that hell, and he put their eyes out with hot pokers and broke most of the bones in their bodies before he killed them.

*Is he doing that to Tamara?*

Screams of agony echo through my mind. I hear the crunch of bones as if it's happening right in front of me. I smell burning flesh.

Panic and insane rage explode inside me, and I run, with the blanket wrapped around my shoulders and the phone clenched in my hands.

Tripping over a branch, I fall to the ground and smash my face. White-hot pain flares from my shattered nose and knocks clarity back into my head. I welcome the pain. I've never been afraid of it. It's my friend and my protector.

Calmly, I climb to my feet.

There's a shift in my brain, something ancient and icy taking over. All those feelings of fear and fury are still inside me. I can't make them go away. But I can store them somewhere else until they're useful.

I stand perfectly still and slow my breathing. Then I look around to get my bearings.

I'm surrounded by a dense stand of spruce trees. The sun has almost vanished. A fat black column of smoke rises into the sky, melting into the blue-black of encroaching night. It has to be the smoking ruins of my former house. With my remote control in my car, I set the code to detonate as I drove away. All evidence of my past misdeeds is now reduced to cinders and ash, floating on the cold October breeze.

The position of the setting sun alongside the smoke column gives me a rough idea of where I am. I imagine that the smoking crater that used to be my house will be crawling with police and fire trucks. I remember hearing sirens before I got in my car and fled with Tamara, so I know Charlemagne called the police. I have no idea what he told them. Did he reveal enough to make me a wanted fugitive?

Until I know, I can't go anywhere near the police. I am easily an hour away from the nearest major road. I picked this remote location for a reason. However, I do have emergency supplies and ATVs stashed in various spots on the property. I head for what I hope is the closest one, crunching over bare leaves, the gunshot wound in my foot sending a jolt of pain through me with every step I take.

*Hold on, Tamara. I'm coming for you.*

She has to know I'll save her, right? She can't give up hope.

I swiftly make my way through the thick underbrush. Deep in the recesses of my brain, guilt and terror hammer at the thorny barrier I've built around them.

It's my fault she's been taken. I will scour the Earth to find her, and when I do, I will build a fortress for her and keep her safe for the rest of her life.

I'm haunted by memories of her inner fire and her magnificent strength, all wrapped in velvety kindness. How bravely she battled for people she barely even knew: that homeless drunk who slept in doorways, the families at the battered women's shelter. With the childhood she had, it's an absolute miracle she has a decent bone left in her body, and yet she's the kindest, most generous person I've ever known. I've

never met anyone like her. I'll never meet anyone like her again.

I imagine Charlemagne snuffing out that fire; her spark lost forever...

Before I realize it, I'm running blindly again, and I almost trip over a spruce tree's long, low-hanging branch.

I pull back my calm.

I can do this. This is easy for me, I remind myself. I've slept outside, naked in the woods, in every kind of weather, for many nights, since my very first memories. My father's training, while brutal, prepared me for emergencies just like this one. And since the day I escaped him, I've never let myself get soft.

The whole time I held Tamara captive, I spent at least a couple of hours a day running through the woods barefoot. Not only to keep my stamina up but to toughen the soles of my feet. I'm comfortable outdoors in any weather and am intimately acquainted with the woods around this property.

I push aside all thoughts and memory of Tamara. I make her very small and hide her inside my heart, where she's safe. What I need to do is concentrate on getting clothing and a vehicle and making my way to the road.

We psychopaths are born with a special affinity for extreme danger. Our focus becomes blade-sharp under stress. Tests on psychopaths show their heart rates remain steady, slow down, even, as they balance on skis at the top of cliff-high ski runs, or disarm bombs. I remember that now. How could I have forgotten?

As soon as I force myself to think clearly, it's as if a map superimposes itself over the woods and I know exactly where I



am. Landmarks spring up in front of me, and I use them to make my way to a small camouflaged hut in the woods, where I keep an emergency getaway stash.

Unfortunately, Charlemagne's already been here. I know he's somehow disabled my perimeter alarms and he's been prowling through these woods for months. I swing open the door, but there's nothing but an empty room. He beat me to it. At some point, he broke in and stole my ATV, modified dirt bike, clothing, and the stash of fake ID and cash I had hidden here.

A volcanic eruption of fury escapes from somewhere deep inside me, and I let out a single bellow of rage.

*Tamara. He has Tamara. He's hurting her.* I will fucking cut him up into little pieces when I catch him. I will make his death last for weeks.

Then I regain control again. With clinical detachment, I note that I have never experienced such repeated loss of control under duress, and that when I have time, I will need to thoroughly investigate this new phenomenon. But right now, I need every single cell in my brain dedicated to finding my brother.

I pause in the doorway of the hut, surveying the darkening woods. I need to decide if I should head straight for the rural road near my property or look for another stash. If I make the wrong decision, it's going to take me at least half an hour out of my way.

I will take a chance. There's another stash that's better hidden, in a hideout carved into the hillside. I'm a long distance from the street. If I go straight to the road, wrapped in a blanket with no clothing on, who knows how long it will take me to flag down a car.

I hurry through the woods, the blanket wrapped tight to protect me from the plunging temperature. The sky is velvety black and the air smells smoky. I start to jog, but with purpose and control this time. The gunshot wound on my foot tears open and bleeds, and branches slash at my face, but I get to the hideout in ten minutes, and I am rewarded for the beating I've taken. Charlemagne didn't find this one.

I've hidden a modified dirt bike that can run in the woods and on the highway, clothes, ten thousand dollars in cash, fake ID, a gun, clips full of ammo, and food and water.

Strapped to the back of the dirt bike is a travel bag with several neatly packed changes of clothes, toiletries, and other items I might need if I have to go on the run. I pull on wool slacks, a turtleneck, a chunky cable-knit sweater and a fisherman's cap, then a thick leather jacket. I peel open a package of QuikClot from my first-aid kit and dump it into my bleeding gunshot wound, then wrap a fresh bandage around it before I pull on socks and boots.

After I gulp down the water, I stuff an energy bar into my mouth. I chew it as I fire up the bike and tear through the woods.

*Tamara. Tamara. Tamara.* Her name pounds through my body in tune with the beat of my heart.

I drive parallel to the rural road, using it as my guide until I make it to one of the main, paved roads.

Tamara's crawled back out of my subconscious again, and she's screaming. Her voice cries out in my head. Her beautiful face swims in front of me, crystalline tears running down her cheeks.

*Save me. Where are you? Why have you abandoned me?  
He's hurting me!*

Once again, I viciously shove all thoughts of her deep down into the darkness that fills me, and I pour ice-cold calm into my core, slowing my heartbeat and steadying my breathing. I feel as if something inside me is tearing and bleeding from the strain of it, but I do what has to be done. I always do what has to be done.

I drive as fast as I dare, which is only a few miles over the speed limit. I can't risk being pulled over, still not knowing what Charlemagne has told the police. They might have an APB out for me with pictures of my face.

It feels as if eons pass before I get into an area with cell phone service. I pull into a parking lot and use a burner phone that I had stashed in my bag, and risk making a call to my attorney, Algernon Brooks, a man who'd slit his sainted mother's throat for the right price. That's exactly what I look for in a lawyer.

He knows a lot about me, including the fact that I have a twin brother who's been locked in an asylum for years, and the fact that Joshua Smith isn't my real name. He also gets paid seven figures a year to make sure that, in the eyes of the law, I'm as pure as the driven snow. He and my head of security, a former CIA black ops assassin named Garrett Jones, are my go-to cleanup crew.

"It's me. How's the weather down there?" My code phrase to let him know it's really me calling. The code phrase changes weekly.

"Colder than a witch's twat. Hell, I thought you were dead," Algernon says. "I've been trying to call you all day."

“I’m hard to kill. Talk to me.”

“You sound different.” I can hear the suspicion in his voice.

“My nose is broken. But I appreciate the paranoia. The first day I met you, we went out to lunch at Tempus Fugit on 34<sup>th</sup> Street, and you had Hennessy on the rocks. Despite the fact that you were drinking overpriced French girly shit for pussies in a failed effort to impress me with your worldliness, I still hired you. Now fucking talk to me before I find you and carve out your voice box with a butter knife.”

That must have been convincing enough, because he talks fast. Earlier today, the local police received a tip telling them that I owned the house in Maine, and that I was holding Tamara Bennett there. I was already on law enforcement’s radar because of Tamara, and because someone—probably my brother—had told them that I was responsible for the disappearance of Baxter Warburton.

Of course, when the police arrived, my house had been blown to toothpick-sized splinters. They haven’t been able to pin the ownership of the house on me. Given how carefully I covered my tracks when I bought it, using a string of shell companies, I’m confident they never will. Algernon defended me indignantly to the police, pointing out that due to my years as a corporate raider, I’m a man with a lot of enemies—the kind who’d be happy to mess with me by making false claims.

When he’s done talking, I get him up to speed, giving him as much information as I think is necessary.

I tell him about my twin brother’s escape from a mental institution in California sometime this year, and that he’s the person who embezzled the money from my company and sabotaged my recent business deals. He was also behind the

mysterious phone calls to the NYPD, the ones accusing me of taking Tamara. I tell him that Tamara Bennet was, in fact, staying with me all along, but Charlemagne kidnapped her this morning. I don't offer any explanation for why she was with me and why I kept that information from the police, and he doesn't ask. I pay him not to ask questions that can't be answered.

“You'll have to be on the lookout for him trying to impersonate me,” I tell him. “My nose is broken, so that will be one way to tell, but given what a psycho fuck he is, he might break his own nose if he thinks it will help him fool people.” I tell him I'll get back to him and hang up.

Next I call my security chief Garrett, on his encrypted line. After I give him the passcode, I give him my location so he can send my helicopter to pick me up. I go through the story again, filling him in on exactly what happened, with some editing and obfuscations that gloss over the worst of the felonies I've committed.

Then I settle back down to wait for the helicopter. Every passing minute chews into my sanity, and Tamara starts screaming in my ears again, begging and pleading, and I think the frozen moisture on my cheeks might be tears.

## CHAPTER TWO

TAMARA

I wake up with my brain wrapped in a million layers of cotton. My mouth is dry and my muscles are loose and liquid. Fear floods my body. *Please let it be Joshua who has me. Please, please, please.*

Seconds tick by as I lie waiting for the fog to clear from my head.

Drugged, kidnapped, no idea where I am...this feels familiar. Too familiar.

I go through the same routine I did when I woke up in Joshua's basement for the first time. I lie there with my eyes closed and my heart pounding, taking mental inventory of my surroundings.

I'm on what feels like a firm mattress. The left side of my head throbs gently from where Joshua punched me...today? Yesterday? I don't feel any chains on my body. The air is cool and smells faintly of apple-scented air freshener. I don't hear anything at all. No traffic noises, no voices.

Then I hear footsteps thudding toward me, and I go stiff with fear. Somehow, even without opening my eyes, I can sense it's not Joshua who has me.

I feel something pinch my nipple, and I let out a shriek and sit bolt upright. Charlemagne—or Micah as he calls himself now—is looming over me with a nasty gleam in his eye. He gives my nipple another twist and then lets go.

“I could have let you stay there and pretend you’re sleeping all day long, but frankly you were starting to bore me,” he says.

I look around, my vision still blurry. The bed I’m on has a heavy metal frame. I sit up and swing my legs over the side, and dizziness swoops down on me. I almost fall off the bed, but I claw at the headboard for support. Whatever he’s drugged me with is still fogging my brain and sapping my muscles of strength.

“Take deep breaths. Don’t stand up yet. Blah blah blah.” Micah’s sarcasm taunts me as he settles down in a chair parked right next to the bed.

I clench my trembling hands into fists and look down at myself. I’m naked. I don’t feel any aches inside me, though. I don’t think I’ve been raped.

Yet.

Slowly, I look around the room, and my stomach turns to water. It’s a large room with pale blue walls and no decorations. It’s brightly lit. There are no windows.

Everywhere my eyes land reveals fresh horrors.

The door is the door of a cage; it’s made of bars.

At the end of the room is a video camera on a tripod, facing an ob-gyn chair. There’s a tray table next to it, with instruments that I can’t quite see from where I’m sitting. There’s a bench next to the chair with straps dangling from it.



When I glance to my right, a jolt of panic and sorrow lances through me. There's another bed, and Heather's curled up in a ball, her ankle chained to the bed frame. The bed is bolted to the floor. She's wearing only a white T-shirt and has no underwear on. She's in good physical shape with no visible marks on her, but her eyes tell a story of nightmares. She's watching us with a dull, stunned look on her face.

*She's here because of me.*

There's another tray table on wheels sitting between her bed and mine. I think I recognize a cattle prod. Pinchers. Knives.

Sheer terror curdles inside my belly. Micah is far more frightening than Joshua.

Even at Joshua's worst, he always gave me choices. Do what he said, and he wouldn't torture me. He might indulge in light whipping or a hard spanking, because it turned him on to make me squirm and cry out, but if I obeyed him, I wouldn't suffer agonies or the threat of death.

Joshua's world was Old Testament brutal but rational. Survivable. Behave and live. Slide your toe over the line and it will be chopped off. The men he hunted down, they chose their own death by virtue of their evil actions.

With Micah, there will be no choices, no safe harbor.

I struggle not to cry in front of Micah. *Joshua will find me. He'll tear the world apart to get to me. He won't let me die.*

I just have to survive whatever Micah's going to do to me until he gets here. Horrifying pictures flash through my mind, images of mutilation and agony, but I quickly sweep them aside before hysteria can overwhelm me. *Live in the now. Live right in this minute. He isn't hurting me in this minute.*

I force myself to look at him, even though inside I'm quailing away from him. He's wearing a T-shirt and jeans and sneakers, and is watching me with amused interest. He's got Joshua's handsome face—the same sharp cheekbones and sensual lips—but when I look in his eyes, I see two pits of slithering serpents. How could I not have seen the depth of his evil when I first met him?

He gestures impatiently, and I see he's got a bottle of Gatorade in his hand. He gives it to me without a word, and I drink it slowly, drawing it out so I can delay whatever he has planned for me. I've learned the hard way, from Joshua, that every second without pain is a blessing and not to be taken for granted.

The sweet, salty liquid feels like heaven running down my parched throat. Reluctantly, I hand him the empty bottle, and he throws it into a trash can sitting next to the tray table.

“Why is Heather chained and I'm not?” I ask, my voice raspy and weak.

“Do you find that reassuring?” His voice is laced with cruel mockery. “Do you think that means I'm going to be gentle with you, Tamara? It doesn't. I didn't chain you because I didn't need to. You were drugged and unconscious. Now you're awake, you'll be restrained as needed.”

I take a deep breath and let it out. “I'd find it reassuring if you just let us go. Your fight is with Joshua, not me. Or her.”

He reaches out, and I flinch, expecting a blow. He laughs, a harsh cawing sound, and strokes my hair out of my eyes. I force myself not to shudder away from his light touch, but my skin crawls where his fingers brushed against me.

“As I recall, Joshua’s got an annoyingly high pain tolerance.” His cold blue eyes drill into me as he speaks, and I feel like I’m staring into the void. “I’ll get my hands on him at a time of my own choosing, but for now, I’m going to hurt you very badly, every day, and I’m going to videotape it. And I’ll send him the videos. And then I’ll kill you, and I’ll send him that video too. That’s going to cause him more pain than if I took a branding iron to his pretty face.” He announces my terrible fate with threads of malice weaving through his calm voice.

I refuse to quail in terror or beg. That’s an aphrodisiac for men like him.

“Pretty face? Quite an ego,” I say coolly, since he also has Joshua’s pretty face. If I can just get my hands on something sharp, I’ll make his face a lot less pretty.

His lips move into the shape of a smile, but the smile doesn’t reach his eyes, just like the night I met him at the nightclub.

“Quite a mouth,” he retorts. “I see what Joshua liked in you. You know, you should have just gone home with me that night when I asked you to.”

“So you could have butchered me then instead of now?” I scoff.

“Tamara. Sweetheart.” He says it with mild reproof. “I’m not that kind of serial killer.”

*Sweetheart. I’m going to torture and kill you, sweetheart.*

I rake him with my hateful gaze. “All right then. What kind of serial killer are you?”

“The kind who kills for revenge.” His lips curl again in that imitation of a smile, and his voice is light and cheery.

“That’s why I’m going to kill you. For revenge.”

A wave of panic threatens to sweep me away. I let out a shaky, hysterical laugh. “You’re sitting there, perfectly calm, not angry at me, having a *conversation* with me and telling me you’re going to torture and murder me, when I’ve never done a thing to you.”

“Yes.” He cocks his head to the side, and he’s staring at me in a creepy way. There’s a sly feline look of cruelty in his eyes, the look of a cat batting a mouse between soft paws. The hair on the back of my neck rises, and every instinct in my body screams for me to run. But there’s nowhere to run.

I shudder and slide down the bed a little to get farther away from him. “You’re studying me, aren’t you? To see what my reaction is? To try to learn what normal human behavior looks like so you can mimic it?”

“Yes. I’ve almost got it down, I think. I’m a pretty good actor.”

“You’re a lousy actor. You’re as human as a scorpion, and I’m glad I turned you down that night, you freak.” I spit the words out with venom.

The insult bounces off him without impact. Calling him names may make me feel a little better, but ultimately it’s a waste of my breath. Harsh words can’t hurt him, as he’s completely unconcerned about what anyone else thinks about him. Like all psychopaths, he’s an extreme narcissist, and his opinions are the only ones that matter in his world.

“I’ve always wondered. Why did you turn me down?”

I look away. Why should I share information with my executioner? “Because I just wasn’t that into you.”

His gaze frosts over. He stands up abruptly, and I stiffen, but he walks over to the tray table closest to us. He picks up a Taser and heads for Heather's bed.

She struggles into a sitting position, her eyes widening with fear.

"Please don't... Please..." she whimpers, scooting away from him.

I leap to my feet, but I'm still dizzy and weak, and fall to my knees, banging them painfully on the wooden floor. "Stop! I'll tell you!" I yell.

He ignores me. He points the Taser at her and presses a button, and her body goes rigid and then spasms. He just stands there, his finger on the button as her body shakes and she makes agonized grunting noises.

"*Stop it!*" I shout louder. "I said I'll tell you! Leave her alone!"

He ignores me.

I don't beg him again. What good would it do? I just press my lips together hard and twist away so I'm not looking at her convulsing, tortured body.

He finally finishes and sets the Taser down on the tray table with a clang. I hear Heather gasping in shock and misery. "You didn't have to do that to me. Why did you do that...?" she wails. I glance over at her. She's picking at the Taser's little metal prongs with shaking hands, ripping them from her shirt.

Micah grabs my arms and hauls me back onto the bed, his fingers digging painfully into my flesh. "Now, where were we?" he says pleasantly, his fingers pinching tighter and tighter.

I suck in an angry breath but force myself to bite down on my rage. It will only make things worse. Not just for me, but for Heather.

I've descended to a new level of hell. Knowing I face my own torture is bad enough, but knowing he's going to torture her too and there's nothing that I can do to stop him... How can I survive this?

"I didn't leave with you because I'm not into hookups." I force the words out. "You asked me to leave the club with you right then and there. And then we'd either have done it in your limo, or maybe I'd get lucky and you'd actually let me sleep in your bed. And then you would have sent me on my merry way in the morning without bothering to get my number, and I would have felt gross and rejected. Why bother?"

He relaxes his hands, holding me lightly now. "What should I have done instead?"

I grimace in disgust. I'm helping a lunatic figure out how to more effectively seduce women. I silently apologize to his future victims and keep talking. If I don't, he'll torture Heather again. "Well, I guess if you were genuinely interested in me, you should have asked for my phone number and asked me out to dinner, or at least coffee."

He nods, not looking at me. "So I should have pretended I was interested in getting to know you as a person. Interesting."

"*Interesting?* Joshua always says that," I sneer at him before I can stop myself. Maybe not the smartest thing to do, considering how enraged he is at his brother.

He slaps me across the face, hard, and my lip splits and starts to bleed.

My self-defense training kicks in and my body twitches with the need to strike back, but I force myself to settle down. I just glare at him.

I'll wait for an opportunity, but now is not the time. Not when my muscles are still weaker than wet linguine strands and all his attention is focused on me. I will need the element of surprise and the ability to hit hard if I am to have any hope at all of escaping him.

Yes, I trained in Krav Maga and other techniques with Joshua for months, but I never got to the point where I even came close to being able to kick Joshua's ass. Or Micah's. Aside from the fact that they're both physically larger than me, they're also both naturally stronger, more coordinated, and faster than I am. And there aren't many women who can take on a man in a fight and win, especially with a mere few months of training.

Micah was locked up for years, but he never let himself get weak and flabby. He's still carved from the same mold as Joshua, with rock-solid muscle and an air of lethal grace. And since he hacked into Joshua's video security system, he'll know about those months of training. Every trick that Joshua taught me, he'll know, and he'll be prepared to counter them.

I also don't know how I'll get out of here. A glance at the door shows me an eye-level panel to the side of the door frame, so it's probably a retina scanner. I would have to knock him unconscious, drag him over to the door, use his eye to open the lock. But I don't know what I'll even find beyond that door. Does he have anyone working with him? Would I just escape this room and run right into a security guard?

My best hope of survival is to learn more about where we're being held captive, then wait until he's distracted and

deliver a knockout strike. Then I'll kill him while he's subdued. I have to tell myself that my chance will come. It's the only way of keeping my sanity.

He bares his teeth in a frightening smile that looks like a snarl, and I flinch away involuntarily. When he drops that mask, I see snakes slithering under the surface of his skin, and he's the most horrifying thing I've ever seen.

"I think you've had enough time to recover," he says. "It's important for you to have your strength. You'll need it so you can scream." He means the words to frighten me, and they do. My heart is beating against my ribcage as he grabs me and hauls me across the room to the chair.

I flail weakly and struggle, but I haven't recovered from the drugs, and it wouldn't matter if I had. He overpowers me quickly and forces me into the chair.

I manage to climb halfway out of it as he's cuffing one of my wrists to the chair's arm. He looks up at me dispassionately. "Lie still and put your arms and legs down, or I'll shove a red-hot poker up Heather's cunt."

I stop fighting instantly. I'm sure he means what he says.

He straps me down, my legs splayed open, with the camera pointed obscenely at my exposed sex like a leering eye.

*Rape. Torture. Mutilation. Death.*

Tears fill my eyes. I can't help myself.

*He said he'd send Joshua videos every day. He wants this to last. That means he won't kill me right away.*

*Oh God, Joshua, come for me. Please find me. Please. Will Joshua still want me after I shot him in the foot? After I tried to escape? Don't abandon me, Joshua, please...*



Micah looks down at me with his alien eyes. “You shouldn’t have turned me down, Tamara. If you’d gone home with me that night, I would probably have screwed you and forgotten you. But instead I couldn’t stop thinking about you. And then I realized that Joshua might find you as intriguing as I did. And you’d be the perfect weapon to get back at him.”

He walks over to the tray and pulls on a black ski mask that obscures his face. He’s thought ahead. Joshua won’t be able to take this video to the police to use against Micah.

Stiff and helpless, I can do nothing but watch as he turns on the camera and fiddles around on the tray. Then he comes over with a wad of something wet and cold and rubs it across my right nipple. I smell a whiff of something astringent; he’s sterilizing my nipple.

He grabs something from the tray; it’s an alarmingly thick steel needle, and it’s attached to some kind of silver jewelry.

“Hold still now,” he says to me. “This is going to hurt like a bitch.”

He presses it against my left nipple, then very slowly pushes it through. I go rigid with pain, grinding my teeth so I don’t scream. It feels as if my nipple is being pinched with red-hot pliers, and he draws it out for way longer than necessary. I know people who’ve had their nipples pierced; they said it was one quick pinch and then it was over. Micah’s doing everything possible to make this agonizing for me. Then he does some kind of clamping thing that hurts so much that tears spill onto my cheeks.

I look down and see that there’s a silver barbell screwed through my nipple.

He repeats the process with my right nipple, using a fresh needle. Then, when he's got the barbell affixed, he twists it, and I let out a shriek of pain. "How does that feel, Tamara? Do you like it?" I don't answer, so he twists the left nipple too. "What was that? I didn't hear you!"

"No!" I scream, panting from the pain. "No, I don't like it!"

"What a shame. Maybe you'll like it better when I do it to your pussy."

I close my eyes as he rubs something cold on my clit, then grit my teeth and go rigid with pain as he shoves a needle through it.

He fumbles with the needle. When I glance down, I see that there's a big dangling ring there. He reaches down and pinches my tender flesh, wrenching another scream from me.

He looks at the camera. "Wasn't that fun, Joshua? I've got all the time in the world. I'm going to make her mine, and I'm going to mark every inch of her body. I notice that you never fucked her in the ass. Thank you for that. I look forward to popping that cherry. And in the end, of course, I'm going to kill her in ways that will make even you weep and vomit. Will that be in a week? A month? Will she still be sane by then, or will she be a gibbering monkey? I know the answer to those questions, but no spoilers here, my friend."

He avoided saying brother. He's hiding his identity.

He unstraps my wrist and ankle cuffs and snaps his fingers at me. "Up."

I slide off the chair, wincing at the pain that pulses from each of my new piercings.

“Now I want you to kiss me. Kiss me like you mean it. And if you don’t, I’ll peel your friend’s face off with a cheese grater.”

Well, he sure knows how to put a girl in the mood.

And he’s still wearing the mask.

He gathers me in his arms and pulls me up against him. Reluctantly, I press my lips against his and open my mouth for him. I let him slide his tongue across mine, and force down my gag reflex. I try to pretend he’s Joshua, but it doesn’t work, and all I want to do is bite his tongue off. If I had a better idea of what was on the other side of that door, I’d do it.

He pulls back, shaking his head. “Poor performance there, Tamara.” He slides his fingers between my legs, rubbing them back and forth. I shudder at his touch and start to step back, but he grabs my arm and holds me in place. There’s no point in fighting; that’s what he wants from me. I just stand there, gritting my teeth, and endure it as he saws into my pussy with his fingers. “You’re not even wet for me. Your cunt’s drier than the Sahara. That makes me sad. Heather, now, she positively drips with excitement for me. She hates herself for it, of course, which makes it even more fun.”

I don’t answer. I just stare down at the floor.

“By the way, there was one room that Joshua took you into that didn’t have cameras in it.” He leaves his fingers there between my legs, wedged between the folds of my pussy, as he talks. Revulsion curdles my stomach, and I struggle not to vomit up the Gatorade. “You went in there for hours every day. What was in there? Another torture room?”

I’m confused. There’s only one place that I can think of. “You mean...the exercise room?”

“Ah, of course. Joshua likes his women fit. He would want you to have a perfect body.” He pulls his fingers from between my legs and runs his hand up my flat, muscular stomach. “Mission accomplished.”

He drops the hand that was holding my arm. I hug myself and look away, keeping my face blank, but my mind is racing. He *doesn't* know about the Krav Maga and the sparring. We talked about it outside the room occasionally, but not that often, and Micah probably didn't listen to every conversation that Joshua and I ever had. So it's possible he never heard us discuss our daily practice sessions. Even if he did hear us mention it, apparently he doesn't know the extent of my training. He must have thought we were just play-fighting, just part of our exercise routine, like Boxercise classes. He doesn't realize that I trained every single day for months.

I might still have a chance. If I wait for the right time and hit him with a disabling blow when he's not expecting it, I could survive this. A sharp enough blow to the side of the neck would cause shock to the carotid artery, jugular vein and vagus nerve, knocking him out. And the second he's unconscious, I won't hesitate to kill him.

I've got to believe there's hope, or I'll go mad sitting here waiting for him to torture me to death.

Micah's hand darts out, and he grabs me by the nipple, tugging on it hard as he steers me toward the bed. Tears of pain run down my cheeks, and I choke on a sob. He pulls a chain from the bed frame and chains up my feet, spread apart, then my hands, over my head.

“I don't want to fuck that dry little pussy, so I guess I'll just have to have some fun with your friend.”

I lie there rigid and silent, twisting my head away so I'm not looking at him.

As he starts in on Heather, I close my eyes and hum loudly, trying to drown out the sound of her screams and the thinking of her bed against the wall.

It doesn't work. I hear every last thud and whimper.

With tears running down my face, I think of Joshua. I conjure him up in my mind, imagining him lying in bed with me, his arms wrapped around me. I can almost feel the muscles in his arms bunching up as he holds me against him, and I can smell the spice of his aftershave tickling my nostrils. He's murmuring into my ear, telling me how strong and brave I am. His words are magic, wrapping around me in a protective cloak.

And then Heather's screams tear through my fantasy.

"Oh, God, no! Please, no! Micah...no...no...!" I squeeze my eyes shut, and my heart slams in my chest in perfect rhythm with the thuds of Heather's bed.

## CHAPTER THREE

## JOSHUA

It's shortly after noon. Sixteen hours since I woke up naked in the woods. I am sitting in the office of my penthouse in Manhattan. I've had the apartment swept for listening devices planted by Charlemagne, of which there were many. They've all been removed. A doctor was waiting for me at the penthouse last night when I arrived, and he treated and properly stitched up the gunshot wound in my foot, then reset and bandaged my nose. I continued surfing the internet the entire time the doctor was stitching my wound closed, desperately searching for any hint of my brother's whereabouts. I accepted local anesthetic but refused painkillers; I need my mind clear.

Somewhere inside, I'm roaring with rage. I am tearing Charlemagne's face off with my bare hands. But the part of my brain that needs to focus is a vast, flat lake of calm.

I was awake all night, trying to track down any trace of his whereabouts. This morning, my brother sent a video to the cell phone he gave me.

I strapped on a blood pressure cuff and put a pulse monitor on my fingertip to ensure that I retained control of my emotions. If I lose control, I can't help Tamara. I sat there and remained calm as I forced myself to watch the video. He wore

a ski mask as he pierced Tamara's nipples and clit. Her face contorted in pain, and my body turned to ice when he twisted her nipples to make her scream.

My heart rate stayed a steady seventy beats per minute.

I ignored the way the walled-up part of me felt. Instead of raging, I studied the video for clues, but there was nothing to give away where he might be keeping her. I tried to track the origin of the call from the blocked number, but my brother has excellent re-routing software. The location of the call bounces around on my computer screen as I watch; China, Afghanistan, France. He's fucking with me. Having a good time.

To find him, I've summoned a potential ally I never would have given the time of day before.

The elevator pings. I glance at the video screen. Sergeant Carter is here.

Garrett pokes his head through the door. He spent the night here, calling all over the world, working with all his black ops contacts, and coming up as empty as I did.

"Let him in, then leave us," I tell him. "Don't bother taking his gun. I can handle him."

I watch the video monitor as Sergeant Geoff Carter walks through the open elevator door, then through a scanner that would put the TSA to shame. I glance at the screen next to my desk. He's armed and has a cell phone on him, but that's it.

Garrett steers him down the hallway. He comes through the door to my office and shuts it behind him, and I stand up, favoring my injured foot.

Sergeant Carter is off-duty today, wearing a wool coat and a rumpled brown suit. His face curdles in disgust when he sees me. His eyes light on my bandaged nose. "Did that happen



when your house blew up?” he snarls. “The Maine State Police called me. Nice way to eliminate the evidence. Tamara Bennet’s just smoke in the wind now, isn’t she? Yeah, yeah, nobody can prove you owned the property. You rich bastards get away with everything, don’t you?”

He’s getting more and more agitated as he talks, and his hand drifts toward the gun strapped to his waist under his jacket.

“I can outdraw you,” I say mildly. I don’t even bother reaching for my holstered Glock.

His eyes flare with defiance. “I doubt it. I’m pretty good. But I got no fucking problem finding out.”

I’ve done my research on him. He is pretty good; he visits a shooting range a couple of times a week—way more than most beat cops. But he’s not as good as me. Few are.

This is normally the part where I show my dominance, whatever the cost. Backing down from a challenge is physically painful for me. It feels like grasping a hot poker, a pain that demands response. But I think of Tamara, and I force myself to let it go.

“I need your help,” I say quickly, almost choking on the words.

He looks at me with shock. Yeah, he wasn’t expecting that.

The words leave a foul taste in my mouth. Rage prickles inside me. The primal beast demands satisfaction. *He challenged me. Kill him, humiliate him...*

No.

His gaze sweeps my office. The hand-carved mahogany desk, the built-in floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with

leather-bound volumes, the three framed Picasso sketches side by side, the red-and-black rug that cost more than his annual salary, the million-dollar view of the Manhattan skyline.

His forehead wrinkles in disgust, and his dark brown eyes flare with anger. “Mister, all the fucking money in the world won’t buy—”

I hold up a box that was sitting on my desk.

“I don’t have time for this. If you want to hear what I have to say, put your cell phone in this box.”

He looks at me with contempt, but then obeys me with a suspicious look.

I shut and lock the box, which will block his phone from recording us, in case he’s done anything sneaky. My scanner already showed me he’s not wearing a wire. He sits down in a chair facing my desk, and I sit back down in my chair and make a steeple of my fingers, resting them on my desktop.

“Tamara Bennett was staying with me in Maine, and now she’s missing. My brother has her. And if you tell the police any of this, I’ll deny it under oath, and I’ll pass a polygraph test too. Again.”

His eyes fly wide open with shock. “You’re admitting that you had her?” he barks at me.

“I am *telling* you that she was *staying* with me. If you find her, you can ask her anything you want. *When* you find her.” I have to believe she’ll be found. Alive. “The thing is, we can’t tell the police. My brother has informed me that if I do, he will start cutting off body parts.”

His lips twist in a sneer. “You think I actually trust you, asshole?”

I struggled to tamp down my frantic impatience. I expected this, but every second spent explaining things to him is time he's not looking for her.

“No, nor should you. But that's not the point. You want her safe, and so do I. And I know you say you don't want money, but that is also on the table. And anything else you could possibly want.”

He snorts. “What else do you think I would want from you? Hookers and blow?”

“Revenge.” I open a folder that is sitting on my desk and shove two pictures at him. He looks at them, and his olive skin flushes dark.

One of them is a picture of his wife's former boss, Peter Brown, the one who had asbestos in the workplace where Carter's wife was employed on the janitorial staff. Years of breathing in poison made her cells riot in revolt. Cancer rotted her lungs, and she wheezed to death on a hospital bed. Peter was slapped with a few fines. Peter's on a yacht in the Bahamas.

One of them is a picture of Gideon Culpepper, the spoiled trust fund brat who introduced Carter's daughter to heroin, with fatal results. He's on the balcony of a hotel in Miami, getting a blow job from some little brunette. The smirk on his face alone is enough to make me want to set him on fire.

“I can make them suffer in ways you could never even dream of.”

An ugly expression contorts his face. “Oh, believe me, I can dream up plenty. And I'm not going to help a serial killer.”

“I am not running around killing women. I have never killed a woman.” That's not a lie.

There's challenge in his eyes as he pushes his jaw out stubbornly. "What about Heather Abelard. Tamara's missing neighbor?"

"I have no idea what happened to her. There's a good chance that my brother kidnapped her too, but I have nothing to do with it. So is it a yes?" I ask him.

"It's a maybe." He folds his arms across his chest. He's as solid as iron. I wouldn't have called him in otherwise. I can't trust a man who doesn't keep fit; it reeks of weakness. "And don't get too comfortable with me, you fucking freak. You're up to something shady. You said you don't kill women, but you didn't deny you're a serial killer." So he's not as dumb as he looks. I was pretty sure he wasn't, because I checked up on him, but it's good to have it confirmed.

I look him in the eye. "The kind of men I just showed you pictures of...men who cause harm and misery to the innocent...sometimes they disappear. Perhaps I help make that happen." Admittedly, I only kill those men for the thrill of the hunt. I don't give a fuck that the men I kill are hurting innocent people, but Carter will.

"Men like Baxter Warburton?" he says skeptically. "I read the file on him. He was a saint."

I snort in contempt. "Is there a patron saint for pedophiles? He liked to rape teenage boy prostitutes up the ass with giant dildos, then kill them."

He makes a raspberry sound with his lips. "No way. There's never even been a hint of that."

"If I show you a video of him doing it, will you help me then?"

He considers that.

“We don’t have time,” I say, desperation edging my voice.

He looks at me suspiciously. “What’s in it for you? Why are you doing this?”

“Because I care about Tamara, and because every minute that passes, my brother is hurting her.” I allow emotion to leak into my voice; I need to be convincing. I don’t have to fake the fury and panic that roughens my words. “You think I’m a bad guy? My brother is the love-child of the Marquis de Sade and Vlad the Impaler.”

“Get me the video.”

I grab the pair of crutches that are leaning on my desk, limp out of my office and down the hall to my bedroom, where I open a wall safe and remove a USB. I shove the USB into my pocket.

I limp back and jam it into my laptop.

“What the hell happened to you? Your brother do that?” Carter is staring at my bandaged nose, and he flicks a glance at my foot.

“Yes,” I lie smoothly. “And then he took Tamara.”

I turn the laptop to face him and play the video, which was taken in a seedy motel room where Baxter had the motel clerk on his payroll. I impersonated a repairman and put a camera in an air duct.

The teenage boy is face down, tied hand and foot, screaming and crying as Baxter violates him with a dildo the size of an elephant dong. Poor, impotent Baxter.

Baxter reaches for the sharp knife on the night table. I watch with flat affect, uncaring. The boy is dead, nothing to be

done about it, and he was nothing to me. Baxter was a problem. I took care of the problem.

“Turn it off!” Carter yells, his eyes practically bulging out of his head. “Fuck! Fucking hell!” He grabs me by the shoulder. “Tell me you killed him. *Tell me you killed him!*”

I shrug his hand off irritably and turn off the video. I’m not a fan of being touched, unless it’s by a woman I’m fucking, and even then I do most of the touching. “He and I met up in the woods,” I say. “He won’t be ass-raping any more boys.”

It takes him a few moments to compose himself, and I struggle not to snap at him.

“Tell me what you know so far,” he says warily. He flicks a horrified glance at the laptop, then looks away, grimacing. I can see he’s still shaken up by the video. Thank God I’m not like that. How would I ever get anything done if I was a weepy, sentimental little bitch who cried every time someone got a boo-boo?

“Tell me why your brother took Tamara Bennett, and what you know that might help me track him down.” He grits out the words. “And I’ll tell you if I think I can help.”

I start talking fast. Seconds count. “My twin brother, Charlemagne, was being held in a mental institution in California called the Blackthorne Institute for the last six years. Or rather, five and a half. He escaped about six months ago, as best I can tell. He blames me for the fact that they kept him there.”

“Why?” Carter interrupts.

“He’s crazy. Paranoid. He’s always blamed me for anything that went wrong.” I’m certainly not going to tell Carter the truth. “From what I understand, he’s concocted

some idea that I was conspiring with Dr. William Barnard, the CEO of the Blackthorne Institute, to keep him locked up there.” Nobody will ever find proof; all my payments were from shell companies to an offshore account that can’t be traced to Dr. Barnard. “Since then, he’s been staying in New York City at least part of the time, impersonating me and sabotaging my company.”

“This sounds like something from one of my wife’s shitty soap operas.” He pauses, mutters something that sounds like, “Sorry, Valentina,” and crosses himself. Actually, crosses himself. This is a man of faith. A man who still believes in a higher power, and not only that, one who stands for ultimate good.

For the first time in my life, a faint wisp of envy drifts through me. What would it be like to have that kind of comfort? Would it lend me strength? Would I feel less isolated? But the practical reality is, I’ll never know. I don’t believe in good and evil. My world is a cruel Darwinian jungle of survival of the fittest, of predators devouring prey.

I pull up yet another video for him, this one of my brother pacing around his enormous padded room. I paid for him to be imprisoned in comfort. He had books, he had movies, he had a closed-circuit computer. Apparently, he didn’t appreciate those special touches.

“That’s him. His name is Charlemagne, but I’m sure he’ll be going under something else now. As you can see, he looks exactly like me.”

Carter stares at the screen. “Why was he in the mental institution?”

“He had a public mental breakdown and stabbed a stranger to death at a coffee shop. Used a ballpoint pen. Broke a police

officer's jaw, shattered another one's eye socket. He was taken into custody and placed under a psychiatric hold."

Charlemagne's breakdown was a hundred percent my doing. He was living in California at the time, under an assumed name of course. Only a week had passed since he'd killed the last of the social workers who'd left us to be tortured as children. The social workers had been in Oregon, where we grew up. It was still all over the news.

But I knew there were other people he could find to blame. Police who had come out to the cabin and just made a cursory inspection. Their bosses. Their bosses' bosses.

Would he ever stop killing? I knew I couldn't control my urge to kill, so why would he?

The problem with him was that he was reckless with his kills. Killing people who had ties to our family was just plain stupid. He risked capture, and possible exposure of our tangled family history.

So I paid a lot of money to have someone from my security team spike his espresso with a hallucinogenic one morning at the Has Bean café, and chaos and death ensued.

I'd already pre-arranged for Dr. Barnard to accept him into the Blackthorne Institute, and thanks to a combination of my generous payments and my threats to Dr. Barnard, my brother was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia with homicidal ideation. Who knows, the diagnosis might even have been accurate.

Charlemagne was a John Doe when he was arrested. Still is. He refused to reveal his real name. Our past is the kind that's better left buried.



“That sounds like a man who’s got no control over his actions.” Carter looks at me suspiciously. “Crazy, not evil.”

I’d admire his cleverness if I had the time to waste, but I don’t, so I speak quickly. “In all honesty, I set him up to be committed, but it had to be done for the safety of the public. He... We share certain inclinations. I have channeled mine in a more useful direction—taking out the trash, so to speak—while he just killed people for fun.”

His brow is still creased with skepticism. “So you’re asking me to believe that you’re an ethical serial killer and your brother is Ted Bundy reincarnated.”

“Sergeant Carter, I never said I was any kind of serial killer, did I? It looks like you’re drawing your own conclusions.” I shake my head chidingly. “I called you in because you seem disillusioned with the system, and I thought you might be willing to work outside it to help save a girl who’s the same age your daughter was when she died.” That’s me, playing dirty pool. “I was able to review your records, and I see that you’ve been accused of use of excessive force against rapists and child molesters. On multiple occasions, you’ve been suspected of planting drugs in order to arrest dealers when you couldn’t find any evidence on them. Your career is hanging by a thread.”

He clears his throat defensively. “If I ever did any of that shit, and I’m not saying I did, it was to scumbag shit-heels who had it coming.”

“So there we are.” I flash him a winning smile. I’ve got a list of smile types stored away in my mental filing cabinet. This one is my “closing the deal” smile, minus any hint of menace, as opposed to my “you’re about to die now” smile, or my “do what I want or I’ll fucking cut you” smile. “Two peas

in a pod. You've broken the law on many occasions, in the service of the greater good. I might have gone a little further than you, although I'm not saying I did. But I am saying that you have no moral high ground here."

"You still haven't explained to me why you didn't come right out and say that Tamara was, as you put it, 'staying with you'." He makes actual air quotes.

"Well, if you're the one who finds her, you can ask her anything you want." I'm clearly brushing aside the question. And I know she might tell him everything, which means I risk going to prison for the rest of my life. But she's worth the risk. And too much time has passed already, and I haven't been able to find a thing. As good as I am at hacking, as good as Garret is, Carter will have more resources than I do—if he's willing to bend...no, break the law to help a damsel in distress.

"What about that security guard who disappeared?"

Damn, the man has a steel trap memory. That whole shambling, disheveled exterior...it's an act. Like the TV detective Colombo. Acts like a half-wit so everyone underestimates him, gathers the clues, and then pounces.

"The security guard tried to rape Tamara. He's...gone. I could show you that video too."

"Do it."

"Seriously?" I throw my hands up in frustration. "What part of 'a woman is being tortured by a fucking serial killer *right now*' are you not getting?"

He doesn't budge. "I'm risking what's left of my career here, and I'm considering working with someone who's all but admitted he's at best a vigilante murderer, and at worst...God

only knows. So yeah, you're going to show me the fucking video."

I was hoping we could dispense with all this moral posturing. Who is he to act all self-righteous when he's broken the law as often as I have?

But Saint Carter has to feel right about this, or he won't help me.

I open up another file on the USB and show him the video of the guard trying to rape Tamara. "See?" I say impatiently, turning the video off.

He still looks skeptical, but he shrugs. "Tell me everything you can about your brother and Tamara."

I give him my version of events from yesterday—my brother hacked into my security system, Tamara and I made a run for it, and my brother blew up the house.

I hacked into traffic cameras and traced him as far as a parking garage in downtown Boston. Unfortunately, I lost track of him. He must have switched cars there. A man on my security team found the abandoned van, and I have no idea where he went from there. It was rush hour when he entered the parking garage, and there were dozens of cars streaming in and out.

"I might be able to get access to the garage's records and their security tapes," Carter says, frowning in thought. "He wouldn't have hung out in that garage for too long. We can start with all the cars that left the garage within, say, two to three hours after the van entered. Run their plates, process of elimination, figure out which vehicle he was driving. What else can you tell me? What did he do after he busted out? Where was he staying?"

“I know that he spent a considerable amount of time in New York, because I’ve determined that he actually went to my office several times, and he came to my apartment here as well. He was the one who was sending information to the police about me. I haven’t been able to find out where he was staying. Also, unfortunately, he embezzled an enormous sum of money from me, so he’s got a lot of funds.” I’m thinking out loud. “Okay. He was sending the police information about me, messing with me, giving you just enough to question me but not enough to arrest me. Can you trace the source of those messages?”

He shakes his head decisively. “No, we tried.” No surprise there.

“What did he tell you about me?”

He scowls, thinking about it before he tells me. “He told us that you were behind the disappearance of the security guard, and Baxter Warburton. And Tamara. And Heather. And he said that you were behind the disappearance of a bunch of other women, but he didn’t name them.”

“Doesn’t that strike you as suspicious?” I say with exasperation. “He told you some half-truths and then a major lie. He didn’t name the other women because there were no other women.”

“Maybe.”

Carter stands up.

“Now what?” I ask.

“I’ll start with the parking garage video. And if you get any information that might help me, you’ll give it to me immediately.” Distrust still simmers in his voice. “And I probably won’t do the same for you unless I need to ask you

questions. It's not a two-way street. I don't know enough about you, and I don't like you. I'm doing this for her, not you. Give me a number to reach you at."

I jot down a number and hand it to him, and dismiss him from my mind as he leaves. My only thought, my only focus, is Tamara.

## CHAPTER FOUR

TAMARA

I lie awake all night. Strapped down hand and foot to the bed, I yearn for sleep that never comes. My piercings throb and chafe. Heather is asleep. I can tell by the sound of her heavy, even breaths, and I don't try to wake her up or talk to her. After what Micah did to her yesterday, she just curled up and pulled her blanket over her head. She's withdrawn into her own little world of misery.

I'm guilt-racked that she's here too, another victim of Micah's madness, but I remind myself that if I'm going to have any chance of helping her, I've got to look after myself first.

What is the morning going to bring?

Getting pierced was painful, and getting kissed and fondled by him was revolting, but I know that the worst is yet to come. I'm sure he's starting slowly and building his way up. Every day will be worse and worse until...

No. I can't think about it.

Instead, I think about Joshua.

I tried to escape him—violently—the second I had the opportunity to. And I don't regret that.

But when I saw his twin brother and thought he'd killed Joshua, for that split second, I was sick with grief. It makes no sense, but it was undeniable. I've developed strong feelings for Joshua. I don't know if I'd call it love or obsession or Stockholm syndrome, but the thought of a world without Joshua fills me with panic and sorrow.

It took that moment of devastation to make me wonder if it would actually be possible to forge some kind of relationship with Joshua...if I survive Micah.

If I were free...would I stay with Joshua?

I know it's insane for me even to think about wanting to be with him.

Joshua imprisoned me. He tortured me. He had every intention of keeping me locked up in his house for the rest of my life or, at the absolute most, letting me take walks with him outside in the woods. My heart ached every day with the knowledge that I'd never have friends, never have a career, never get to make another person smile, never see anything outside his house again. He would have trapped me in amber, suspending me in time.

He snuffed out my dream of going to college and becoming a lawyer. That was all I wanted from the day I started high school. I wanted to save little girls like me from the hell of child abuse and neglect. I was a poor girl from a grubby little city in Nebraska, with no connections and no prospects, but I'd hauled myself up out of the gutter. I'd worked two jobs while I was in high school and worn clothes from the Goodwill fifty-cent bin so I could afford to move to New York. I'd been so proud of myself when I got that college acceptance letter. And that meant nothing to him. *Nothing*.



I begged and begged him to let me go free. I begged him to kill me rather than force me to live as his prisoner, and he coldly and heartlessly refused.

But I have to admit, he changed over the months I was staying with him. He changed because of *me*. He didn't even want to, but something about me really did touch him inside, and he became a better person. He actually made compromises. He was more than proud, he was arrogant, but when I needed to rage at him and curse at him after I woke up from my brainwashed stupor, he permitted it. He let me get it all out of my system.

And he promised things would be different between us. He tried to make things work. He coaxed me with bribes, giving that enormous donation to the battered women's shelter just for the privilege of a conversation with me. He bent as far as a man like him was capable of bending.

For *me*.

And I can't lie to myself and say I hated every minute of being with him. I didn't.

I loved the sex. It was out-of-your-mind, explosive, weep-with-ecstasy sex, every time. He was utterly devoted to my pleasure. He wasn't satisfied until I was panting and gasping from orgasm after orgasm.

Before I met him, I always yearned for a man who'd dominate me. Not to that level, of course, but Joshua forced me past my limits and taught me new things about myself and what I *really* wanted.

And it wasn't just the amazing sex. It was being special to a man like him. It was our conversations, where he opened his

whole world up to me—the heartbreak of his childhood, the Godlike power he wields today.

It was the way he made me forgive myself for what I did to my stepfather. It was the way he helped me see that what my mother did to herself wasn't my fault.

What would it be like if I were with Joshua again, but free?

*He'd never set me free.*

But I could never be with another man after him. The thought curdles my stomach.

I struggle to push these thoughts from my head. I've got to concentrate on survival. There's no point in using up mental energy worrying about a future I may not live to see.

A vicious voice slices into me. "Rise and shine, you little whores. It's another morning in hell."

I start and stifle a shriek. I was drifting off into some dreamland of exhaustion, and I didn't even hear Micah come in.

He walks over to me, his face blank of expression, and lets me up so I can use the toilet positioned at the far end of the room. There's no privacy, just a toilet sitting out in the open. There's a sink and a cart with towels on it next to the sink. I hunch over, trying to hide.

Micah stands there, impassive. I'm woozy from lack of sleep. My piercings are still sore and tender. And I know there will be another torture session today.

*I can survive this. Joshua will find us, or I will take Micah out myself, or both.* I repeat it to myself to keep myself from breaking down and panicking.

He hands me a bowl of scrambled eggs and chains my ankle to the bed, leaving my hands free so I can eat.

Then he repeats the process with Heather. I watch her. There's no fight in her. She's shrunken in on herself and she shuffles to the toilet and back without looking at me. She sits down on her bed and gulps down her food and hands Micah back the bowl and the spoon without a word. This is a familiar, terrible routine for her.

I wonder how much longer she'll be able to hang in there. She's so dazed and lifeless, anything could send her toppling over the edge into madness. And if Micah does succeed in killing me, what will he do to her then?

Micah flashes me a malicious smile. "I'll be back in a bit. I've got to fetch something I'll be using on you this morning. I won't make you wait too long, though, Joshua misses you. He'll need his daily video. Won't this be *fun*?"

I wait until he leaves before I return my attention to her. "Have you been here this whole time?" I ask her.

She twists around and looks at me with hollow eyes. "I'm sorry," she says to me.

"What? Why would you be sorry?"

She sucks in a breath and lets out a slow sigh, and the seconds drag by so long I don't think she's going to answer me. When she speaks, her voice is cracked and husky.

"The last day I saw you, I snapped at you. And I never got a chance to explain myself. I have bipolar disorder. I don't tell a lot of people, but sometimes I just get these flashes of rage."

That makes a lot of sense. Part of what made Heather so fun was that she was so giddy, so whacky, always on a high.

That's not uncommon with people who are bipolar. The problem is that for all the highs, there are going to be lows too.

"It's nothing," I tell her. "We've other things to worry about."

"Yeah, we do. I don't expect we'll make it out of here. We had some fun times, though, didn't we?" She manages a sad smile.

"We did. We really did."

She seems to revive a little as she talks. "Remember when we went to that bar, the one with live music and the band let us get up on the stage and sing with them?"

"Because you lied and said it was your birthday! We were terrible." I manage a smile at the memory.

"Yeah, we were." She smiles back. "Thanks for being my friend. I can be hard to deal with sometimes. I'd say that I'm glad to see you again, but given the circumstances..."

"Yeah."

We both fall silent for a while.

I know there are cameras watching us and listening to us, so there's no point asking her about anything that would help us escape.

My eyes are fluttering closed with exhaustion when the door flies open and Micah marches in. He looks completely different than he did a little while ago. His face is animated and his eyes spark with malice.

This is bad.

"Time to play," he sings out. He's carrying a long chain with a tiny clasp at the end. He hooks it to the hoop in my

clitoris and gives it a little tug, making me cry out in pain.

Sick bastard. Sick, evil motherfucker.

Then he unchains me and leads me, with cruel jerks of the chain, across the room to his little makeshift torture chamber.

When we get there, he chains me up facing the wall, with my arms over my head. There's some play to the chains, which means he wants me to be able to thrash around. I don't resist; the less I fight now, the less he'll expect it when I finally do lash out.

He unclamps the little chain that was attached to my clit.

He grabs something from the tray table and shoves it in front of my face. It looks like a large vegetable that's been peeled and carved into the shape of a curved dildo, with a thick clump of roots as a handle. The end of it is tapered and then it gets thicker and thicker, almost conical.

What the hell?

He leans in and kisses my cheek. "My brother did a lot of kinky shit to you, but he never took you up the ass. It will be my honor to pop that cherry. Today we'll use the ginger root. Tomorrow it'll be my big fat cock."

Horror jolts through me. I struggle to keep my face blank as I press my lips together and turn to face the wall.

A minute or two passes. I hear him rustling around. I assume he's putting on his hood and turning on the camera, but I refuse to look. I hear him talking to the camera. "This is called figging," he announces happily to the camera. "The ginger root, on its own, causes an intense burning sensation when inserted into the anus or vagina. I fermented the ginger root for weeks to increase the potency of the burn. When the figging is followed by a whipping, we'll have even more fun.

Each stroke of the whip will cause her to involuntarily clench her inner muscles, clamping down tightly on the ginger and increasing the painful burning sensation exponentially.”

Sick horror churns my stomach. Hearing him describe the intimate way he’s going to violate me, in those gleeful tones, is torture.

Then he strides jauntily over and leans up against me. He’s wearing the mask, and he’s rock hard. “With lube or without?”

“With,” I mutter.

“I didn’t quite hear you. And a please would be nice. Or I’ll set Heather’s hair on fire.” He says it so calmly, as if he’s saying he’ll go fetch Heather a cup of coffee.

“Please give me lube.” I raise my voice and clench my fists.

He turns and calls out to the camera. “Hear that, Joshua? She wants me to lube her up and then take her ass. Well, it will be my pleasure.”

He walks away, and I hear things rattling on the tray. Then he returns and spreads open my cheeks with one hand, and drips something cold onto them. I feel a gloved finger pressing against my clenched rectum. He pushes hard, and I squeeze, trying to resist, but he breaches the ring. One finger slides in, which is revolting but not painful, but then he thrusts another finger in and spreads them apart, and a dull burn throbs inside me.

“You like it, baby?” he croons in my ear.

“No,” I grit. In response, he slides his lubed fingers in farther and pumps them in and out. He pauses and spreads his fingers even wider, and I jerk and grunt in pain. “Gotta open you up a little. You’re so fucking tight.”

He withdraws his fingers, but there's only a moment of relief before something hard presses against my puckered hole and slides in. He works it in, twisting it, forcing it past my tense inner muscles until I'm gasping in pain. He doesn't stop until the whole thing's inside me, and then the burning begins as the fermented ginger sets my sensitive tissues on fire.

I gasp and press my face against the wall, waiting for the whip. Nothing could have prepared me for what's coming next. The very first slash wrenches a scream of agony from me.

After being held captive by Joshua for all those months, my pain tolerance is much higher than it used to be. But this is red, screaming torture. As he whips me again and again, I scream myself raw. My howls bounce off the walls and smack my eardrums. Trickle of blood run down my back, and I can smell it. With every slash, I clench my ass muscles, just as he predicted, and bolt after bolt of pain shoots up my core. My legs jerk madly, and I'm gasping and sobbing and praying to pass out.

*Pain, pain, pain...*

Micah works his way slowly from the top of my back down, and it feels as if a lake of fire is being poured over me, from my shoulders to my hips. He stops at my ass, sparing that for now.

When he finishes, I am sagging on my bonds and crying helplessly. Blood runs down my back and splashes onto the floor.

“You pathetic...inadequate little prick,” I sob. “Your daddy would be so proud of you right now.”

He grabs my hair and yanks it until I scream.

“Leave the ginger in? Sure, princess. I’m going to go see if Heather will suck my dick for me. This whole session really made me hot. If you hadn’t mouthed off to me, I’d have taken the ginger out first. You want to be very, very careful when you’re talking about my family. That’s something of a hot button for me.” He smacks my left breast, and the piercing flares in pain.

“Got that?” He smacks it again, harder.

“Yes! Yes!” I scream, and he lets go and walks away. A minute later I’m forced to listen to the sound of him groaning in pleasure as Heather services him.

*It hurts, it hurts, it hurts...*

*Joshua. Please. Save me.*

After what feels like a million years, he comes over and slides the ginger out, tossing it into the trash. My rear tunnel still aches like I’ve been speared with a red-hot poker.

As I slump against the wall, he walks over to the door and uses the retina scanner.

“Tamara,” Heather calls out weakly. “Hang in there, Tamara.”

She’s being so brave. Still thinking about me, right after she was raped and forced to watch my torture session. But I don’t have the strength to answer.

*This will be my life every day until I die.*

No. *No.* Joshua told me I was strong and brave. I’m not giving up. I lived through everything that Joshua did to me. I can live through Micah.



## CHAPTER FIVE

TAMARA

The minutes tick by, the drips of blood running slowly down my back. Meanwhile, I try to think about anything but how much pain I'm in.

My arms, stretched over my head, are burning, my muscles screaming.

I jump when the door clangs open, and my stomach clenches in fear. More torture?

But this time, Micah is accompanied by a woman who looks to be in her mid-forties, carrying a black bag. She's pretty, with high cheekbones and pale blue eyes, and she's got frosted blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. The roots have grown in, and as she gets closer, I see she has circles under her eyes. Those eyes go wide when she sees me.

"What the hell have you done to her?" she cries out in horror.

"I'd think it's rather obvious, isn't it? And it's not your concern. You'll clean her up and check on her daily to make sure her wounds don't go septic." He fumbles with my cuffs, and then I'm free. I stagger, almost falling, and brace myself with my hand pressing against the wall.

She looks at him with utter hatred. "You sick bastard."

“Yes, I think we’ve established that. Why repeat yourself?” His tone is mildly puzzled.

She walks over to the sink, and I see there’s a hose on the cart next to it. There’s also a drain in the floor. She attaches the hose to the faucet and gestures at me to come over. Agonizingly, I obey her, but I can’t suppress my whimpers as she hoses down my back with lukewarm water, rinsing away the blood and washing out the wounds.

When she’s done, she sets down the hose and washes her hands and dries them carefully. Then she pulls on a pair of rubber gloves from a box sitting on the cart.

“You’re a doctor?” I say.

“A nurse. My name is Astrid Barnard. I’m so sorry,” she says in a soft voice as she sprays something cold on my back. “This is antiseptic. I’m also going to be giving you antibiotics. I don’t want to help him, but he’s holding me and three of my children here. And I don’t know where the other two children are right now.” She chokes on a sob as she speaks.

A fresh groundswell of horror sweeps over me and nearly drowns me. Children? He’s holding children hostage?

*I’m going to find a way to hurt you, Micah. I’m going fuck you up so badly.*

“I have to do whatever he tells me. I’m sorry.” Her voice is a hoarse, heartbroken whisper.

Tears fill my eyes. “Don’t be sorry. It’s not your fault you were kidnapped by a nut job. You do whatever you have to do.”

I twist around to look at Micah, who is standing close, looking bored. The movement costs me dearly; fire licks up my back, and I gasp in agony.

*He can't keep children prisoner. He can't. He can't.*

*Joshua, what the fuck is taking you so long?*

Micah flicks her a look of annoyance. “Your children are living in the lap of luxury here. They’ve got video games and television and excellent food. They have nothing to complain about. Do they, Astrid?”

She looks at him with a flat, blank expression. “Would it do any good to complain? And you may call me Mrs. Barnard.”

I like this woman. I like her a lot.

She reaches into her bag and pulls out a can of antiseptic. She starts spraying my back, and I grit my teeth to keep from screaming from the sting.

“Do you want to know why I took her and her children?” Micah asks.

*No, all I want is to cut your balls off and feed them to you.* But I humor him. “Why?” the word comes out in an agonized grunt.

“Because her husband, Dr. Barnard, kept me prisoner in his mental institution for the last five and a half years.”

“They have nothing to do with this!” I protest.

“No, but I have my reasons for needing them to be here. And it also hurts her husband. So that’s a fun bonus.”

“For the love of God,” I beg him. “Please at least let her children go. After the way you were raised, how can you hurt children?”

Rage contorts his face, and he grabs my tender pierced nipple and twists, making me scream. “Don’t *talk* to me about

my upbringing.” His voice is savage, his eyes mad. “You don’t know a fucking thing about it. And I have not hurt her children. I never hurt children. Ever. Ever. Ever.” His voice goes higher and higher with each syllable. Astrid stiffens and watches him with wary eyes.

He lets go and stumbles back a step. Panting with fury, he turns and runs from the room, slamming the door behind him.

*He’s not like Joshua, I think dully. He has no control over his emotions. Maybe I can use that.*

Astrid quickly bandages up my back. “I’m sorry,” she whispers again. I lean in, resting my head on her shoulder, pretending I need comfort.

“Are there guards?” I whisper.

“No, just him,” she whispers back so low I can barely hear her. And I feel a surge of hope. Astrid is a strong, brave woman, Micah apparently lets her walk around freely, and I have no doubt she’d kill him in a heartbeat if she got the chance.

“His brother Joshua—he’ll come for me. He’ll find us.”

“I hope so.” There’s not a lot of hope in her voice, but she manages a tight, pinched smile.

A minute later, Micah returns.

“She needs painkillers,” Astrid says in a quiet, deferential voice. “I have codeine in my bag.”

“Fuck that shit. I want her to hurt.”

“You want her alive, don’t you?” There’s a slight tremor in her voice, but she keeps going. Fighting for me, a woman she just met. I blink away tears of gratitude. Her kindness warms me in this cold place. “Pain impedes the healing process. Too

much pain can send a person into shock and even kill them. Also, if she's in too much pain, she won't be able to sleep, and the combination of lack of sleep, her injuries, and the pain are going to weaken her body and increase the risk of infection."

"Fine," he snarls. She quickly fetches me two pills and gives me water to wash them down.

Micah leads me by the arm back to the bed. I'm panting out sobs with every step.

He chains me up, but at this point he wouldn't even have to. I'm so weak from his whipping that I couldn't fight a sick kitten. I very slowly lie face down on the bed and pray for the painkillers to kick in. The whole time, Heather's curled up on her bed, watching me with blank, exhausted eyes.

Micah leaves the room with Astrid, shutting the door firmly. Astrid casts one sad, regretful glance through the bars, then Micah hustles her away.

After a while, I actually manage to fall asleep. It's probably the codeine. I'm asleep for a few hours when Micah comes in to take us both to the toilet and give us lunch. His face has gone flat and blank again. Apparently he only comes alive when he's about to hurt somebody.

I'm trembling all over when I walk to and from the toilet. He holds on to my arm so my legs don't collapse underneath me. I hate the feeling of his hand on my skin, but without his support, I'd fall. Micah doesn't say a word the entire time, for which I'm grateful. He holds out a handful of pills, and I take them. I'm relieved to see that two of them are codeine, because the pain has come roaring back.

When he leaves the room, I breathe a sigh of relief. His presence is foul and suffocating. He pollutes the air by

breathing it. I have to force down the sandwich and apple that he brought me. I've no appetite at all, and my stomach threatens to rebel, but I manage to keep it down.

“You really believe Joshua's going to find us?” Heather's voice drifts over to me, dull and sad.

“Yes, I'm sure of it.”

“How will he find us?”

“I don't know. He just will.”

“That's it? You must have some idea.”

“No, I really don't. He's smart, he's determined, he's got resources, he cares about me. He'll find us.” How can she not understand that he's listening to us? Just because there's no camera visible doesn't mean that it isn't here. A man like him would be watching us constantly.

“So you don't know shit!” Heather's voice rises, shrill and angry. “Damn it, Tamara! I'm here because of you! This is your fault! Tell me how he's going to save us, tell me! I need to know what he'll do to get us out of here!”

I make myself sit up, very slowly and painfully, so I can turn to face her. My back screams as I brace myself on the bed. I put my finger to my lips and tap my ear, to tell her to be quiet because we're being spied on.

“Why are you telling me to be quiet?” she screams. “He's not in here! Tell me how the hell Joshua will get us out, tell me, tell me, tell me!”

Months of living with Joshua have toughened me up considerably. Once I would have agreed with her, and I would have wept and tortured myself with guilt over what's

happening to her. Now I'm much less patient and I'm nobody's emotional punching bag.

"Heather. It's not my fault that Micah is a fucking lunatic. It's not my fault he kidnapped you. And I'm not going to talk to you unless you calm down and lower your voice."

In response, she glares at me and starts screaming wordlessly at the top of her lungs. She's gone completely over the edge.

Very carefully and slowly, I turn my back to her and lie down on the bed again. Eventually, she runs out of breath. Then after a while, she starts crying, big gulping, heaving sobs.

"I'm sorry," she wails. "I'm sorry. I know I'm acting crazy. I don't have access to my meds here, and I'm going fucking crazy. You don't know what he's done to me. I'm so scared, Tamara. I'm scared all the time. Please don't hate me."

"I don't hate you," I tell her gently. "I'm going to try to sleep." I close my eyes. The pills are starting to take effect again. Weariness sweeps over me, and I struggle to fall back to sleep again. I know that Joshua will tear the world apart to find Micah, but after this morning's session, I wonder if I'll still be alive when he gets here.



## CHAPTER SIX

## JOSHUA

It's been six days. I'm woozy from lack of sleep, and from the effort of maintaining my focus, a task that was once as effortless as breathing.

I've relocated to California, to a very expensive and isolated rental home in Mendocino County. I'm expecting some guests, and while I wait, I'm searching through property records. Carter is here too. He's taken a leave of absence from work and is staying half an hour away at a hotel I'm paying for.

It's just as well that he's not staying with me. Carter wouldn't approve of my guests.

I desperately hope I'm in the right place. Carter managed to identify Charlemagne's rental car, the one he drove out of the parking garage in Boston after he ditched his van. He gave me the information, and I hacked into traffic cameras and traced the car to a private airport in upstate New York.

Garrett kidnapped the owner of the airport and brought him to me, and I cut pieces off him until he told me where the airplane went. Northern California, where the Blackthorne Institute is located. Where Dr. Barnard and his family live. Apparently Charlemagne has been flying back and forth

between Northern California and New York every week for the last six months.

Finding this out took time. Two days. Time I don't have.

Every morning I get videos from Charlemagne. He's killing her bit by bit. Killing her spirit, her hope, her soul.

This morning I got one that showed him cutting his initials into the bruised flesh of her chest with a box cutter. He's using the initials MS—apparently he's taken on the new name Micah Smith. That's what he announced when he started cutting. "Property of Micah Smith," he said from behind that mask. Tears leaked from her eyes and ran down her cheeks, and she sobbed, making horrible, hopeless noises. She's as white as a ghost, with dark circles under her eyes.

He's sent me videos of himself branding his initials into her left butt cheek. Raping her anally. Whipping her until she passes out.

Thanks to a lifetime's worth of brutal self-denial of my feelings, I don't even break a sweat as I watch. My heartbeat actually drops a little. An observer who didn't know better would think I was watching a corporate training video. But there's a part of me that's an enraged, screaming animal, torn away from its mate. I am still walling that part of me away for now, but it's coming at a cost. I can feel it. I spent an entire lifetime of moving through life fueled only by anger and revenge and lust. Now I realize that many other emotions were living inside me the whole time, raging and hurling themselves against the prison bars of my mind.

Sorrow. Terrible grief at the loss of my mother and my brothers, at the loss of the childhood we never had.

Burning, corroding hatred of my father.

Tamara's kidnapping broke some kind of dam inside me. All those emotions are bubbling up like hot lava. It is taking more and more mental effort to keep them suppressed, and soon there will be a reckoning. An explosion that will tear me apart.

But to save Tamara, I need to keep those emotions locked away, because I must think with a clear head. Panic and rage are not useful to me; those emotions cloud the senses and muddy the thinking. Until she's safe, the bad feelings and dangerous thoughts will stay right where they need to, festering in a toxic sludge that's eroding my sanity.

*My heartbeat is speeding up.*

No.

I need to focus.

As I sit in my office, working the computer, I remind myself of the control I still have.

I am confident that Charlemagne doesn't know I'm here, which is helpful. I accessed the location tracker on the cell phone he gave me, and I rewrote the software so the phone would still report that I was in New York.

And I have figured out how he fooled the surveillance team I paid to watch Dr. Barnard and his family. Ever since the day I had my brother trapped at the Blackthorne Institute, I had them under guard. I needed Dr. Barnard to know that if he ever let Charlemagne escape, his family would pay the price.

But somehow, Charlemagne's been free for six months, and Dr. Barnard never said a word to me. Even worse, he lied to me and showed me fake video making it look as if Charlemagne was still locked up.

Looking over the surveillance video of the Barnard family, I have a good idea of why he did that.

Charlemagne was holding different members of Dr. Barnard's family prisoner. That's how he got Dr. Barnard to cooperate, to maintain the ruse that he was still safely tucked away at the Blackthorne Institute.

Dr. Barnard would go out for a walk with his wife and a couple of his kids. A week later, he'd be seen taking three of his kids out to dinner, but this time, the wife and other two kids weren't there. The entire family hasn't been seen together at one time in six months.

And close-ups of the videos show the strained looks on their faces, the tightness of their smiles. I should have noticed that a lot sooner. If I were better at understanding and interpreting human emotions, I would have.

If Charlemagne has been holding members of the family prisoner, that means they know where he's staying. Early this morning, I had my men stage a raid on Dr. Barnard's house, and they snatched up Dr. Barnard and the two boys who are currently with him.

It's midmorning when Dr. Barnard and his two sons, Fletcher and Paul, arrive. Fletcher is twelve and Paul is ten. The whole family is blond with pale blue eyes and fair complexions. They're all pale from strain, and there's a haunted look in their eyes, but Dr. Barnard is the only one who's been crying. His cheeks are still wet with tears and his lean face is puckered with self-pity. His sons just look angry and resolute. They're more of a man than he is, and their voices haven't even changed yet.

Fletcher looks at me suspiciously. "You're not Micah," he says to me. "You look like him, but you walk differently."

Smart boys.

“I’m his twin brother. My name is Joshua. Nothing’s going to happen to you. I just need to talk to you.” I’ve never been the type to say reassuring things before. Tamara’s influence again.

I gesture at Garrett. “Take them down the hall and give them some video games while I talk to their father,” I say to him.

They glance at their father. He looks away, avoiding their eyes, and he wails as I lead him down the hall. He’s actually crying out loud in front of his children. Jesus. What a pussy.

Once I get him into my sound-proofed workroom, I tie Dr. Barnard to a chair and I pull up my cart of tools. I pick up a skinning knife. I don’t have time to screw around.

He starts crying louder, like a big miserable infant.

“I wish I’d never met you,” he snivels. “Do you know what your brother did to me?”

“No, but I hope it hurt. Now you’re going to start talking.”

He tells me everything he knows. Charlemagne seduced one of the nurses and, with her help, escaped six months ago. Dr. Barnard was stupid enough to try to cover it up so I wouldn’t find out.

That was a mistake.

My brother kidnapped Dr. Barnard and took him to a big empty warehouse and cut his balls off to pay him back for keeping him prisoner. He interrogated Dr. Barnard and found out I was the one behind his continued imprisonment. He also showed Dr. Barnard’s the head of the nurse who helped him

escape. Left it sitting on a table next to him while he tortured him.

Then he set him free, but only after kidnapping Dr. Barnard's wife and two of his daughters. And ever since then, he's swapped them out like pieces in a chess game. Sometimes he'd keep the daughters, sometimes the sons, sometimes the wife would get to stay with her kids, sometimes he'd send her back home and keep a few of her children. There are three girls and two boys.

If Dr. Barnard utters a word, they'll be killed.

His wife and his daughters were snatched up a week ago, and his sons returned to him. He has no idea, of course, where they're being held.

So here he is, a neutered, pathetic, sniveling shell of his former self. His life unraveled by greed and stupidity.

But what he's telling me is the biggest break I've gotten so far.

For this to work, Charlemagne would have to be staying in a house that's reasonably close to Dr. Barnard's family. My search area just shrunk considerably.

I hurry to the room where Fletcher and Paul are waiting. They're sitting on a couch, huddled close together. Garrett gave them Nintendo Switches, but they're just ignoring them, talking to each other in low voices.

"Are you friends with your brother?" Fletcher blurts out when I walk over to them.

"No, I'm not. He wants to kill me, but I'm going to kill him first. And I brought you here so you can help me find him. Then you'll be free."

Long ago, I told Dr. Barnard that if he let my brother escape, I'd kill his family. He'd nodded and smiled and cashed my checks. I meant it then. But Tamara has worked her magic on me, and now I couldn't do it. I won't hurt these boys. They've already had enough of a rotten hand dealt to them, with a father like Dr. Barnard. He didn't even say a word about his sons when I left him.

Paul glances at Fletcher for reassurance. Fletcher pats his brother on the shoulder. I'm strangely fascinated. My brothers and I never dared to offer each other comfort; our father would have seen it as a sign of weakness and punished us both until we bled.

"He has our mother and our sisters," Fletcher says, clenching his fists. "Can you find them?"

"Yes, but only with your help. I need you to tell me everything you can. Think about places he kept you. Did you go by car or in a plane? And was it always the same place?"

"It was always the same place," Fletcher says. "He put us in the back of a van, and he tried to trick us by driving around and taking different routes. But I paid attention while we were driving, and I counted in my head to keep track of time. The shortest time it ever took was three hours, and the longest it took was five. But his house isn't three hours from ours. Even the time he drove for three hours, he was driving back and forth for a while to make it seem like it was farther away than it really was."

I nod approvingly. "Excellent! You guys are geniuses." The words feel strange on my tongue. Kindness. Reassurance. *I'm a new man, Tamara. Please survive so I can show you.*

Fletcher smiles just a little, then the smile vanishes. "Sometimes we smelled this really foul manure smell, like



from some kind of farm, and that was about half an hour before we got there. We didn't smell it every time, though."

Hope floods through me. "This is fantastic. You're helping me narrow it down. Anything else you can tell me will be helpful. Did you get any sense of how big the house was inside? I can start searching property records."

Fletcher frowns in concentration. "Not really. We'd drive into a garage, and the door would close behind us, and we'd have to wear hoods on our heads until we got to the part of the house where he kept us. We never saw the outside of the house, and the windows were all blocked off."

"Oh! The bird." Paul speaks up suddenly. He looks at his older brother, who shrugs, looking skeptical. "I heard it one time when we were pulling into the garage. It was a double ring-necked warbler that's mostly found in Tehama County." At Fletcher's skeptical look, he tells him, "I know what I heard."

Tehama County would make sense. It's within the driving range we're talking about, and it's remote and rural. A perfect place for Micah's needs.

"But that was one time. And different birds can sound like each other. If you're wrong, if you send him to the wrong place..." Fletcher protests.

*"I know what I heard. I know birds."* Paul looks at me. "I'm going to be a wildlife biologist," he says with pride. Then his face falls. "If you don't murder us."

Something twists inside me. I remember waking up every morning as a child, wondering if this would be the day my father would kill me. I grew numb to it in the end.

“I am nothing like my brother. That’s why he’s my enemy. Nobody is going to kill you, because I will keep you safe,” I say fiercely. “I’m going to find your mother and your sisters, and it’s going to be because of what you just told me, and I’m going to make sure you stay safe and protected. I swear to you. Your days of living in fear are over.”

*Who is saying these words?*

The craziest part, I actually mean them.

I wish Tamara could see me now.

I see both boys visibly relax, and Fletcher puts his arm around his brother’s shoulder. They exchange glances, and I see the hope in their eyes.

“He’s telling the truth,” Fletcher says to Paul. “He’s not like his brother.”

“You’ve given me some good tips,” I say. “Let me get to work.”

Now that I’ve taken them, the clock is ticking down. I’ve got to make my move. I call Carter and tell him what I’ve just learned. Then I return to my computer to search property records again with a renewed sense of hope.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## TAMARA

When Micah walks through the door right around lunchtime, my muscles lock up in fear. I see the look on his face. It's that look he gets when he's about to hurt me. Manic glee lights up his eyes, and there's a bounce to his step.

He skipped the last three days of torture sessions. He hasn't made any videos in the last three days either.

He's dragging this out, letting me heal before he starts in on me again. And for Joshua, not getting those videos will be a nightmare. He'll be thinking the worst, picturing me dead.

If he's still looking for me.

I'm struggling to hold on to hope, but with every day, it's fading. I was able to survive my time with Joshua because underneath it all, I knew I had at least some control over my fate. And I knew Joshua wanted me. He wanted to own me, yes, to possess me completely, but I knew he didn't want me dead. Micah wants me dead.

And from the nasty gleam in his eyes, I can see he's got something especially harsh in store for me today. There's something made of cloth bunched up in his hand. What is it hiding? Something bad. It can only be something bad.

“Today’s going to be a little different,” Micah says to me as he unchains me. I stand up slowly, painfully. I feel tight and swollen and hot all over, despite Astrid coming in every day to change my bandages, clean my wounds, and give me medication. Every part of my body is battered. The cut marks on my chest, the brand on my buttocks, the whip marks on my back... will he start in on my face today? There’s not much unmarked flesh left.

I stare at the floor, waiting for him to do whatever he’s going to do.

He grabs my chin and turns my head to make me look at him. His mouth is twisted into a smirk. His eyes are cruel, eager to drink in my suffering. “What, no smart remarks?”

“They’d be wasted,” I reply coolly. I won’t reward him with tears or screams unless he forces them out of me. When I’m in between torture sessions, I retreat into my shell, wearing an indifferent mask. There’s no drawn-out sobbing or hysteria, not like Heather, who punctuates long bouts of silence with fits of crying.

“Careful.” His smirk tightens, his lips drawing back into a grimace. “Piss me off and I’ll go have fun with your friend instead. And it will be your fault.”

I stare right into his ice blue eyes. “Micah, or Charlemagne, or whatever dress-up game you’re playing today, nothing I say or do is going to make any difference. You’ll do whatever your inadequate, perverted little brain dreams up, no matter what. And either Joshua will find us in time to save us, or he won’t.”

“You’re so brave,” he croons sarcastically. “I see why Joshua loves you.”

“He doesn’t love me,” I snap. “I told you that already. I was just another possession. Another project.” Do I believe that, or am I just saying it in the faint hope that he’ll stop torturing me? I’m not sure what I think about Joshua, or about anything anymore. My only thoughts now are how to survive the next few minutes, the next few hours.

He smiles with triumph. “Oh, I saw the way he looked at you, drinking you in like the finest wine. That was love, Tamara.”

Is that true? I want it to be true, and not just because it means he won’t abandon me here. If I have to die here, I want to die knowing I was loved. That someone will miss me fiercely. I want to have mattered.

Micah holds out the cloth in his hand. I see it’s a dress.

“Hold out your arms. I’ll help you get dressed.” I do, wincing as he roughly pulls my arms through the sleeves of a wraparound dress, then pulls it around me, tying it at the waist. The place where he carved his initials into my chest is partially exposed, the “S” peeking out in a hideous red squiggle.

This is the first time I’ve had clothes on since I’ve been here. I can’t fathom why he’s dressing me. What does this mean?

I glance over at Heather, who hasn’t spoken to me in the last twenty-four hours. She doesn’t look up from her bed.

He wraps his fingers around my arm. “Come with me,” he says. And he takes me, not to the side of the room where he tortures me, but out of the room. We pause for that retina scanner on the way out, and when we step into the hallway, he slams the barred door shut behind us with a resounding clang.

I curse my physical weakness. I can barely move now without crying. While I know where to strike him to take him out, I lack the strength to do it. I had these big dreams of using my secret sparring knowledge to disable him, and they've come to nothing.

The hallway is bare of decoration; no pictures on the white plaster walls, no carpet on the laminate floor. Micah hauls me limping past several doors, around a corner, down another long, plain hallway, and into a big, sparsely furnished living room. Astrid is sitting on a black leather couch with a girl who looks to be nine or ten, and two young teenaged girls. They look like their mother, lean and pretty with dirty-blond hair. They're all wearing jeans, blouses, sneakers, and wary, frightened expressions.

He introduces them. Her daughters are named Darlie, Julianne and Robin. Darlie looks like she's about nine or ten, and Julianne and Robin are teenagers.

My heart aches for them. They're so young. They don't deserve this hell. Even if they survive this, they'll never be the same.

"Oh, don't look so sad," Micah says with cruel cheerfulness. "I promised them when I first took them that I wouldn't hurt them as long as they cooperated with me and followed my orders to the letter." He puts particular emphasis on those last three words, and I feel a faint shiver of alarm. Astrid doesn't seem to notice. "That's the deal we have, isn't, *Astrid?*"

I see her eyes flicker with annoyance. His insistence on using her first name when she asked him not to is just another of his stupid bullying power moves. What a petty little tyrant. Even more reason to loathe him.

“Yes,” she says quietly, not looking at him. “You have reminded me of that many times.”

He glances at me. “Why don’t you sit here and socialize for a while? Lunch is on the table.” He points at a coffee table sitting in front of a sofa, and I see there is a platter of sandwiches and a pitcher of what looks like iced tea, with glasses. “I’ll be back whenever I fucking feel like it.”

Darlie flinches at his language, and Astrid’s lips thin as she presses them together. For some reason, the fact that he’s using that kind of language in front of a child ignites a flare of rage deep inside me, even though it’s the least of his transgressions.

Of course, there’s nothing I can do about it, or anything that he’s doing to us. A dull, leaden lump of despair settles in my stomach.

There’s another of those retina scanner panels next to the door. He uses it to exit the room.

I walk very slowly over to the couch, my breath hitching with every step, and Astrid helps me to sit down. I groan as I settle back against the cushions. Her daughters look at me with dismayed expressions, their gazes flicking to my scarred chest. I’m suddenly conscious of the barbell piercings; are they visible through the fabric? Shame burns through me, and I cross one arm over my chest, awkwardly trying to hide myself.

“Did he hurt you?” Darlie asks, tears brimming in her eyes.

“It’s not so bad. I’ll be fine.” I very slowly lean over to reach out for a roast beef sandwich with my free arm, and Julie grabs one and hands it to me.

These are people with compassion. Decent human beings who don’t deserve this. And there is absolutely nothing I can



do to help them.

Joshua, what the *fuck* is taking you so long?

I give up on trying to hide my chest and start chewing, mechanically, not because I'm hungry, but because I need to keep my strength up for whatever comes next.

"Why is he doing this to you?" asks Robin, who looks to be the oldest, looking bewildered. "He doesn't do this to the other girl, or to us."

"You do know he's listening to everything we say, don't you?" I ask her.

"Yes." She flicks a glance at a corner of the room, and I follow it and see a camera mounted on the ceiling. She turns her head so the camera isn't pointed at her, and mouths something that looks like "motherfucker", and I manage a little smile.

I carefully explain as much as I dare. I don't tell them the full story about Joshua. I just tell them that I've been staying with Micah's twin brother, and Micah hates Joshua and believes Joshua loves me, so that's why he's using me as an instrument of revenge.

"Who is that other girl?" Astrid asks me. "The one who's chained up in the room with you? The one who never talks?"

"She used to be my neighbor. It's a very long story. Robin, can you pour me some tea?"

As I eat the sandwich in small bites, Astrid quietly tells me about her husband's deal with Joshua. Joshua was paying millions of dollars to keep his brother locked away in an asylum.

She only found out about it six months ago, after Micah escaped. Her husband rushed home one day in the middle of work, in a panic. He confessed everything to her and told her they needed to leave the country.

She thought her husband was lying. It was the craziest thing she'd ever heard. She stood there watching him dragging suitcases out of the closet, wondering if he would end up in a straitjacket in his own hospital.

Then Micah walked in with the barrel of a gun pressed against her youngest son's head. And her family's life has been hell ever since. He always keeps a few of them prisoner here, and the ones who are free have to go out in public with Dr. Barnard and pretend everything is fine, in case they're being watched by Joshua's men.

She had to pull all her children out of school and pretend that she was homeschooling them. They stopped talking to their friends, stopped doing everything except living in fear.

"It's torture for me when he has my children here and I'm not with them," Astrid whispers. Darlie sniffles, and Astrid quickly pats her knee.

"Sorry. I shouldn't talk about it. We'll be fine," she says bleakly, in a leached-out, despairing voice that convinces no one.

As we talk, I'm scanning the room. No windows. One door. Nothing but the sofa, a couple of overstuffed chairs and a TV mounted on the wall, a very heavy coffee table that I wouldn't be able to move even if I had my full strength, and a remote control for the TV.

I don't see anything I can use, and it fills me with despair. The Barnards were useful to Micah as long as he needed them

to fool Joshua. Now Joshua knows Micah is free, he doesn't need them to carry on that charade anymore. Astrid, a nurse, is still useful to him as long as I'm alive. But what will he do to them when I'm dead? They'll be a liability. They could testify against him if he let them go.

They're as good as dead. Do they realize it? From the heavy silence in the room, I'm afraid they might.

"Let's talk about happy things," Robin says in a tight voice. "Who's your favorite band?"

"I like the Killers a lot."

"The Killers! Get out of town, Gramma," she says in a joking voice. Then she gasps and looks horrified. "I'm so sorry. After everything you've been through..."

"Don't be sorry," I say quickly. "Please. I haven't messed with anyone in ages, especially a member of the Justin Bieber fan club."

"Ewww." She and her sisters laugh. "He is so last year. Ed Sheeran!"

"She's MrsEd3725 on Twitter," Julianne confides. "She like totally stalks him. She wants to have his little ginger babies."

"Oh, my God, you witch. I'll get you for that." Robin fake glares at her.

So we spend the next hour talking about our favorite music and our favorite movies, and the girls paste on smiles and pretend everything is fine, and Astrid's eyes are haunted and her hands tremble as she eats. The air is sticky with misery and fear.

Then the door flies open, and Micah comes in, marching Heather in, his hand gripping her arm. Her hands are free, but her ankles are shackled. She's barefoot and wearing a cheap-looking white rayon tank dress. She looks angry and confused. And in his free hand, he's holding a very sharp knife.

We all stand up as he approaches us, our eyes drawn to the blade. I feel a chill of fear, and I move forward so I'm in front of Astrid and the girls, my bruised body groaning in protest with every twitch of my muscles.

"I'm getting bored," Micah says to me. "You break so easily, I haven't been able to play with you in days. I don't deal well with boredom. So we're going to play a little game. It's called Who's Going to Die Today?" His eyes are glowing with unholy glee.

"Micah. You're angry at me, not them," I say, keeping my voice very steady and calm.

"I can kill your best friend, Heather, right here and now, or I can kill Astrid. You get to pick."

Shock jolts me. He couldn't have just said that, but he did.

*He promised he wouldn't hurt Astrid and the girls.*

*I'm a fucking idiot for believing the promise of a sadistic lunatic.*

Heather stumbles back with a shriek and almost falls, and he catches her by the arm. He holds her with an iron grip as she tries to yank her arm from his grasp. "You're lying!" she whimpers, her eyes huge with fright. "You wouldn't kill me, you wouldn't!"

"No!" Julie screams.

“You promised! You said you wouldn’t hurt us!” Robin cries out at the same time.

Darlie just goes stiff with horror. Her skinny body shakes violently, and tears start pouring from her eyes, but she doesn’t make a sound. Astrid steps in front of her girls, her eyes blazing.

“I told you the rules,” Micah says, flicking a bored look at the woman he’s threatening to murder in front of her children. “And you disobeyed, Astrid. You smuggled in a cell phone and tried to make a call.”

Color drains from Astrid’s face. “That...that was months ago,” she whispers. “I didn’t even know you knew. I never tried again.”

“Doesn’t matter. You broke my rules. You suffer the penalty.”

“Ah,” I say, nodding and keeping my voice calm even though my heart’s hammering against my ribcage in panic. “I get it now. You let me hang out with Astrid and her daughters for a while so that I’d get to know them a little bit and it would be that much harder for me to make the choice, right?”

“What? You’re going to choose me!” Heather screams. “I’m your best friend. I’m only here because of you. Choose me! You don’t even know these people!”

I don’t even spare her a glance. I just stare straight at Micah, keeping my face blank as I consider my next move. This is it. It ends today. We’re going to have to gang up on him, and some or all of us will die.

*Goodbye, Joshua.*

“I must say, your poker face is superb.” He smiles at me. “Or maybe you don’t care about any of these annoying little

bitches. Maybe my brother and I found you so appealing because like calls to like.”

“Please, don’t flatter yourself.” A surprising calm descends on me, and I start to understand Joshua a little better. So this is how he feels when everything’s crashing down around him. Cool as ice. “And it’s an easy decision, given that Heather has been working with you all along.”

Micah raises his eyebrows in polite inquiry.

“No, I haven’t!” Heather whines. “That’s crazy.”

I rake her with a scornful look. “I’ve had a lot of time to think since I came here. Nothing but time. I’m actually embarrassed it took me this long to figure it out. Micah recruited you to help him throughout this whole scheme. From the very beginning, back in New York. You only made friends with me because he asked you to. That’s why you kept trying to push me to make a pass at Joshua. It was like you were freaking obsessed with it.”

“You were the one who was obsessed! I was trying to help you! I was being a friend!” Heather’s face goes bright red.

I ignore her. “It really didn’t fit your personality. You were entertaining and all, but you were totally self-absorbed and vain. You didn’t give a damn about what I did with my life other than that. You know, I should have figured out that you were working with Micah when he came to pick me up and had you tied up in the van. I was a little foggy at the time, but I figured it out eventually. There would be absolutely no reason for him to bring you. It would increase his risk of getting caught, transporting someone he’d kidnapped all that distance. You were his partner, not his prisoner. And when I woke up here, actually, you looked pretty damn healthy. Not a mark on

you. You looked way too good for someone who supposedly was abused by a psychopath for the last six months.”

“No!” Heather howls. “You’re freaking crazy! None of that’s true! You can’t let him kill me, Tamara, you can’t!” She looks at Micah, who is watching us with interest.

Astrid’s girls are huddled behind her, sobbing.

I shift where I’m standing, and wince. It’s all right. All my pain will be over soon.

“It explains a lot of things. Like why you kept trying to interrogate me about how Joshua would find us, and how when I tried to tell you to be quiet, you yelled louder. You’re a decent actress, Heather, but you’d never win an Oscar.”

“But he beat me up!” she snivels. “He Tasered me! You’ve seen what he did to me!”

Astrid and her daughters stare with horrified fascination. A gentle smile is curling Micah’s mouth. He’s enjoying this.

“Of course he did.” I shrug. *Ouch*. “You’ve got a sick, twisted relationship.”

“He raped me!”

“It wasn’t rape. It was role-playing.”

“Relationship is going a little far,” Micah breaks in, smirking at Heather. “I don’t do relationships.” Then he looks at me. “She was a tool, and not a particularly effective one. She’s been boring the fuck out of me lately. I’m glad you chose her. I should have gotten rid of her a long time ago.”

At her shocked look, he laughs. “What? You think you deserve to live? A woman with no loyalty, a woman who would betray her best friend knowing she’ll be tortured to death?”

Darlie lets out a little scream and claps her hand over her mouth. Robin hugs her sister fiercely.

“No!” Astrid cries out in horror. “You’re not going to torture Tamara to death! You’re not!”

Heather suddenly lunges at Micah and grabs for the knife. He dodges her easily, and in one smooth move, he stabs her in the stomach.

She makes a choked sound of disbelief. We all freeze in place and stare as he gives the knife a vicious twist and then yanks it back out again and the air fills with the smell of blood. It occurs to me that he dressed her in white to make sure that the blood showed. Heather makes horrible screeching noises and falls toward him, landing on him and throwing him off balance.

While he’s distracted, Astrid tries to grab the knife, and he punches her in the eye.

Suddenly, Darlie lunges at him and bites his hand savagely, clinging to him like a pit bull, and the knife falls to the ground. He raises his fist to punch Darlie, and I somehow thrust aside all my pain and weakness, just for a moment. I hurl myself at him and headbutt him so hard that I hear his nose crunch. Stars explode behind my eyes, and I stagger back.

Robin lashes out and kicks him behind the knee, making him stagger and almost fall, at the same time that Julie snatches the knife from the floor and plunges it into his thigh. The smell of blood is choking me. All my food comes up in a rush, and I vomit on the floor. My body is seizing up, and my eyes are watering and I can’t see.

“Side of the neck! Hit him with the heel of your hand!” I scream to anyone who’s listening. “In front of the ear! Hard,



hard!”

There are screams and grunts and then a thud, and my vision clears a little, and I look down at Micah. He’s lying on the floor, eyes rolling back in his head. Oh God, it worked! Julie is standing over him, panting with triumph and looking at her hand. Robin’s trying to pull the knife from his leg, but it’s stuck.

Heather is lying in on her side in a red lake of blood, twitching feebly. Her eyes plead with me and her mouth opens and closes like a fish, but no sound emerges. She’s as good as dead, and she deserves it. I make no move to help her.

Robin stomps repeatedly on Micah’s throat. She’s only wearing sneakers, though.

“The door!” I cry. “The retina scanner! Pick him up, we have to go!”

Astrid and Robin manage to lift his dead weight, and they wrestle him over to the door. He groans. Julie grabs a handful of his hair and lifts his head and peels back his eyelid and presses the button on the panel. And the door clicks open.

My heart pounds with wild elation.

Oh my God. Oh my God.

We might actually make it. We might not die here.

I limp behind them as they drag him down the hall, leaving a long trail of blood from his leg. The knife is still sticking out of it. We get to the front door and repeat the procedure with the retina scanner there, and it opens. He’s starting to wake up now, grunting and struggling.

The front door opens, and Astrid and her daughters drop Micah on the floor. He lands with an agonized groan that

warms my heart. I kick the knife in his leg, which sends agony pulsing through my battered body, but his strangled cry is reward enough.

Astrid and her daughter run out the door, and I limp after them. The front yard is wild and overgrown, with waist-high weeds. A long paved driveway curves behind tall trees. I try to follow them, and something grabs my ankle with a death-grip.

Micah.

As they run, they're glancing behind them to make sure that Micah's not chasing them. When they see what's happening, they stumble to a halt and stand there, unsure.

No fucking way am I letting them die when freedom is so close. Their escape? That's my happy ending.

"Go!" I scream at them. "Get help!"

It won't be in time, but it doesn't matter.

*They're free.*

They turn and run for their lives, legs churning.

He clenches my ankle, and I kick at his face with my bare foot, but he twists away and pulls me down to the ground with a thud.

A shockwave of pain rolls over my bruised, battered body, and I shriek.

But they're safe. They're safe.

Tears pour out of my eyes as I watch them disappear around the corner, past the tree line.

It's over.

"You better cry, you fucking bitch," Micah pants. "You have any idea what I'm going to do with you?"

He doesn't understand why I'm crying, because he can't comprehend caring about someone else more than you care for yourself.

*Run, girls, run.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## SERGEANT CARTER

After a lifetime of shitty luck and being dealt every bad hand, I was beginning to doubt my faith. I thought God hated me.

Molly and Valentina were sweet and innocent and kind, my reason for waking up in the morning, and they were both taken from me. I fought to bring their killers to justice. I believed in the system, and the system spat in my face.

I threw myself into work, and I busted kiddy-diddlers and drug-dealers, just to watch them go dancing out of the courtroom, high-fiving their lawyers when they beat the rap.

I prayed and prayed to see justice done, only to have my prayers fall on deaf ears.

But finally, today, the angels are smiling on me.

Yesterday afternoon, that creepy bastard Joshua Smith gave me some information that he swore up and down came from someone who'd been at Micah's house. He said Micah was in Tehama County and he described a bridge, a farm that smelled like manure that was half an hour from the house, and a bunch of other markers that would help narrow down the location. He refused to tell me where he got the information, but for now, that's not important.

What's important is that Micah made a mistake. I bet he thought he was being smart getting a house out in the country. Lots of privacy, no neighbors close enough to hear the screams. But actually it was pretty stupid, because there aren't that many parcels of land here, and to make it even easier, I only had to look at places that were rented or purchased in the last five or six months.

I narrowed it down to five possibilities. I have an old army buddy who's working for the Feds now, stationed in San Francisco. I've hinted to him a little, telling him that I'm working a private case trying to track down a kidnap victim, but he knows I'm not doing anything official.

He did a search on the utilities for all five properties. And bingo. This morning he called to tell me that one of the utility accounts was opened under a fake name, a ghost who only exists on the lease, and who used fake ID to rent the property.

This afternoon, I drove out here to do some scouting. I'm not bringing Joshua with me, or any of his security team. I don't trust that motherfucker any farther than I could throw him. And as I drive down a narrow rural road that passes the suspicious address, I see a woman and three girls running toward me, waving their hands frantically.

*Yes.*

*Finally.*

I pull up closer, window rolled down, and I don't see Tamara, but these chicks look as scared as shit, and they're screaming at me to stop.

"Tamara Bennett?" I call out to them. "You know where she is?"

“She’s back at the house! He’s got her!” the woman cries out, waving her skinny arm, pointing at the road behind her. “Micah’s got her. He’ll kill her!”

That’s the alias that Joshua’s brother is using. Joshua told me that.

There’s no cell phone reception out here—probably part of the appeal for Charlemagne—but I came prepared. I park the truck, climb out, and place a quick call to my FBI buddy using a satellite phone he lent me, and I tell him that kidnap victim Tamara Bennett is being held against her will at the address he gave me. And I tell him I’m going in. He tries to yell at me to wait for backup, but I hang up.

The girls are pawing at me, howling at me to hurry up and go, go, he’s going to kill Tamara!

I make a quick decision. These girls have got to get the hell out of here.

“How far off the road is the house?” I ask them.

“A quarter mile! Go!” the woman cries out.

I hand the woman my keys and my cell phone. “Get in the car and drive until you get to a place where you can make a call. About ten miles due south and you’ll come to a crossroads with a store. There’ll be reception there.”

They’re all crying as they scramble into the truck. I hear the screech of tires as I run, faster than I’ve ever run before. Thank God I hit the StairMaster every day. I may look like a fat, out-of-shape fuck, but I can run a mile in six minutes.

The trees are flying by me, but every second feels like an hour. Is he killing her right now? After all this time, am I too late?

The driveway is hidden from the road by trees, and it curves. I'm sick at the thought of what might be waiting for me around that corner.

Tamara Bennett can't be dead. She can't.

*Please, God. Can you throw me a fucking bone? Do you hear me at all?*

When I get halfway down the driveway, I see a squat, ugly brick house. In front of the house there's a dark-haired man who has his arms wrapped around a woman. She's got her back to him and she's crushed against his chest, and her legs are flailing. The man has a knife sticking out of his leg and his pants are drenched in blood. He looks so much like Joshua it's freaky. In fact, the only way I can tell the difference is that Joshua has fading bruises under his eyes and a recently broken nose, and this guy doesn't.

The woman is skinny and bruised and her dark hair is matted, but I can tell it's Tamara Bennett.

My heart's pounding in my chest. I can't believe it. I can't fucking believe it. I thought she'd been chopped up and fed through a wood chipper somewhere.

In one smooth motion, I pull the Smith & Wesson M&P from my holster and point it at his head. I pray I don't have to shoot him.

"Drop her!" I shout. Charlemagne freezes, and his pretty-boy face bunches up into something out of a fucking horror movie. He's got that crazy look in his eyes, the look that says he won't be taken alive if he can help it.

"I'll snap her neck!" he yells at me. "Get the fuck off my property, or I'll kill her!"



“Charlemagne,” I spit the word out like a curse. “You sick piece of shit. I’m not going anywhere. You kill her, and I’ll shoot your dick off and leave you to bleed out. Let her go, and you live another day! Come on, asshole, you can always try to bust out of prison and take another whack at—”

While I’m talking, Tamara suddenly hooks both her feet behind his knees and pulls them forward, sending him crashing to the ground. He screeches in pain, clutching at the knife.

I run toward them as she rolls away. Crying, she starts to crawl off slowly. She’s so weak, so beat up, she can barely move. What the hell has this animal done to her?

*Motherfucking piece of shit.*

I should shoot him. It would be a righteous kill. Why the fuck am I still so tied up by the rules?

I walk closer until I’m standing right next to him, the gun pointed at his head. He suddenly rolls and lashes out with his good leg, and my gun goes off, hitting him in the left arm. He doesn’t even seem to notice. Doesn’t even flinch. Is he on PCP or is he just that fucking crazy?

He pulls something from his pocket, and as it’s slashing toward me. I realize it’s a hypodermic needle. Before I can get away from him, it jabs into my calf. Suddenly my vision goes blurry and my body goes numb. My hand is a thick, clumsy paw, and the gun falls from my fingers and hits the ground with a thud.

Panic boils up inside me. He’ll kill me. He’ll kill Tamara. *I was so close...so close...*

I can hear him laughing, but everything has turned to a red haze. I try to make my legs move.

“My brother sent you, right? You have any idea what I’m going to do to you?” His voice is hoarse and raspy. “How long I’m going to make it last?”

Then I hear Joshua’s voice. I think it’s coming from the thick bushes that hem in the driveway.

“Tamara!” he cries out. “Hold on, baby!” His voice is very far away.

How the hell did he get here? Am I hearing things?

Am I going to die? And when I do, will I see my Molly and Valentina again, or for my sins, am I going to the hot place?

Their faces swim through my head as I pass out.

## CHAPTER NINE

## JOSHUA

County jail isn't anywhere nearly as unpleasant as I would have imagined. Yes, the food is disgusting, and there's nothing pleasant about sharing a cell with ten foul-smelling men or pissing in a stopped-up toilet while they watch. But by the second day, they all knew not to look. One of the men, who kept staring at my dick when I pissed on the first day died in his sleep that night, or at least nobody will ever be able to prove how he died. One of the other men somehow bounced off a wall and shattered every bone in his face. *Oops.*

After that, they were eating out of my hand. I was the king of the cell. They practically bowed when I walked past them.

And the filth of this place? I embrace it.

I like cleanliness. I like order. That's why dirt and chaos are my friends. That which hurts me strengthens me. Being in a place like this is the same kind of trial that my father put me through as a child, and the same kind I put myself through after I left him, to make sure I never got soft.

I know Tamara is in a hospital, covered in bruises and cuts, with a fractured ulna in her right arm...but she's safe now. That's all that matters.

My brother is under police guard at a different hospital, waiting to be transported to a special high-security lockup

when he's well enough to be transferred.

I was standing over him with my gun trained on the spot right between his eyes when the police pulled up. It's a shame. I wanted to see what the inside of his head looked like, but the police would have shot me right there if I'd pulled the trigger.

They cuffed me and marched me away before I could speak to Tamara. I wanted to run to her. I wanted to tell her I was sorry I let her down, but they hustled me off and stuffed me in a squad car before I could say a word.

My brother has been charged with multiple counts of kidnapping and assault and one count of murder. He has refused to speak to the police at all, from what my lawyer says. He hasn't told them anything about me, about our past. He's refused to even give them his name.

My security chief Garrett followed my instructions and released Dr. Barnard and his two sons. I made the boys a deal before I flew here. I promised them I'd save their mother and sisters, but they couldn't say a word to the police about me kidnapping them. Am I a manipulative asshole? Did I promise things I had no way of knowing I could deliver? Hell yeah. I don't lose a wink of sleep over it.

Dr. Barnard won't dare say a word, because if he rats me out, then I'll tell the police about our deal and they'll know he took bribes to keep my brother locked up. He'd go to prison right along with me, and lose his medical license.

Mrs. Barnard has filed for divorce and is demanding full custody of the kids. She blames him for what happened to her and her children, and she's right.

He's lost his manhood and his family. I'll settle for that, for now.

The police and the district attorney have done everything that they can to build a case against me. The fact that they've failed means they have been unable to get testimony against me from the one person who could have put me away for life.

Tamara.

The days float by in a haze. I need to see Tamara. I need to touch her, to be with her, but I can't, and my hunger is eating away at me. I'm still holding tight to my emotions, stuffing everything into a little box. When I get out of here, I need to hunt, and I need to do it *soon*. If I don't bleed off some of the emotion boiling inside me, I'm going to explode like a supernova, consuming everything around me with the fire of my rage.

My lawyer manages to get me out after five days.

There's a limo waiting for me outside the prison. I head straight to the hospital. I have so much I need to tell Tamara.

When I get there, Carter is just leaving Tamara's room. From what my lawyer's heard, he's been fired from the NYPD for going rogue.

His face flushes with anger when he sees me coming down the hall. Apparently, our recent adventure together and the fact I saved his life haven't gained me any favor with him. "I heard you got out. Figured I'd try to talk sense into her one more time," he says coldly. "You've got some kind of hold on her. You fucked with her head. I know Stockholm syndrome when I see it. Don't get too comfortable, asshole. I'm sticking to you like white on rice."

Once upon a time, I would have gloated in my triumph, and humiliated him. There's nothing he can do to me now. But

something in me has changed. I'm far from a decent human being, but I am less cruel than I used to be.

Because of Tamara.

And he did save her life.

Of course, he should have told me he'd figured out where my brother was, but I had a tracking device on his car, so I was never far behind him.

Standing outside the room, with him blocking my entrance, I stifle the urge to hurl him out of the way. "My offer still stands," I say to him.

"You think I did this for money?" he scoffs.

"Not that offer. Well, that's still there if you want it. But the other thing we discussed. Making life a little more...fair." I'd cheerfully kill the rich little shit who gave his daughter the fatal overdose, or the asshole boss who caused his wife to die. Why not? Even if they're not worthy fighters, it would still be fun.

I see the temptation in his face. But he shakes his head firmly.

"I'll never work with you," he says.

"That's not what I was suggesting."

"And I don't take favors from killers."

"Who did I kill?" I smile gently, but I won't be separated from Tamara for one more minute. "If you could prove anything, I wouldn't be standing here. Now step out of my way before I lose my temper."

He's blocked me long enough, and I have a short fuse these days.

He turns around and goes back into the room. “Tamara, Joshua’s here. I’m telling you, you deserve better than this. Let me call security for you.”

I walk in behind him. Tamara is sitting up in bed, hooked up to a monitor, an IV in her arm, covers pulled up to her chest. Her other arm is in a sling. Even after five days in the hospital, she’s painfully thin and ghost-pale, with dark hollows under her eyes. Greenish-blue bruises bloom on her arms and face.

My heart leaps in my chest when her eyes meet mine, and I just stand there, drinking her in. Just to be in the same room with her, breathing the same air, makes everything right with the world.

“It’s all right,” she says to Carter, her voice weak and raspy. “I’ll talk to him. And thank you again for everything you’ve done for me, Geoff. You’re a good guy.” He hesitates in the doorway. “I’ll be fine,” she says to him. “Really.”

“You can call me any time,” he says to her. With a dark look at me, he leaves.

I can’t take my eyes off her as I cross the room. *My girl, my beautiful girl.* I sit down in the chair next to her bed, strange emotions churning inside me.

“I’m sorry I took so long to find you,” I tell her, reaching out for her arm. She moves it out of my reach, and a spark of anger snaps in me.

She’s still mine. I can touch her when I want to.

I restrain myself, though, for now. She’s been through hell, and I’ll go easy on her. At first.

She looks at me wearily. “Thank you for saving us.”



“Of course. It was my fault he had you.” *I came to save you. I didn't give a damn about any of the rest of them.*

She shakes her head, her dark hair rustling on the pillow. “No, it wasn't. He set me up to meet you, knowing he was going to kidnap me in the end.” She tugs the blanket up a little. “I knew you'd come for me. I knew you wouldn't sleep until you found me. That's what kept me going, every day.” She shudders, her eyes drifting away to a dark place.

I know what those days were like, because I watched the videos. Every minute of every video.

But she believed in me. She knew I wouldn't abandon her. I feel the ice inside me thaw a little, and I'm not ashamed to say that my eyes burn with unshed tears. Her faith in me wraps around me like a warm blanket.

“It shouldn't have taken me so long. I threw everything I had into it, Tamara, I hope you know that. The world stopped turning for me. I went days without sleep and did nothing but search and search.”

She shifts in the bed and grimaces with the effort of movement. The hell my brother put her through...the things he did to her body.... Choking anger sweeps through me, and I clench my fists.

“I know,” she says, her eyes hollow and tired. “I never doubted it. If I hadn't known that, I think I would have gone insane.”

“He'll never touch you again,” I vow. “Nobody will. I'll keep you safe.”

Her eyes narrow. “Let's not get ahead of ourselves.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll keep myself safe, thanks. I’m not leaving here with you.”

“Oh no?” That’s what she thinks.

She fixes her gaze on me, with the strength and ferocity of a lioness. “Listen. You saved me, and Astrid and the girls. I will always be grateful for that. But you also held me prisoner for five months, and you tortured me and nearly broke me. You hung me over a damn electric plate, Joshua. You locked me up in the dark for weeks. If your brother hadn’t kidnapped me, you would never have let me go.” Her dark eyes burn holes into my soul. “I would have been your caged little sex toy for the rest of my life.”

“You were much more than that to me.” She is everything to me. She is the first woman to challenge me, to enchant me, to capture my heart. Before I met her, I didn’t even know I had a heart.

She just looks at me with rebuke and hurt.

“I understand why you’re angry at me,” I say. But I can’t quite bring myself to say I’m sorry. Am I sorry I took her, possessed her, forced her to crave my touch? Am I sorry for all those nights she screamed my name when she came? I’d be lying if I said yes.

“If you really acknowledged everything that you’ve done to me, you’d understand why I won’t leave here with you.” Her chest moves up and down as her breath speeds up.

She looks so pale, so tired.

“Don’t upset yourself,” I say. “Are they taking good care of you? Do you need anything?”

She shakes her head. “Just time to heal.”

I reach out again and take her hand in mine. She looks down at our entwined hands. “It’s okay that you’re touching me,” she says, almost as if she’s speaking to herself. Then she looks up at me. “I thought that after what he did to me, I wouldn’t ever want a man to touch me again, but...I don’t mind you holding my hand.” We sit there in silence for a few seconds, then she slowly slides her hand out of mine.

I lean in and brush my lips against her neck, and I hear the hitch of her breath.

“Stop,” she whispers. I straighten up.

“You liked it,” I point out mildly.

“Yes. That’s why you need to stop. Because I’m not going to fall into your trap again.” Then her lips twitch up in a smile. “It felt good. I’m glad to know that I can let a man touch me again and not want to scream or run. I can still feel pleasure. He didn’t ruin that for me. But it stops now. I’m not going to get used to being with you.”

“You can let *me* touch you,” I clarify. It’s an important distinction. I feel a wave of relief sweep over me. She loved sex. Loved having me touch her and dominate her. I’m grateful that she can still enjoy my hands and mouth on her. And I can’t wait to be with her again, to kiss her sweet flesh, to wash away all memory of him.

She gives me a wry look. “You think I’m eager to run out and start dating again? I had no idea you were the jealous type.”

Is she kidding? I’d fucking eviscerate a man if he looked at her too long. But we don’t need to talk about that now.

“When you check out of the hospital, I’ll be waiting to pick you up. I’ve got the resources to protect you in case my

brother escapes again.” That’s a scare tactic, but I’ve never believed in playing fair.

And it works. I see the flicker of fear in her eyes. “He’s under guard. He won’t escape.” She says it a little too forcefully.

“We can’t be sure of that, Tamara. He escaped from an extremely secure psychiatric institute. Seduced one of the nurses, it turns out. As long as he’s alive, we can never relax. If I get the opportunity, I’ll kill him.”

She stares at me, eyes widening. “He’s your twin brother, Joshua. Yes, he’s an evil bastard, and he should be locked up forever. But for you to kill him...you don’t know what it will do to you. It will be like killing a piece of yourself.”

It would. But it doesn’t matter. “I have to. You’ll never be safe until he’s dead.”

“What do you care?” There’s a sassy, sullen bite to her tone. It makes my dick twitch. God, I wish we were together back in my house in upstate Maine. I’d spank her bare ass until it was red and hot underneath my hand, then I’d bend her over and make her come so hard she cried.

“I care very much. And you care about me too, despite everything.”

“I don’t care about you. I don’t love you.” Tears start pouring from her eyes, a sudden fountain of grief. I lean forward and gather her in my arms, and the feeling of her warm, fragile body in mine almost undoes me. I hug her very gently to avoid her hurting her bruised flesh, her shattered arm. “I don’t. I don’t!”

Her hospital gown slides off her shoulder, and I bend down and kiss her exposed flesh. She whimpers—that soft, helpless

little sound she used to make for me. And blood rushes to my cock, stiffening it with desire.

“I’m not arguing with you, baby. Even though you’re lying to me.” I nip her shoulder sharply, and she whimpers again, louder. “You know I punish you for lying.” I lick the spot that I just nibbled. “But then I make you feel so good afterward. Just the way you like it. Pleasure mixed up with pain.”

“Ah,” she gasps, her breath coming out in little pants of arousal. “Don’t do that to me. Please don’t.”

In response, I stroke her arm, my fingers trailing featherlight over her skin. “I missed you every second of every day, Tamara. I was out of my fucking mind without you.”

She slumps into my arms, all the fight gone out of her. Her head rests on my shoulder, and she sobs until my shirt is damp. “Oh God, what have you done to me? I can’t stop thinking about you. I hate it. I never used to dream, and now I dream of you. I can’t even escape you in my sleep. You’ve invaded my mind, and I can’t get rid of you.”

A warm glow spreads through me. I knew it, but hearing her say the words is more delicious than the sweetest dessert.

“You’ll come home with me. We’ll make this work.”

She sits up again and moves away from me, but I keep my arms wrapped around her, my fingers locked tight behind her back. My little caged bird.

“After what you did to me? No.” Her voice is hoarse.

“I won’t accept that, I’m afraid,” I say sternly, in my “I mean business” tone. “I will never put you in a cell again. I will never try to make you into Toy again, but you are mine.” I’m growing impatient.

I own her.

She shouldn't argue with me about that. She won't win. Doesn't she know that by now?

"No, I'm not! I'm going to leave this hospital by myself, and I'm going to live my own life." Her voice trembles. She places her hand against my chest and pushes hard, so I release her and move back a little. But then I reach out and stroke her cheek, trailing my fingers over her lips. She draws in a shaky breath, and I force my finger into her mouth. She closes her eyes, fresh crystalline tears glittering on her cheeks, but she sucks my finger.

This is our dance. She needs it as much as I do. She needs me to dominate her, to claim her. She needs to feel the force of my passion. It brings her to life in ways she's never felt before. I know that, because we two are one, and I can read her like a book that's been written just for me.

She starts to pull away from me. I grab her by the throat and hold her still, squeezing just a little. That makes her eyes fly open, and she glares at me.

"I'll scream."

"No you won't. Because then they'd arrest me, and you can't bear for that to happen." I look down at her, my eyes gentle. "And even jail wouldn't stop me. I'd make my way back to you, always. We'll be together again, and I'll punish you for refusing me. But afterward, I'll make you come so hard you cry and beg for more."

"I hate you so much." She wipes at her wet cheeks with the back of her hand, her face twisted in frustration.

And I smile.

I could just sit there in the hospital room, and she'd never call for security. I could stay with her until she was ready to check out.

But it's better if I don't.

I've got her right where I want her. She needs me as much as I need her. But I'm a lot stronger. Even with all these dark feelings bubbling up inside me, clawing at my self-control, screaming through my nightmares, I still maintain an iron control over my feelings and behavior. But she doesn't have that same self-control. Every second she's without me, she'll be craving me.

This will work to my advantage. She'll be aching and lonely without me. And when the time is right, I'll claim what's mine again, and by then, one simple caress will make her melt for me.

"What you hate is how much you want me. I think you need to miss me for a while. Goodbye, Tamara. I'll see you soon." I press a gentle kiss to her mouth, and her lips part for me. She moans into my mouth. I kiss her hard, swirling my tongue around hers, tasting her sweetness, and I am the one to break off the kiss, not her.

She looks up at me, eyes glazed with desire. "*Go away.*"

I nod. "For now. I'll transfer money to your bank account as soon as I leave."

"I'll never take a cent from you!" She spits the words out defiantly.

"You're homeless." There's a snap of impatience to my voice. I'm keeping a mental tally of her attempts to defy me, and refusing my money goes on the list. When she's ready, when she can handle it, I'll make her pay for every act of

disobedience, in delightfully painful ways. “You don’t have a job. You’ve got seven hundred and fifty dollars in your checking account.”

She doesn’t bother asking me how I know that.

“I’ll figure something out. I always have.”

I stand up. “If you need anything—”

“Freedom, Joshua. How about that? The right to go where I want and do what I want, whenever the hell I want. That’s worth more than millions of dollars.” She looks away and is crying again, and her shoulders are shaking. She looks small and tired. “Please leave, Joshua.” Her voice is trembling. “Please.”

It hurts me to see her like this, it’s a physical ache inside me. All I want to do is gather her into my arms again, lend her my strength, let her know that she is safe and loved. But I don’t. It’s not the right time for it, so I leave.

I walk away from my love, my heart, my sanity. But I do it with a smile on my face, because I know it won’t be long before she’s chained to my bed and screaming my name.



## CHAPTER TEN

*Five days later...*

This can't be right.

As I climb out of the taxi, I stare at the huge brick house looming in front of me.

“Are you sure that this is the right address?” I ask the Uber driver as he sets down my two suitcases next to me. A chill wind makes me shiver, and I hug my second-hand wool coat around me and wish I had a hat.

“327 Fairview Drive?” He points at the numbers to the side of the big stained-glass door. Before I can argue, he gets in the driver's seat and peels away, leaving me standing there hugging my coat around me in the chill, late October afternoon.

This can't possibly be where Sarah lives.

My high school counselor had a little one-bedroom apartment in downtown Flat Plains, Nebraska, back when I went to school here. This house has got to be one of the largest houses, not just in the gated subdivision, but in the entire town. Flat Plains has one nice neighborhood, and this is it. And this house is easily several thousand square feet.

But when the door opens, it's Sarah standing there between the two-story high fluted white columns, waving wildly, with a huge smile on her face.

I grab my suitcases and hurry toward her, wincing only a little. The bruises are fading, and the cuts and burns are healing. Inside, I'm shaky and frightened and lonely. I miss Joshua fiercely, and I hate myself for it.

"Tamara!" Sarah hurries toward me and grabs the suitcases from me. They're stuffed with all the clothing I had in my apartment before Joshua kidnapped me. I woke up in my hospital room a few days ago and they were just sitting there. The nurse had no idea how someone had snuck them in my room.

"Let's get inside before we freeze into corpsicles." She grins as she says it. Our breaths make puffs of white vapor as I follow her up the steps.

"This house is amazing," I tell her. "Gorgeous. Did you win the lottery or something?" I pause in the foyer, closing the door behind me. She throws back her head and laughs. "Almost! You'll never believe what happened." She's walking ahead of me, leading me through the big octagonal foyer and into a lovely living room with views onto a snow-capped mountain.

"I'm dying of suspense."

She shakes her head, a smile beaming from her round, freckled face. "Two months ago, I got an anonymous gift of *five million dollars*, from someone who said they were a former student of mine. They said that I saved their life."

Shock ripples through me.

*Joshua.*

It could only be him.

He did that while he was holding me prisoner, and he never even told me. I told him about Sarah, about what she did for me, about how I was sinking into depression and my grades were slipping until she made me believe in myself. Did he send her the money as a thank you?

If so, I don't know Joshua as well as I thought I did. Then again, I don't think he knows himself as well as he thinks he does.

"What?" She laughs at my expression of shock. "What's that look? It's a good thing."

I force a smile. "I'm just surprised. And tired, so please forgive my resting bitch face. That's great! I'm really happy for you!" And I am. Nobody deserves it more.

She beams with happiness, her hazel eyes alight. "I'm doing some amazing things with it. I've created a charitable foundation. We have a daycare program for teenage mothers so they can stay in school, and scholarships for college or tech school for low-income students."

I smile at her, blinking my watering eyes. After being force-fed various flavors of evil for half a year now, seeing there's still good in the world makes me want to cry. "Of course you did," I say.

"Enough about me. Come on, come on, let's get you settled in." She leads me to a huge bedroom, with a cherrywood sleigh bed topped with a white comforter. There's a matching cherrywood desk, and a bookshelf filled with paperbacks. Colorful abstract paintings adorn the walls. "You can stay here as long as you want to. Months. Years. Until you

get sick of me.” She winks at me as she sets down the suitcases.

Then she puts her hands on my shoulders. “How are you holding up?”

I meet her gaze and manage a rueful smile. “Surprisingly well. I mean, I can even pass for sane most of the time.”

She knows what was reported on TV, and what little I’ve told her. I was one of the victims of the mysterious twin brother of the equally mysterious billionaire Joshua Smith. I was kidnapped and tortured for a week, and spent ten days in the hospital recuperating.

I’ve refused to talk to the press and I didn’t tell the police much. When they asked me why I disappeared for six months and where I was staying, all I would say is that I had a breakdown and realized that I couldn’t handle college. When the police asked me, again and again, where I’d been staying, who I’d been staying with...I refused to tell them.

The truth sounded absolutely mad.

I was the prisoner of an incredibly sexy serial killer who broke my mind to the point where I don’t know who I am or what I want any more.

And more than that...it would have sent Joshua to prison, and I couldn’t bear to do that.

“You know you can talk to me any time.” There’s worry in her kind eyes as she drops her hands and shoves them in her pockets.

“I know. Right now, I’d just love to eat dinner and pretend everything’s normal.”

“Fake normal! I can do that,” she says cheerfully. “And I’ll have dinner ready in an hour. You settle in and get comfortable.”

I do my best, but over the next week, I find myself moving in a daze. I wake up and eat. My body heals a little more every day. I put some weight back on. I watch TV and read books and I spend some time on Sarah’s treadmill every day, trying to build my strength back up.

Sarah insists on buying me a cell phone. I use it to call Astrid a few times. She’s got her whole family back together, and they’re staying at a hotel. They can’t stand to be in their house anymore.

Her daughters want to talk to me too, to make sure I’m okay. They’re such good people. I despise Micah for what he put them through.

Like me, Astrid sounds muted when she talks. Stunned. We’re slowly feeling our way through a world that’s forever changed for us.

Sarah is at work during the day, managing her various charities. Time drags on, and I spend days and days just idly surfing the internet and watching TV, trying to figure out what to do with myself.

My body is healing. My mind is shattered, and I am trying to remember how to live in a world without bars.

And without Joshua.

Every day, I expect him to call me on my cell phone. Or Sarah’s home phone. I’m angry he doesn’t, even though that’s irrational. I told him to leave me alone, and he is.

I accept that I’m going to miss him for a long, long time. He was my entire life for five long months. My time with him

was frequently terrible, but it was also intense and sometimes it was ecstatic and amazing. It's even harder since I'm not working or in school. I've got nothing to think about but him.

No. I'm lying to myself. I'd think about him all day even if I were in school.

It doesn't matter. I could call him any time, but every day, I dredge up my willpower and choose not to contact my torturer.

Sarah insists on taking me shopping. She buys me new clothes and takes me to a hair salon and a nail salon. I wear clothing that covers me from the neck down so I can conceal the scars on my chest. I can't stand to leave the house without carrying a Taser and pepper spray.

I join a yoga studio and go with Sarah, and we do meditation, which helps a little when I'm attacked by flashbacks of Micah's abuse.

My nipple and clit piercings closed up very quickly. They were removed in the hospital. One less reminder of my ordeal.

At Sarah's suggestion, I put bandages over the scars where Micah cut and branded his initials into me and go to a massage therapist a few times a week – a woman – to force myself to get past my instinctive tendency to flinch when anybody touches me. *Anybody but Joshua*. Why did his touch in the hospital room arouse me so much? He's the one I should be running from, and yet he's the only person I can imagine touching me intimately ever again.

In my room, I practice my self-defense moves. I have Sarah order me a punching bag, and I beat the hell out of it. I do sit-ups and push-ups and planks and squats until my muscles scream.

*I won't be a victim again.*

When I climb in the shower every morning, I feel cold and lonely. I close my eyes and turn up the water until it's so hot that it's almost scalding, and I try to summon up the feeling of Joshua's hands on my warm, wet flesh. I remember the slow, sensual torture of his tongue lapping between my legs, dragging me to the edge of ecstasy and making me scream and beg for release. I dream of the explosive orgasms that racked my body again and again when he finally let me come.

I touch myself, but it's not the same.

After a few days, I get a message from Mark, the homeless alcoholic I used to give sandwiches to. After Joshua kidnapped me, Mark kept bugging the police department about my disappearance.

He managed to track me down here in Nebraska, and he wants me to know that things are better for him now. He's finished with rehab. An anonymous sponsor is paying for an apartment for him in New York City, and he has been offered a job at a large non-profit doing computer security.

I also talk to Jessica Brown, the director of the battered women's shelter where I volunteered. She wants to know I'm all right. She tells me that they miss me there, and she's so grateful I was found safe.

And while she's catching me up on the latest news at the shelter, she mentions they received an anonymous two-million-dollar donation a few weeks ago.

This is all Joshua.

I'm happy people are benefitting from his generosity, but I'm also skeptical about his motives.



Does he think that charitable donations will erase what he did to me? Does he believe it will make up for chaining me in a dark, lonely cellar for weeks until I went mad with sorrow? Does he think it will make up for breaking my heart and mind by telling me nobody was looking for me, when he knew how my mother's abandonment had haunted me? Does he believe it's going to buy his way back into my favor after he heaped abuse and scorn on the broken Toy that he made me into, for months, until I was a lost, hurting creature with no will to live?

Nothing will make up for it.

But nothing will let me banish him from my mind, either. He's branded himself onto my soul. His cruelty made those rare moments of tenderness so much sweeter. When he wasn't destroying me, he was fighting for me—side by side with me, battling the demons of my past.

I keep dreaming about him at night. In my dreams, I surrender to my desire. I crawl to him, I beg him to fuck me, and he makes me cry before he'll touch me.

He's woken up something dark and needy in me.

During the day, I find myself clutching the new cell phone that Sarah bought for me, fingers playing across the blank screen. I'm typing out the number for Smith Acquisitions. I'd never actually call, but my fingers don't seem to know that.

I want to call him up at work. I actually want to call up the man who made me dance on an electrified plate with clamps hanging from my burning, tortured nipples.

There's a treacherous little voice in the back of my head, arguing for him like a lawyer. Pointing out how different he was once I managed to claw my way back from the edge of madness, once I started fighting for myself. Reminding me of

those days when we'd sit there at the dining room table and he'd treat me like an equal, like a lover, talking to me about his work and his childhood and the music he liked.

I'm fighting the little voice. I'm fighting my need, my hunger, my loneliness.

I can only pray that the intensity of my longing will fade over time, because it's miring me in the muck of my past, and I can't find the motivation to do anything other than exist right now.

Sarah's kind and calm and supportive. She doesn't push me. She doesn't ask me what my plans are. She just lets me be me.

Weeks drag by, and my bruises are gone, but I still feel as if I'm moving through a fog.

I start forcing myself to go out to coffee shops during the day, so I can get past the fear that curdles in my belly at random moments. I always sit at a table in a corner by myself, though, with headphones in my ears so that nobody will try to talk to me. I'm not playing any music, because I need to be alert and aware at all times in case anybody tries to sneak up on me.

I should start thinking about college again, should try for another scholarship or at least financial aid, but when I think about it, my heart starts pounding in my chest. I'm nowhere near ready. Will I ever be? I've got to find a job, I've got to do something, but every time I start thinking about it, my throat closes and I get dizzy.

Sarah goes out with a group of friends to a downtown restaurant called Mark & Molly's once a week, and she's given me an open invitation to join her.

At first I say no. Socializing is hard for me these days, and I haven't gone out after dark since the day I left the hospital. But one day, after the grinding loneliness has brought me to tears, after the dozenth time I've tapped out the phone number for Smith Acquisitions on the back of my cell phone, I say yes.

I put on a high-collared shirt to hide my scars, and slacks, and clunky combat boots. I pull my hair back into a ponytail and I don't wear makeup or jewelry. I want to be around people, but I want to be invisible. It's the first time I've actually been out anywhere since I escaped from captivity.

I force myself to stay calm as we take a big table for the six of us and look over our menus. I order in a clear voice that doesn't shake at all.

A half hour drifts by, and we're working our way through dinner and deciding on dessert, and I'm starting to relax. But suddenly I feel a strange prickle of danger.

I scan the room, looking for Joshua or Micah. I don't see either of them.

My gaze settles on a man with his back to me. He's part of a group of people who just came in, half a dozen men and women. He's tall, broad-shouldered, has close-cropped dark blond hair in a military cut. He's wearing a gray suit that doesn't seem to fit him quite right. He rolls his shoulders and shifts where he stands, as if he's not used to wearing a suit. But he walked through that door with his arm around the waist of a pretty blonde, and he's chatting with her.

That's normal, right? As far as I can tell, he's not scanning the room looking for me. He seems entirely focused on his date.

Am I just being paranoid?

I push my plate away and take a sip of my margarita. Sarah glances over at a guy who's sitting by the bar and nudges me with her elbow. "He's checking you out," she says. "I actually know him. His name is Cassius Fuller. Just graduated. He's a dentist. Late twenties, older than you, but a nice guy."

Yes, that would be the problem. Joshua has ruined me for nice guys. He's ruined me in general.

I flick a glance at Cassius. He's blandly handsome, with wavy brown hair parted on the side, wearing a blue sweater over a blue Oxford shirt, jeans, and brown boots.

"I'm not up for it right now," I say, and I struggle to push down a swell of panic. "I appreciate the thought."

Sarah nods cheerfully, not pushing me at all. She and her friends are laughing, checking out guys at the bar, making comments about them.

*I'll never be normal again. I'll never be able to date, never be able to just go out to a fucking restaurant and enjoy myself. Damn Joshua, damn Micah, damn everyone!*

I need to be alone. There isn't enough air in the room. Everything is too loud.

I excuse myself to go to the bathroom. When I come out, Cassius, Mr. Nice Guy, is standing at the end of the hallway that leads back to the restaurant.

"Hey," he says. "I saw you checking me out."

"Uhhh..."

He flashes me a charming grin. "Of course, I only saw that because I was checking *you* out."

"That's flattering. Unfortunately, I'm not really up for anything right now. I just had a really bad break-up." *You have*

*no idea.*

I see the disappointment in his eyes. “Of course,” he says, and he turns and leaves. He goes to the bar and pays his bill, and heads for the door. I stand there in the hallway, watching him. I feel a mild sting of guilt because he looks genuinely let down, but I know I’m doing him a favor. I am not the girl for a nice guy.

As my gaze sweeps the room, I see the man with the suit glance after him and peel away from the blonde woman, heading out the door after him. The blonde woman doesn’t blink; she spins away smoothly and starts talking to one of the other guys in their little group. The group subtly shifts, closing in as if the big guy in the suit was never there.

Damn it. I was right.

I push my way through the crowd and rush out the front door to the parking lot.

I’m looking around frantically when I see them. The big blond guy is standing over Cassius, who is curled up on the ground. He’s kicking him in the stomach.

My Taser is in my hand so fast I barely remember grabbing it. As the blond guy turns to face me, I Taser him before he can do anything to me. He falls to the ground with a grunt of pain.

When he’s down, I kick him in the face so hard I break his nose. I kick him again with the full force of my combat boot, and I hear his jaw crunch.

My hands are shaking with fury as I call 9-1-1 from my cell phone and tell them a man’s been attacked in the parking lot. I tell them that the attacker is disabled now, and I make sure that they know which one of the two was the assailant.

The guy in the gray suit tries to get up. I Tase him again.

God, poor Cassius! He didn't do a damn thing wrong except try to say hi to me in a bar. Fury chokes me, and I resist the urge to kick the bastard again.

Instead, I lean down and spit in his face, "Tell Joshua to stay the fuck away from me. Tell him if he ever sends anyone to harass me again, I'll go to the police and tell them everything about him, and he'll go to prison for the rest of his life."

I hover in the shadows, and I don't leave until I see a cop car is pulling into the parking lot. Cassius is just staggering to his feet as they arrive, and the gray-suited guy is crawling away. I watch the cops close in on him. Then I hurry back into the restaurant.

My stomach is tying itself in knots as I go over and tell Sarah I'm not feeling too well and I'm going home early. She jumps up and wants to come with me, seeing the look on my face, but I won't ruin her evening just because I'm *fucking crazy* and being stalked by my serial killer ex-lover. I insist she stay, and I tell her over and over again that I had a great time, my stomach is just acting up.

I take a cab back to her house, and I don't start crying until I storm through the front door. When will I ever be free of him?

He's got men following me around, ready to beat the ass of any innocent man who even talks to me. I have no hope at all of making my own way in life as long as he knows where I am.

I've got to disappear. Go off the grid.

I'm leaving tomorrow.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

TAMARA

I toss and turn all night, and when dawn breaks, I give up on sleep.

I pull on an ankle-length black-and-gray plaid wool skirt, thick black tights, and a black turtleneck sweater, with chunky flat boots. My boots have steel toes; I'm also wearing a ring that could put a man's eye out, and I have my pepper spray and Taser close at hand. I cover myself in weapons these days.

Then I pack. It doesn't take long. With shaking hands, I scribble a note for Sarah. I tell her how grateful I am for everything she's done for me and promise that I will be in touch soon. I tell her that I just need some time alone.

I call a taxi to take me to the bus station, then I sneak out so I won't have to go through the pain of saying goodbye, to say nothing of answering any awkward questions.

How could I explain my life to her?

"My former lover-slash-kidnapper sent a squad to spy on me and beat up any man who even talks to me, so I don't feel comfortable staying here anymore." She'd freak out. She'd insist I call the police.

I walk to the front of the gated subdivision, and I get there just as a taxi is pulling up. The guard opens the gate for me.



“Laura Jones?” The taxi driver calls out the fake name I gave him. Yes, I’m paranoid these days. I think that’s a normal reaction after what I’ve been through.

“Yes, that’s right.” With a regretful glance behind me, I climb in.

Everything is fine until, a few miles down the road, he makes a turn that’s so sudden it throws me against the door. At first I think he’s dodging a pothole, but then I see he’s pulling into a parking lot. “Joshua wants a word,” he informs me.

*Fucking Joshua.*

A small nuclear explosion of rage detonates inside me. Yes, I miss Joshua. Yes, I want to see him, but not by being kidnapped. Again.

I grab my pepper spray.

The taxi door opens, and Joshua is standing there, looming over me, blotting out the sun. That handsome face is staring down at me, those cool blue eyes capturing my gaze. My treacherous heart starts thudding in my chest, and for just a moment, I want to leap into his arms and pull him to me, before I remember that he’s about to drag me off somewhere against my will and steal all my choices. With the help of the fucking cab driver.

Furious, I stick my pepper spray into the front seat and press the button before I lunge out of the car. My eyes sting and water a little bit, but the taxi driver got the full blast. He lets out a shrill scream, throwing open his door and staggering out onto the pavement.

Joshua grabs my arm tightly as he marches me over to a limo that’s idling a few feet away. I swing the pepper spray toward him, and he snatches it from my hand.

“If you could stop injuring my employees, that would be nice,” he says coolly, maneuvering me into the back seat of the limo with more force than is strictly necessary. He reaches over and pulls the door shut, and the lock clicks into place.

Is he kidding me?

“If you could stop stalking me and kidnapping me, I wouldn’t have to!” I yell at him. “What the hell was that back at the restaurant, by the way?”

“You were being harassed. My employee took appropriate measures.” A big man in a dark suit is taking my suitcases from the trunk of the cab and carrying them toward the limo.

“Harassed?” I say angrily. “Bullshit! A man came up and tried to flirt with me because he saw me sitting with a bunch of women and assumed I was single, and I politely declined because I told him I had just gotten out of a *really bad relationship*, and he immediately backed off. And your employee beat the hell out of him. He had no right.”

“He had every right!” Joshua’s face twists into something truly frightening, and his anger burns the air like heat from a radiator. “If I’d been there, I would have killed him!”

Joshua’s employee puts my suitcases in the front seat, and climbs in. The limo starts moving, pulling out of the parking lot. I just stare at him, blank-faced, and he takes several deep breaths before he finally calms down.

He looks a little different. A hint of something haunted in his eyes, a faint air of weariness. He turns away from me, his brows drawing together.

“I’ve never been jealous before. It’s an unpleasant feeling. Messy, ineffective.” He’s staring out the window as he says that, and it’s more like he’s speaking to himself than me.

Chastising himself for his weakness. He turns to face me again. “I’m not lying when I say that if you so much as flirted with another man, I’d have to kill him. I couldn’t stop myself. So be warned.”

I shake my head. “No. Just no. I can’t live like this, Joshua. You need to let me out of this car, now. You need to let me live my life.” I grab at the door handle, but of course it’s locked.

“I can’t. It’s not safe. My brother escaped from the prison hospital yesterday evening. Seduced a doctor this time. You’d think they’d learn not to let any women near him. Her body was found by the side of the road an hour ago.”

A wave of ice crashes over me. Horrible images crowd into my brain. Phantom agony stabs up my rectum, and I hear the sounds of Micah’s grunts in my ear as he violated me there. I scrabble for my purse and pull out my phone. He puts his hand over mine.

“Who were you planning on calling?”

“Astrid. Her children.”

“They already know.”

“Are they safe?”

“Yes. Sweet little Tamara, always worrying and putting other people’s needs before her own.” There’s a hint of gentle mockery in his voice.

I drop the phone back into my purse and look away from him, struggling to pull air into my lungs. Micah’s free... He’s looking for me. I’m sure of it. I wouldn’t survive another round with him. I wouldn’t survive another *hour* with him.

“I was going to go off the grid anyway.” Is my voice trembling? I clear my throat. “I’ll ditch my phone, work under

the table. I'll...stay hidden. I'll be careful."

"Yeah, you're doing a great job so far," he scoffs. "If I could trick you into getting into a fake cab, so could my brother. That money he stole from me? I haven't been able to track it down. He has a hundred million dollars of mine. That kind of money means he can find just about anyone, anywhere, given enough time."

I cross my arms over my chest like a sullen kindergartener. "So, what? You plan to lock me away forever to save me?"

He shakes his head, and now there's a spark of humor in his eyes. "I won't have to. You're going to come around. You're going to decide to stay with me on your own. And in the meantime, we're going to work on those self-defense skills."

"I kicked your thug's ass back at the restaurant," I remind him with a smirk.

He smiles coldly. "That's because I told him that if he hurt you in any way, I'd peel the skin from his body and make him into a leather jacket."

Oh. I feel a little deflated. I thought I was seriously badass back there. Guess not.

As if he can read my mind, he pats my knee. "You still did pretty well. You were prepared, you had a weapon, and your kick has some real power to it. But it wouldn't have been enough to stop my brother."

The feeling of his hand on my leg weakens me, so I try to push it away. "I'm still choosing freedom over safety. And it's my choice, not yours. Pull over."

His hand tightens on my knee, and he looks at me with challenge in his eyes.

*I still own your body, and I'll touch it where and how I want to, for as long as I want to.*

That's the message he's telegraphing with his eyes. Shamefully, I'm wet for him in an instant. I squirm uncomfortably and hug myself to hide the fact that my nipples are swollen little nubs rubbing against my shirt.

Too late. A triumphant smile curves those sensual lips as his gaze wanders over my breasts. "You're going to be begging for it by the end of the day."

"Pass, thanks."

"I can't decide what part of you I'm going to lick first."

My face flames red. He settles back in his seat, and I squirm. I'm uncomfortably aroused, and from the smile on his face, he knows it.

A little while later, we arrive at a private airport.

He hustles me on to a plane that could easily seat twenty, and one of his men loads my suitcases into a baggage compartment. Then the man climbs off the plane. The door to the pilot's cabin is locked.

*I'm alone with Joshua.*

Arousal burns the fight right out of me. I struggle to find my anger, my hatred. I try to call up images of being chained up in that dark cell, but instead I think of our baths every morning, Joshua's tongue dancing on my clit.

We settle into our seats. He waits until we're airborne before he says to me, "I'm going to need your cell phone. You can give it to me voluntarily or not." I see the gleam in his eyes. "You know what will happen if you say no."

He's hoping I'll fight him on this.

I should just hand it to him. I know what will happen to me if I don't.

But I want that.

I've been craving it ever since I was taken from him.

I shoot out of my seat, my purse firmly clutched in my hand. It's ridiculous. We're on a freaking plane; where would I go? I head toward the restrooms in the back.

He chases after me and catches me halfway down the aisle. My purse falls to the ground, and I give a strangled cry. He captures my wrists in one hand and easily ties them together with his necktie. Then he fishes my cell phone out of my pocket and drops it on the floor and stomps on it several times, shattering it.

"You bastard! Sarah gave me that!" I howl.

"Aw, you poor baby. Are you going to cry now?"

*Why do his cruel words turn me on so fucking much?*

There's a small love seat at the back of the plane. He bends my arms painfully and steers me down the aisle, then sits down, pulling me across his lap at the same time.

"Miss me, baby?" With one hand, he holds my arm, trapping me there. He pushes my skirt up, leaving my tights on, and his other hand descends on my ass in a stinging slap. The jolt of ecstasy that shoots through me makes me scream.

"No," I choke out, fighting for my last little scrap of self-respect.

"Liar." His hand descends in a series of very hard smacks. They're painful and shockingly erotic at the same time. I thrash and scream, twisting on his lap, but even as my butt

grows hot and painfully sore, the juices of my arousal soak my panties.

“Let’s try that again,” he taunts me. “Did you miss me?”

“Yes,” I sob shamefully. Tears drip onto the love seat, and I writhe on his lap, almost sliding off. He grabs me by the hip and hauls me back on. As I squirm, he seizes the waistband of my tights and does something with his hand, and I hear the ripping of cloth. Cool air wafts across my rear, and his fingers gently graze the curve of my cheek, tracing it from top to bottom.

I tense. Micah branded his initials onto my right cheek, and the scar is still there. Joshua, as ever, is attuned to what I’m feeling, and he knows just what to say.

“I own every inch of your perfect skin.” His voice is so strong and commanding, he’s like a warlock casting a spell, leaving me no choice but to believe. “I always have, and I always will.”

“I have scars,” I moan.

“No. You have badges of survival.”

*How incredible of him.* He took what was shameful and transformed it into a symbol of strength.

And with that, I feel the tension flowing from my body. He strokes me again. My freshly spanked skin is exquisitely sensitive, and I moan aloud at his touch. “Oh. Oh.”

“Are you wet for me?”

I buck against his grip. I don’t want to admit it.

“Shall I just see for myself then?”

With one hand on my wrists, he pushes down and holds me still as he slides a finger inside me, through the hole he made in my tights. “You’re soaking,” he says smugly, and begins to stroke me, his finger curving against the sensitive inner wall.

“Ahh!” I cry.

My legs part of their own accord and I feel the fabric rip in more places.

“You want me?”

“Yes!” I sob. “Damn it! You know I do! You always know.”

“Yes, I do. If you want me, tell me. I need to hear it. What do you want me to do to you?”

I press my face into the love seat and mumble the shameful words. “I want you to fuck me.”

I’m afraid he’ll make me say it again, louder, but apparently he’s equally hot for me. In one swift motion, he sets me down on the floor.

“Face in the carpet, ass in the air,” he barks, and I hurry to obey. As I spread my legs apart, the tights rip all the way, down the back and up the crotch, and I’m completely exposed.

For a brief moment, my vulnerable position sends a shaft of fear through my heart. Micah’s leering face swims in front of me, but I use the creative visualization techniques they taught me at the yoga studio. I toss a grenade at him, and he explodes, shattering, flying into a million pieces, and fades from my mind.

I’m back in the plane with Joshua, and I’m hungry for the feel of his thick, hard cock.



I hear the crinkle of a condom wrapper and clench my fists impatiently. Then he's back, kneeling behind me. He strokes between my legs, sliding two fingers in and pumping them inside me.

Weeks and weeks of pent-up desire burn painfully inside me. The wanting is agony.

"Please," I grit between my teeth. "Please, Joshua! I want you inside me, please, now!"

"Yes. I know." His rich, warm voice drips like chocolate. "But I decide when. Not you." He presses against my swollen clit with the pad of his thumb, wrenching a cry from me.

"Bastard!" I pant with desire and open my legs even wider as he rubs back and forth.

"I missed this, Tamara. I love how much you want me. I love hurting you. I love making you beg for it. Cry for it. I'm a sick motherfucker, aren't I?" He presses my clit harder and moves faster, and I'm close, so close. Hot pleasure swells inside me.

"Yes, yes, yes...no!" I scream with rage as he suddenly pulls his hand away.

Then the fat head of his cock presses against my entrance. I wriggle like a cat in heat, pushing back. He forces his way in slowly, drawing it out. I feel as if eons are passing as he slides in bit by bit until he's plunged in to the hilt. I groan with pleasure. I love how his thick cock fills me and stretches me.

Holding my hips, he rocks in and out of me. My face presses painfully into the carpet and my wrists strain against the silken neck-tie.

That tidal wave of ecstasy rises inside me again, higher and higher, hotter and hotter, and he pumps so hard that my

cheek is rubbed raw against the carpet with each thrust. The whole universe shrinks down to the heat between my legs.

“Come for me,” he snaps, his tone vicious. “Come for me *right now* or I’ll beat you until you fucking pass out.”

As if his words are magic, I finally crest and fall over, the explosion rippling through my body and sending showers of sparks behind my clenched eyelids. I cry into the carpet as wave after wave slams against me, shattering me.

“Oh, yes, yes, yes...” I moan, and I can hear his groans from high above me as the convulsing of my inner walls milks him and forces him over the edge too. His body shudders with release, and when he’s done, he lets out a long, contented sigh.

As he slowly slides out, mini tremors rock my body and I pant shamelessly, dazed with the aftermath. He unties me, and I roll onto my side, lying on the carpet, feeling limp and boneless. He lies down behind me and hugs me to him. I feel completely safe in the fortress of his arms, caged in but loved and cherished and protected. His shirt is soaked with sweat. I press back against him, drinking in his scent—perspiration and woody cologne and the musk of his arousal.

He presses his lips against my ear, and his hot breath sears my flesh. “You see, Tamara? Your body belongs to me. Your orgasms belong to me. My name is branded onto every cell on your body. Deeper than that, even. I own you on a subatomic level. How could you ever escape me? I’m part of you now.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

TAMARA

I actually doze off on the plane. I didn't sleep last night, and the orgasmic sex with Joshua is followed by a great wave of weariness.

When we land, I wake up with a start, groggily, and realize my head is resting on Joshua's shoulder. Just like a normal couple. I lie there for a few seconds and relish the feeling, the way I used to do sometimes when Joshua was holding me captive. I used to spin lies in my head, back then, pretending that I was living my dream life with the sexiest man in the world.

*I'm sitting here on a private jet with my rich, handsome boyfriend who loves me...*

"Home sweet home," Joshua says, shattering the illusion.

I straighten up and look out the window at the tarmac. "Prison sweet prison."

He looks down at me fondly and runs his thumb over my lips. "Keep it up. I haven't delivered a really good ass-beating in far too long, and clearly you're in need."

We sit there in silence while the plane taxis to a stop, then wait for the plane's door to open.

“My tights are ripped,” I say, suddenly self-conscious when the door opens.

“It’ll be our dirty little secret.” He grins at me wickedly.

I look around as I walk down the stairs. We’re on a private airstrip. It’s about thirty degrees warmer than Flat Plains; we’re not in Nebraska anymore. The trees here are lower and scrubbier looking. They’re strangely twisted and look as if they’d be thorny to the touch.

“Those are mesquite. They’re called the devil tree,” Joshua says, following my gaze.

*How appropriate.*

Near the airstrip, I see high stucco walls with a lacing of razor wire running all along the top.

I squint into the distance, across the plains, at mountains whose tops are swallowed by haze. “Where are we?”

“North Texas. Home sweet home. For now. We can decide where we want to go once my brother’s back in prison. Until then, I like it here. We can see anything that’s coming at us for a hundred miles in any direction.” Joshua walks toward a man who’s approaching us in an open-top jeep, the kind with the roll bars.

“*We* can decide, can we?” I stand stubbornly still as a man loads my suitcases onto the jeep. Joshua walks back to me and favors me with one of those smiles that hold a hint of menace.

“Yes. Unless you decide to be a stubborn, annoying pain in my ass, in which case I will whip some manners into you and decide for myself where we go.”

I ignore the little thrill that shoots through me when he says that.

“Just because we have amazing sex doesn’t mean I want to live my life as your slave.” I struggle to find the energy to glare at him. “I want the freedom to decide where I live, and what I do with my life.”

Do I, though? I was completely lost at Sarah’s house. Deciding what I wanted to do from one minute to the next drained me of all my energy.

Do I need someone telling me what to do? That can’t be right. Before Joshua kidnapped me, I lived my entire life alone, even when I was in a house full of foster kids. I was forced to be my own parent, to forge my own path, from as early as I can remember. I had dreams, and I fought for those dreams, worked long nights and went without sleep and scraped together my pennies and knew exactly who and what I’d be when my dreams come through. Until Joshua swooped in and snatched me off my clear-cut path.

Has Joshua broken me? The thought of not knowing what I want makes me break out in a cold sweat, because that must mean I don’t want anything. Has Joshua stripped away my life’s purpose?

Joshua grabs me by the arm, breaking into my reverie. His fingers stab into the sides of my elbow. I yelp in pain as he steers me toward the waiting jeep.

“If you still think that way in a few months, and if my brother is in custody again, we can talk about it again,” Joshua says calmly. “Until then, you’re just wasting your breath and my time, telling me the same thing over and over again. I don’t like having my time wasted so there will be consequences.”

I struggle to pull my arm from his grasp, and he pinches harder, forcing tears of pain from my eyes.

“You’re a control freak asshole.”

“Oh, I’m much worse than that.” He grins at me. “And that’s what you love about me.”

I won’t dignify that with an answer. Because I’m afraid it’s true.

He keeps an iron grip on my arm as we climb into the back seat. The man behind the wheel either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care. We drive toward a huge wooden gate, which slides open to let us in. As the gate slides shut behind us, he loosens his grip a little but never lets go of me—punishment for my defiance.

Behind the gate is an enormous, sprawling Spanish-style hacienda with dull tan stucco walls and brown barrel tiles on the roof. The landscaping is suitable to the desert location; more of those scrubby mesquite trees, cacti in barrel planters, big round rocks, ground cover of some kind of green succulents.

The front door is at least eight feet tall, made of steel, arch-shaped. Joshua ushers me inside, fingers poking my back.

There are red clay-tiled floors and decorations with a southwestern theme. More cacti in big round barrel planters, woven baskets on the floor, rugs with the geometric southwestern motif in tones of brown and turquoise. There are some beautiful woven tapestries on the walls, and the furniture is wood and leather. Side tables and shelves hold painted clay vases.

It looks like a designer showcase home, but it lacks any personal touches. When I think back on it, Joshua’s house in Maine was the same way. Pretty on the outside, but with an artificial, not quite real feel to it.

Like Joshua, most of the time.

The door slams shut behind us, and I jump.

A feeling of claustrophobia squeezes the breath from my body. It's the same feeling that drove me mad when I was trapped in Joshua's house before. Knowing I could never step outside those four walls made me feel as if I were wrapped in a straightjacket and stuffed into a very small closet. It didn't matter how luxurious my surroundings were; I would rather have lived in a filthy hut with a door that I could actually open.

I stare at the huge, solid door in front of me. "Am I confined to the house?" My voice rises in hysteria, despite myself. I can't live like that again. *I can't, I won't.*

"No, but we're a long, long way from anywhere. If you managed to escape, you'd die of starvation and dehydration long before you were found."

I spin around to face Joshua, burning with desperation. "So I can walk out that front door if I want to?"

He shrugs. "Go ahead."

I walk over to the door and grab the knob...and the handle turns. I pull it open. When I look out the front door, I see the dry landscape in front of me, then the high walls beyond the broad stretch of xeriscaping, but at least I have the freedom to open the damn door. I step outside and walk down the front steps to see what Joshua will do.

I stand there for a minute, with the mild breeze flowing over my face, then walk back inside, shutting the door behind me.

"Happy?" Joshua arches an eyebrow



“That’s not how I would describe my current emotional state.” I tilt my head back and stare up into his ice-blue eyes. I refuse to blink. “I told you what I want, and you’re not respecting it.”

“Let’s see. You want me to leave you out there unprotected, so my brother can very easily snatch you up and kidnap you again and slowly roast you to death on a spit over an open fire. You want to pretend you don’t crave me every second of the day. You want to throw tantrums and act like a spoiled little brat who doesn’t appreciate the things I do for you.” His voice is knife-edge sharp. “Have I just about covered it?”

My face grows hot with anger. “I’d like you to take me to my room,” I say tightly.

“When I’m ready,” he says with maddening calm.

“You may be underestimating me, Joshua. How do you know I won’t kill you in your sleep?” I snap at him.

He smiles. “I’d love it if you tried.”

Will he ever take me seriously? I turn to storm away, and he grabs me from behind, spins me to face him, and wraps his arms around me.

“I’m not done with you yet. I haven’t seen you in a long time, and we’re going to spend some time together.”

I wriggle in his arms, but he’s caged me in. He’s rock-hard, the thickness of his cock pressing into my stomach.

“Why are you fighting this?” His eyes meet mine and hold me captive.

Frustration surges through me. It’s so hard trying to have a normal conversation with a man who had all semblance of

humanity beaten out of him as a child. “How could you possibly ask me that?”

All of a sudden, he lets go of me and shoves me up against the wall. “Is there someone else you want instead?” His hands are on my shoulders, pinning me in place.

This again? Is the arrogant, supremely confident Joshua Smith suddenly insecure?

“No!” I snap at him. Frankly, that’s insulting. “Why would you even think that? Will you chill the hell out? What’s wrong with you?”

“That man who flirted with you in the restaurant.” His blue eyes are the color of a stormy sea. “Would you rather be with him?”

“We already talked about this!” I yell at him. “Today! Do you have freaking dementia? Did you forget what we talked about like four hours ago? I had no interest in him! He was a wimpy little dweeb!” He wasn’t. Cassius seemed like a great guy for any woman other than me, but if I tell Joshua that, Cassius will probably turn up in a back alley with his throat slit.

“Have you wanted *any other man* since you’ve been with me?” He’s shouting now.

Tears run down my cheeks. “No! Damn it, no! I can’t even look at another man ever since I’ve been with you! Why are you doing this to me?”

His eyes are wild, and he’s breathing hard. “Because you won’t admit that you belong to me. And I belong to you.”

I go still, staring at him in shock. He belongs to *me*? I’m not just a thing he owns?

He nods at my look of astonishment. “Oh, yes. I’m all yours. You crawled inside me and took up residence from the minute I first saw you. When other women flirt with me now, I want to slit their throats.”

Wait, *what?* Fury billows through me. “What other women flirt with you? When did this happen?”

He rolls his eyes. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me,” I spit out before I can stop myself. “You’re asking me to completely surrender to you, and you’re flirting with other women?”

He didn’t say that at all, but the idea of him being with other women after he met me...it hadn’t even occurred to me. It calls up a killing rage inside me.

“You’re with other women?” I scream, and I start raining blows on his hard chest. “You fucking asshole! Did you make them come? Did you call them *baby? Sweetheart?* Who are they?”

He cups my face in his hands. I’m sobbing now, crazed with pain at the thought of him running his hands over the bodies of all these phantom women who are prettier than me and smarter than me and sexier than me. “Why would you do that?” I shout, and rivers of tears run down my face.

He pats the side of my cheek hard, just short of a slap, then tips my head up so I’m forced to look at him. “Tamara. I love that you’re jealous, but there’s no reason for it. Did you hear what I just said? Were you listening at all? Other women have tried to flirt with *me*, not me flirting with them, and I literally, no exaggeration, wanted to stab them in the throat. I have not so much as glanced at another woman with interest since the day I took you. You are my everything.”

“Do you mean it?” I stare up at him miserably.

“You know I do.” He kisses my cheeks, drags his tongue through my tears. He smiles with grim humor. I blink hard and just stare at him, drinking in his beauty, but I can’t help but see something new in his face. A weariness that was never there before. “Damn. You’re as fucked up and crazy as I am, Tamara. Can’t you see how perfect you are for me?”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Long seconds drag by, and I take deep breaths until the strangling fury loosens its hold on me. Where did that storm of jealousy come from? It was ridiculous. He's never given me any cause for it. If anything, from the moment he took me, he's completely devoted himself to me—in unhealthy ways for sure, but there was never any question that he was wrapping his life around mine.

And yet, just thinking about women being in the same room as Joshua, looking at him, wanting him...it makes me feel murderous. I can imagine how other women react when they see him, because I know what effect he had on me when I first saw him. His cold beauty, the raw animal power that roves just beneath the surface...it pulled me toward him like the moon is drawn to Earth.

Abruptly, Joshua steps away from me.

“We’re going to go for a walk now,” he announces.

“A walk? Like...just going out and enjoying the scenery?”

“Yes.” He nods firmly and throws his arm around my shoulder. He steers me toward the front door. “We’re going to spend some time together doing normal couple things if it kills us. Normal couples take walks outside when it’s nice, don’t they?”

I can't help it; I actually start to laugh as we head through the foyer into an enormous living room with views of the mountains in the distance, and the dark cloud that was clinging to me blows clean away.

"How did this even occur to you? Did you look it up online or something?"

"Where else? I went to the website [datingforserialkillers.com](http://datingforserialkillers.com) and picked one from the list."

I laugh harder, laugh until my shoulders shake and tears leak from my eyes.

Joshua laughs too. "It wasn't *that* funny."

"Oh God. You have an actual sense of humor. Maybe someday you'll be a real boy."

"Pinocchio," he observes, as he opens a door onto another landscaped garden with stone paths, fountains, and enormous multi-branched cacti. "So well-read."

"Um, I was actually paraphrasing the Disney movie, not the book. But thank you for thinking I'm at least semi-literate."

It's midafternoon now, and the sun gilds the distant mountain-tops with a golden glow. I stand still for a moment, drinking in the beauty. There are acres and acres of landscaping surrounding the house. Flagstone pathways wind through islands of carefully sculpted mini-scapes. There are dry riverbeds with bridges over flowing streams of polished rocks that wink in the sun. Arrangements of wicker chairs with cushions in a half circle in front of an outdoor chimney. Mesquite trees with ornaments dangling from them.

"Did you design all this?" I wave my hand at the garden, then the house.

“No, I hired a decorator. Same with the house in Maine.” His fingers stroke the small of my back as we walk. “If we had a house together, what style would you pick?”

I frown in thought. “Well, it would depend on where the house was. I like a house that reflects the region it’s in, like this one. I’m also fond of the shabby chic look, myself. But if we were...hey!” I shake my head. “Nice job, planting that image in my head of us owning a house together.”

“Thank you. I pride myself in being a manipulative bastard. It’s nice to have my work acknowledged.” His eyes crinkle as he smiles.

He’s joking with me. We’re bantering. It’s so...normal. I feel a sudden flood of lightness that makes me stumble, and he catches my arm protectively.

Could it always be like this?

We stroll in silence for a little while longer. pause by a tan, three-tiered fountain bubbling with crystal-clear water. His tone is light and playful, he’s saying all the right things, but I can’t ignore the faint, haunted air that clings to him like smoke. It’s so subtle that I don’t think that anyone but me would spot it.

“Is everything all right? You seem...tired. Preoccupied. Something.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Well, Charlemagne is loose in the world again. With a hundred million dollars of mine, and a brilliant mind that is laser-focused on tearing my life apart in ways that are the most painful to me. And since you’re my only weakness, the only thing that would hurt me to lose, that laser is trained right on you. So there’s that.”



I have the feeling there's something more to it than that, but if he doesn't want to tell me, there's nothing I can do to pry it out of him.

We're coming around to the side of the house. "How long do you think we'll be here?" I ask. I realize I'm resigning myself to staying. Even if I could get past all his security, Joshua's right about the danger I'd face. Micah's got insane resources, and he'd find me eventually. The thought sends a tremor of sick terror through me.

Joshua's about to answer when we hear a scream coming from around the corner. I freeze on the spot, but Joshua keeps walking, looking perfectly calm.

It takes me a moment to realize I'm hearing shrieks of laughter. Children's laughter. I glance at Joshua, but he just gives me a mysterious smile.

We keep walking, and when we round the corner, I see Astrid and her children. All five of them. The two sons I never met but recognize from pictures Astrid emailed me, and her three daughters.

They don't seem upset. In fact, I've never seen Astrid so happy and relaxed. They're playing basketball on a big paved-over area, and Astrid is laughing, and her kids are smiling too. Beyond the tarmac, there's an enormous obstacle course with ropes dangling over high wooden walls.

There are four big, bulky men playing basketball with Astrid and her children. Joshua's security guards.

"Why are they here?" I ask him. "How do you even know them?"

He shrugs. "When I was searching for you, I...had Dr. Barnard and his two sons brought to my house. I kept them

safe there while Micah was on the loose. And after you were found, Astrid called me to thank me for helping to save you all.”

I look at him, frowning. “Brought to your house”?

Sounds like kidnapping. But from the looks of it, he did it in such a way that the boys, at least, thought he was helping them.

He ignores that. “When my brother escaped this morning, I notified them immediately and offered to let them stay with me. I told them they’d have 24/7 security. They jumped at the chance.” He frowns at Fletcher. “That boy can’t dunk to save his life.”

I wave that away. “He’s twelve, right? Give him time. What I’m asking is, why are you helping someone when it doesn’t benefit you? That seems to go against everything you’ve ever told me about the way your mind works.”

He smiles, and I’m struck by how much more human his smile is than Micah-Charlemagne-psycho’s.

“You know I only act in my own self-interest. If Charlemagne got them, it would hurt you. And that would be tedious for me. So I brought them here to make you happy. You’re welcome.”

Astrid sees me and calls out, waving energetically.

I hurry over to them, breaking into a jog, with Joshua following.

Astrid throws her arms around me and hugs me hard, and her daughters crowd around to get in on the action.

“You’re in our club!” Darlie says to me with a huge smile, bouncing on her heels with excitement. At my puzzled look,

she explains. “Mom says we’re the survivors club. And you’re part of our club.” Tears fill my eyes, and she looks alarmed. “Did I say something bad?” she asks, worried.

“No, I’m crying because I’m happy.” I hug her, then let her go so I can swipe at my cheeks with my sleeve. My heart is pounding in my chest. “I think that’s one of the nicest things anyone’s ever said to me.”

Astrid introduces me to her two sons. They look at Joshua with hero worship shining in their pale blue eyes. He doesn’t seem to notice. He’s standing back, watching us, and I feel a sudden pang of pity for him. He’s on the outside looking in. He can’t help himself. He’s built that invisible wall between himself and everyone else, even me, and I worry he’ll always be trapped on the outside, alone. That’s a terrible way to go through life.

“You guys go ahead and play,” Astrid says to Robin. “I want to talk to Tamara for a minute.”

“If you can call it playing,” Robin says, winking at her brother Fletcher. “It’s more like a massacre.”

“Hey, Garrett!” Fletcher cries out happily to one of the bodyguards on his team, a handsome man with a shaved head. He’s built like a freaking tank. He looks like bullets would bounce off him. Joshua isn’t taking any chances. “Are we going to let her get away with that?”

“Hell no.” He glances at Astrid with a grin. “Sorry, heck no. Let’s show them how it’s done.” And they go back to playing.

I’m so relieved to see them alive and happy and joking around that I almost start crying all over again.

Astrid leads me aside. Joshua watches us go but doesn't try to follow.

"You know he escaped, of course," she says when we're out of earshot of the others. And I don't need to ask her who.

"Yes," I say. "That's why Joshua came to get me." I don't tell her that my being here isn't voluntary. Why stress her out? She's been through enough.

"It's all right," she tells me. "Micah can't get to us. Joshua will keep us safe here."

"Yes. Joshua." She glances at me. "You two seem like you're...together. Like everything's fine. When the police talked to me, though, they told me that he kidnapped you and held you against your will for months." She looks at me questioningly. "But you would have had him arrested if that were true. He wouldn't be out here, he wouldn't be free. And you never said a word about anything like that to me."

She's searching my face. She needs reassurance. She needs to know she didn't just deliver herself and her children into the hands of another monster.

"You and your children are in the safest place on Earth right now," I tell her, not really answering her question. "If you hadn't come here, you'd have been at Micah's mercy. I don't know whether he'd go after you guys or not, but you'd have been looking over your shoulder every second of the day."

"He has a grudge against my soon-to-be ex-husband, and he *would* use us to hurt him," she says quietly. "And when I called William this morning to warn him that Micah was out, there was no answer. I called the police and told them, but what can they do? They won't find him in time. The children

don't know yet. They're furious at their father for getting us involved in this situation, and they don't want to talk to him, but he is still their father. And I think Micah has him. I don't even want to think about what's happening to Reggie right now. I just hope it's fast."

Reggie. First time I've heard Dr. Barnard's first name.

I shiver at the thought of what Micah would be doing to a man who held him captive in a mental institution for five and a half years. He doesn't need to keep Dr. Barnard alive anymore. I pray that he makes things quick, but I don't think he will.

"Yes," she says, nodding at the look on my face. "But I'm putting on a happy face for them."

"I won't say a word."

"That Sergeant Carter, he was very kind to us. Right after Joshua called to tell me about Micah, he called me as well. Offered to sleep in our guest bedroom and stay with us 24/7 until Micah's caught. I thanked him, but it wouldn't have been enough. Not with Micah."

"No," I agree, with a shudder. "It wouldn't. This was the right choice."

"He wanted to know where we'd be going, but I didn't tell him, because I know how he feels about Joshua. He seems to think he's some kind of serial killer." She shook her head. "He was really worried, so I'm calling him every day to check in. Joshua's got a blocked line I'll be calling him from."

"Sergeant Carter is a good man." I glance at the kids playing basketball. "Let's go join them, shall we?"

She puts her hand on my arm. "Everything is okay between you and Joshua? Are you...together?"

It's a mother's fear speaking. There are too many unanswered questions here for her comfort.

"We have a complicated relationship," I say, picking my words carefully. "Joshua and Micah had a horrendous childhood, as I'm sure you gathered from Micah's reaction every time I mentioned their father. It makes Joshua difficult to live with, but...we're seeing where things go." None of that was a lie, and it seems to satisfy her. I'll never tell her the whole truth, because it would just terrify her, and Joshua's perversity is reserved for me and me alone. She's in no danger from him.

I sit on the sidelines for a while and watch them playing, until we're summoned inside for dinner by a very muscular man in a butler's tuxedo. He's a butler like I'm a prima ballerina. He's just like the other men here—ex-military and all lethal. Joshua is taking no chances.

After dinner, Astrid and her children retreat to the guest wing of the house, with several bodyguards accompanying them.

Joshua and I settle into his living room. He leaves me to fetch a bottle of red wine and pours a glass for each of us, and we stare out the floor-to-ceiling windows, at the twinkling stars and the curving crescent of the moon.

"I'm offering ten million dollars for information leading to my brother's arrest."

"Ten million?" My jaw actually drops. After he gave millions of dollars to my friends? "You're going to end up with nothing left."

"I won't even notice it's gone." He smiles at me teasingly. "Why, Tamara, are you a gold digger? Are you going to run

off with someone richer?”

I shrug. “Well, the money was the primary appeal, yes.”

“Funny.” He reaches out and touches my lips with his thumb. “I love your smart mouth. You give me endless reasons to punish you.”

I smile secretly, picturing the way he spanks me, and turn away, sipping the wine and staring out the window at the stars.

But I don't know what to say next. An uncomfortable silence stretches between us. “I don't know how to do this,” I tell him. “I don't know how to spend time with you when it's like this. When I'm not chained up and spending all my time scheming to escape.”

“I don't either,” he says, “but we'll figure it out.”

I find that surprisingly touching. The part of me that wants to hate him is getting weaker and weaker. This is a man who wants me and only me, a man who'd die for me.

Joshua takes a long, slow sip of wine before setting his glass down. “I'm hoping that Charlemagne isn't on the loose for too long. My brother's face is all over the news tonight. I made sure of it. I gave an interview by Skype this morning after the news of his escape got out. Not something I enjoyed doing, but it helps get the word out. I can turn on the evening news if you want.”

I shudder. “No. If I never have to see him again, that'll be too soon for me.” I hug myself. “I guess if he's caught, I'll need to testify against him.”

“Yes. I can have my lawyer work with you to prepare you for that.”

I drain half the glass of wine in one gulp, thinking about having to face that bastard in court. Joshua leans forward to refill it, and I see the faint hollows under his eyes. “Are you sure *you’re* all right?” I ask him.

“Not by the standards of civilized society, no.” He smiles. “But it’s decent of you to ask.”

“It just seems like—”

“I answered you twice.” There’s a hard edge to his voice now, and his eyes are the color of storm clouds threatening a hurricane. I sink back into my chair, stung. Fine. I won’t ask again.

To change the subject, I say, “So, have you identified any candidates for...hunting?”

He glances at me in surprise. “You really don’t have a problem with what I do?”

“Not when you’re cleansing the Earth of the scum, no.” And I mean it.

All the suffering that Astrid and her children and I endured at the hands of Micah can be traced even further back. They can be traced back to Joshua and Micah’s father. An abuser doesn’t hurt just his victims. Some of those victims, forever damaged, will go on to inflict various kinds of pain to a new generation of victims, and then their victims will do the same. And the poison will spread and spread, like an oil spill spreading over clear waters and coating everything it touches with suffocating darkness.

If Joshua’s father had been killed before he could hurt anyone, then countless untold agonies would never have happened.



“I have a list of possibilities. Obviously while my brother had you, everything else was on hold, but I still kept my list. Do you want to look over it with me?”

“Okay,” I say without hesitation, but when he leaves, I feel a moment of doubt.

I’m going to help Joshua pick out someone to kill. I’m going to help him make a decision that will end someone’s life. Can I really go that far? Should I avert my eyes?

No. If I’m willing to accept that Joshua kills people, if I’m willing to be with him despite that, then I can’t separate myself from what he does. Pretending it’s not happening doesn’t give me a Hail Mary pass. I’m every bit as culpable as he is.

When he returns, he opens a document on the laptop and puts it on my lap. I look over the pictures. Joshua’s hands are trembling slightly, but I don’t say anything. If I do, he’ll just deny it and bite my head off.

He starts talking about the men on the computer. I listen to his litany of the things these men do, and I feel faintly ill. Pedophiles, rapists, sadists. Why is there so much evil in the world?

He yawns as he’s talking to me.

“I want you to kill all of them. Immediately,” I say, my stomach quavering.

He gives me a weary, sympathetic smile. “Give it time,” he says. “For now, I can’t leave you. I can’t hunt again until my brother is in prison.”

“Will you be all right? It seems like it’s something you need to do.”

Joshua shrugs. “I’m quite capable of self-denial when it’s necessary. Leaving you is exposing you to unnecessary risk.”

“Couldn’t you send anonymous tips to the police?” I plead. “They’re hurting people.”

He considers that. “If they go to prison, I can’t hunt them. They’d never get what they truly deserve.”

“But if you don’t report them, they’ll continue victimizing people.”

“There’s no guarantee that they’ll even be arrested or convicted, even if I do tip off the cops,” he argues. “The legal system is pathetically inadequate. I am the only sure justice.”

“You’ve got to at least try.”

He frowns, staring into space. “All right,” he says distantly. He yawns again. “As a gift to you, I’ll get to work on that first thing in the morning. And now I’m going to turn in early. Let me show you to your room. It’s right next to mine, in case you need anything.”

“Next to yours?” I say, startled. He’s joking, right?

But he folds up the laptop and leads me to my bedroom, and I see that he means it. He’s actually having me sleep in the room next to his. I’m not sleeping with him.

Why?

He had me sleep in his bedroom after he kidnapped me. But now he claims he wants us to be a real couple, not Master and slave, not jailer and prisoner, and yet he doesn’t even want me in his bed at night?

The only thing I can think of is that he’s back to playing head games—like when he let me leave the hospital without him, because he knew I’d burn for him every minute we were

apart. And now that he's got me again, he wants me to beg to sleep with him.

Well, the hell with that.

Furious, I stalk into my own room and slam the door without looking back.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TAMARA

I'm woken up by a tapping on my door, and for a moment, I'm seized with panic. Sick dizziness swims over me, and I brace myself, thinking, *Is this the day I die?*

Then I feel my silky comforter and the soft puffy pillow underneath my head, and I remember where I am. My heart is still pounding in my chest and I have to take several deep breaths to calm myself down.

Fuck Micah. Fuck him so hard. Will I ever wake up without those few seconds of utter terror?

I shove the blankets off me and climb out of bed, clutching at the comforter for a minute and swaying where I stand. The knocking gets louder.

"Ma'am? Are you all right?"

"Hold on," I call out, and I go to answer the door. It's one of Joshua's burly security guards, so thick his shoulders seem to merge with his head without much of a neck in between. He's wearing desert camo pants and shirt, and there are two pistols and several magazines on his belt.

"Breakfast will be served in ten minutes," he says.

I take a quick shower, missing Joshua's strong hands on me, then dress in jeans and a white peasant blouse and low-

heeled boots.

The guard is waiting for me outside the door, and he leads me through the house until we reach the dining room.

Astrid and her children are already seated, drinking orange juice and coffee. The room has a bay window with a beautiful view of the cactus garden outside. There's a tablescape running down the center of the table with small red clay vases, dishes of polished stones, and little arrangements of succulents in round terracotta planters.

Another security guard is pouring coffee as Joshua hurries in, looking a little frazzled. I feel a twinge of worry. He never used to be late to anything. I see faint circles under his eyes.

But I've already asked him if anything was wrong, and he shut me down quite decisively, so I just murmur a "good morning".

We work our way through fluffy stacks of pancakes and plump, salty sausages. Life with Joshua is one gourmet experience after another. He seems to revel in delivering exquisite sensations of all kinds.

Conversation is casual but careful. There are so many subjects to be avoided. Astrid and the bodyguards and her kids settle on talking about sports, which leaves me out because I can barely tell a football from a basketball.

When we're done, Joshua pushes back his seat. "Sparring practice starts today at eleven a.m.," he says. He looks around the table. "For all of you. My men will take you to the exercise room."

"Sparring? Like karate?" Paul says, looking interested. "I'm a yellow belt. I can break a board with my hand."

“I’m going to teach you skills that you can actually use,” Joshua says, a little more sharply than I think is necessary. Paul winces.

Joshua stands up and inclines his head at me. “Tamara, come with me.”

I follow him out of the room. Halfway down a long hallway, I stand in his way and block him. “You know what? You’re lying to yourself, Joshua.”

“Oh?” He folds his arms across his chest, looking disinterested. “Do tell.”

“You actually care about them. You do. You brought them here because you want to keep them safe. It wasn’t just for me.”

“You’re giving me too much credit, Tamara.” His brow creases in annoyance. “Remember what I am.”

I look up at him. “I did a lot of reading when I was in the hospital. There are different kinds of psychopaths, and they’re not all bad or evil. A lot of them take the more useful traits like being hyper-focused and having the ability to make decisions without emotion, and make them work for them. Like you did with your business.”

He rakes me with a scornful look. “Oh, you did research on my condition? Why didn’t I think of that?”

“And now you’re trying to push me away with sarcasm because I’m getting close to an uncomfortable truth.”

The contempt on his face would have melted me into a puddle when I first met him, but I’m made of stronger stuff now.

“Thank you, Dr. Bennett, will you send me a bill afterward?”

I keep pushing past his nastiness and his attempts to be hurtful, because it’s important.

“You’ll never know what you would have been if you’d been raised by normal parents, but seeing the things you do for other people...it makes me think that maybe you’re not a psychopath at all. Maybe you just built up all those walls and convinced yourself that you were something dark and terrible because it was the only way for you to survive. You have compassion. You care about Astrid and her family, not because it benefits you in any way, but because you have some normal human feelings after all.” I shake my head at his scowl. “Having compassion doesn’t make you weak, Joshua.”

“We’re done with this conversation, Tamara.” There’s a snap of impatience in his voice as he pushes me through a doorway.

We’re walking into his bedroom—the one I wasn’t invited to last night.

He leads me through the bedroom, and I scan the room as we’re walking. There’s a four-poster bed with thick poles of round wood, a chifferobe, big framed photographs of desert scenes, a bureau, a desk with papers stacked up haphazardly, and a chair with clothing draped over the back.

Joshua’s obsessed with cleanliness and order. Never in all the time that I was imprisoned at his house in Maine did I see so much as a stray sock or a crumpled piece of paper or a speck of dust.

Should I be worried?



Maybe it's a good sign. Maybe those rigid walls of his are coming down.

He steers me through the bedroom and into the bathroom. There's a giant white tub in the middle of the room. And he's made some modifications to the tub. He's screwed in chains with cuffs at the ends to all four sides.

"Take off your clothes," he says to me, shutting the door behind him. We're in our own little world.

Instantly I'm under his spell. "Yes," I say, as if in a trance. The sentence feels incomplete. It needs another word. And he knows it.

He bends toward me. He's unbuttoning his slacks. "Say 'Yes, Sir'," he whispers into my ear as I peel my shirt off. "Just in here."

"Yes, Sir." A sense of rightness settles over me. Our clothes are falling off us, dropping onto the cool marble floor. I'm naked so fast I barely have time to notice, and so is he.

I consume him greedily with my eyes. Those broad shoulders, that six-pack carved into his flesh, the narrow hips, the dusting of dark hair on his chest, the treasure trail leading from his navel down to a thick cock that's rock-hard for me, only for me.

His ocean-blue eyes meet mine and capture me. "Do you want me to bathe you, Tamara?"

"Yes. Please. Sir."

And oh, the joy of settling back into warm, fragrant water. The restfulness of letting him cuff me, of surrendering all decisions to him. The ecstasy of his strong hands moving over my body.

With every caress of the soapy washcloth, he's washing Micah's filthiness off me, that faint film of horror that I could never quite slough off no matter how hard I scrubbed.

I close my eyes and drift away into a place of warmth and pure sensation.

Finally, he sets down the washcloth and pulls the plug, letting the water drain. Then he straddles me, legs on either side of my waist, his cock and balls resting on my stomach. He trails his fingers along my neck, then down. When he touches the scars on my chest, I flinch.

"We'll get those taken care of with skin grafts," he says to me. "I'd like to wait, though. I want to bring your self-defense skills up to par, and if we do any surgery, you're going to have to wait for a few weeks. Unless you want them off immediately. That's fine too."

He looks at me, searchingly, and there's no denying the worry and compassion shining from his eyes. He probably doesn't even know it's there, but I do.

"It's okay. If...if it doesn't bother you to look at them."

"Every inch of your body is beautiful to me."

He cups my breasts and strokes them with his thumbs until the tension melts from my body. Then he moves, sliding back, and bends down to gently tease my left nipple with his teeth. His warm mouth engulfs the swollen pink peak, sucking it until it aches with pleasure.

"Mine," he says.

"Yes," I breathe. "Yes, Sir."

Then he uncuffs me and helps me climb out of the bath. He lays me down on my back on an enormous fluffy white bath

rug, and kneels between my legs. We're still slippery-wet from the bath, and everything smells like honeysuckle. He places his big, strong hands on my thighs and spreads them open wide. My knees are bent, and even though I'm completely exposed to him, I feel safe and strong and in control of what will happen to my body.

"Ask me," he says.

I'm floating in a dream. "I want you to kiss my pussy, Sir."

"That's not good enough. Beg me."

"Please, Sir. Please. Kiss me. Lick me. Fuck me, Sir," I moan.

He kisses his way down my stomach, pausing to swirl his tongue in circles. I beg shamelessly. "Please, Sir. Please don't stop."

He spreads my wet lips open with his fingers and draws his tongue across the seam of my pussy.

"Remember this?" His hot breath on my exposed sex makes me want to cry and scream my need for him.

"Yes," I whimper. "I loved it. I missed it. I missed your mouth on me, Sir. Please don't stop. Sir."

He keeps my lips spread open and slowly, reverently, he traces the line from front to back, from my pussy to my puckered hole again and again, as if he's lapping up the most delicious cream. I surrender myself to the sensation. He can do anything that he wants to me. I am powerless to stop him, and I love it.

When he thrusts his tongue into me, fucking me with short, wet thrusts, I can't take it anymore.

“Please, Sir!” I wail. “Please let me come, please, please...”

“You’re a greedy little slut, aren’t you?” He blows on me, the warm air fanning my heated sex.

“Yes. I’m a greedy little slut. I’m your little slut. Only yours. Sir! Please!” I’d say anything to make him give me what I need.

He reaches over to a shelf next to the tub and grabs a condom from a round ceramic bowl. I watch as he peels it open and slowly rolls it onto his thick cock. It has little nubs all up and down it.

“Studded, for her pleasure.”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.” *Hurry the hell up, Sir.*

My knees are still bent. He settles between my legs, sitting up, and grasps my hips. I am panting, helpless, pinned to the floor with the heavy weight of my sexual hunger.

“Tamara. Oh God.” The words breath out on a sigh as he uses his cock like a battering ram, sliding into my slick tunnel with one brutal thrust. The condom’s nubs rub against my sensitive inner walls as he pushes inside me. They drag against my tortured, needy flesh with each thrust. He controls the pace, pushing me to the brink of orgasm and then holding still while I writhe underneath him. Tears of frustration run down my cheeks as he hovers there, fingers sinking into the flesh of my hips, holding me perfectly still. Buried to the hilt, stretching me out... And then finally he starts moving again.

The sensations are so intense that I drift away, leaving my body and moving to a plane of pure sensation. When he picks up the pace, ramming hard, I clench my fists and arch my back, meeting his thrusts with my own until the two of us are

swept away together. We fall over the edge, and I hear his cries as my muscles convulse and squeeze him. His fingers dig into my hips, his breath panting out eagerly.

“Fuck, Tamara...yes...so fucking tight... Oh God...”

Wave after wave rocks me, and I hear my voice crying out, making sounds without words. The orgasm rides up along my nerves, sending sparkles of pleasure to the tips of my fingers and toes.

He stays inside me even after the waves calm and recede, sitting with his eyes closed, as if in some faraway land. My body is limp and spent when he finally slides out of me.

My muscles are so loose and rubbery that I just lie there without moving as he fetches a towel.

Through slitted eyes, I watch him drying himself off. It's like my own personal porn movie playing out in front of me. The towel moves over his flat stomach, over his broad sculpted chest...His body is perfectly proportioned, and his cock is already hardening again as he towers over me.

Slowly, I climb to my feet, just as he's tossing the towel into a hamper and grabbing a fresh one from a shelf.

Without a word, he spins me around and pushes me against the wall and begins drying me off. I whimper when he drags the towel between my legs. I'm so sensitive from my orgasm that it hurts when he rubs me, and I try to push his hand away.

Instantly, he wraps his muscular arm around me, pinning my arms to my side. I'm trapped and squirming against him.

“Mine,” he growls, rubbing even harder, making me cry out in protest. “I touch you where I want, and how I want.”

“Please, Sir. I’m really tender after I come. You’re hurting me... Please...”

“Then why are you squirming?” he taunts.

“Because it hurts.” So why am I panting in pleasure as he torments my sensitive tissues?

“Liar.” The more I fight, the harder he rubs. Sensation explodes inside me, and I can’t stop the hot streams of pleasure that flood my body.

I’m screaming “No! Please, no!” as I come, bucking against him, orgasming uncontrollably.

“If you want me to stop, then you address me with respect.”

“Sir! Please, Sir!” I wail, and he finally stops, stepping away from me. I brace my hands on the wall, whimpering as the climax finally starts to fade. My quivering knees can barely hold me up.

He’s already getting dressed, and I’m still gasping for breath.

Bastard.

“I’m going to my office to work on finding my brother,” he says briskly, buttoning up his shirt. Calm, in control, emotionless. As if he didn’t just make me come and cry with his dick and his tongue and his fingers. “I’ll fetch you at eleven for sparring.”

“Yes, Sir.” My voice wavers, but I make sure that the word “sir” comes across loud and clear, because I can’t handle any more punishments. Or any more pleasure, for that matter.

He starts to walk out of the bathroom, then stops and looks back at me. His voice softens. “I’m sorry about being an

asshole after breakfast. You're wrong, but it was kind of you to say those things, and I shouldn't have insulted you for it. And I like that you think better of me than I deserve."

"I'm the last person to give you credit that you don't deserve. Listen, Sarah is going to worry. Can I call her?"

He pulls out his cell phone. "With me standing here and listening, yes. You should be careful what you say to her, though." There's a hint of threat in his voice that really pisses me off, but I let it go.

I call her, and of course she's completely freaked out, but I manage to calm her down when I tell her that I'm lying low until Micah-slash-Charlemagne is captured. Like everyone else on the planet, she's heard about it on the news. I promise to check in regularly, and she settles down once I convince her I haven't been kidnapped.

Back in my bedroom, there are bookshelves stocked with paperback bestsellers in every genre, so I settle down to read.

At five minutes after eleven, Joshua shows up in my doorway. Unfortunately, he's got nothing to report. There's no sighting of his brother, and nobody's been able to track down Dr. Barnard either.

He takes me to the exercise room. Astrid and her kids are standing on the blue plastic mats waiting for us, with Garrett. Garrett has his massive arms folded across his chest and looks stern and menacing. Joshua has us go behind screens at the end of the room to change into loose workout clothes.

We warm up, then I practice with Joshua while Garrett teaches Astrid and her kids the basics. They really get into it, slamming into the plastic dummies with gusto, if not with finesse. Sometimes they miss the dummies entirely, or trip and

fall over, but they all spring right back up and dive in, fists flying.

A couple of hours pass by, and we're all covered in sweat and gasping with exhaustion.

"I'm going to learn how to kill your brother if I ever see him again," Fletcher says to Joshua with a gleam in his eye. Paul looks at his big brother with pride, and nods.

Fletcher is skinny as a beanpole. The kind of kid you'd be afraid to let stand on a subway grate because he might fall through. I love his spirit.

Joshua dismisses him with a cutting glance. "Not if today's any indication."

Astrid flashes a startled look at Joshua. Fletcher's face falls. Fortunately, the other kids are already walking over to the changing area, and they don't hear it.

I grab Joshua by the arm and pull him aside as Fletcher heads over to the changing area, shoulders slumping.

"How dare you treat him like that?" I snap. "He looks at you like you're a god. You have the power to crush him just using your words. So don't."

Joshua's toweling the sweat from his hair as I speak. "If my words alone can crush him, then he needs to toughen up a little."

I lower my voice so nobody else can hear. "You are not your father, and you don't have to act like him!"

He drops the towel on the floor and walks out of the room without a word.

I change my clothes, and hurry after Astrid and the kids as they're leaving.



“Fletcher, you did great. Way better than I did on my first day sparring. Joshua just has a hard time relating to people. It’s nothing personal,” I say to him. Fletcher nods, but he doesn’t look convinced.

Since sparring is done, we eat lunch, but Joshua doesn’t join us. We all go outside afterward. The weather is mild and balmy, in the sixties. I join them in a few games of basketball, then we stroll through the gardens. Fletcher’s quiet and subdued all afternoon long, which puts Paul in a bad mood too, and Astrid watches them with worried eyes. I’m furious with Joshua.

When they go back inside, I head over to the obstacle course, but I can’t haul myself up the ropes. I need to build up my upper body strength if I want to make any headway, and that’s probably going to take me months.

Then again, I don’t have anywhere else to be, do I?

The thought fills me with gloom. I sit down cross-legged on the ground next to the wooden tower I just failed to climb.

I’m staring into the distance at the mountains a few minutes later when I feel a tingling that sweeps throughout my whole body. I don’t have to look up to see that Joshua’s coming; there’s this connection between us that makes me exquisitely sensitive to his presence.

He walks up to me and stops, waiting. I twist around to scowl up at him.

Silently, he holds out a bottle of Gatorade, and I climb to my feet and take it without a word. I drink half the bottle before I turn to meet his gaze.

“Come to tell me what a lousy job I’m doing with the rope course?” I snap.

He frowns. “No. Why would I do that?”

I keep forgetting that his brain doesn't make connections like other people's do.

“Because you're being very critical today. You were way too hard on Fletcher.” He looks as if he's about to argue, so I say “What do you want to achieve? Do you want to crush his self-confidence so he gives up? Is that your goal?”

“Of course not. Why would I want that? It would be wasteful and serve no useful purpose.” He's genuinely confused.

“The way that you snapped at him will not help motivate him to improve. It will have the opposite effect. Please trust me on that, Joshua.”

He sighs, staring off into the distance. “You know I don't have good interpersonal skills,” he tells me. “For most of my life, I only interacted with people until they gave me what I wanted, then I left as quickly as I could. I excel at a lot of things, but socializing isn't one of them. Being around people for more than half an hour feels like rolling on a bed of nails.”

“You spend tons of time with me,” I point out.

He smiles with a deep weariness and caresses my mouth with his finger. “I never get tired of you.”

I find myself softening, but I struggle not to. “Are you sure? You just about bit my head off earlier.”

“People in relationships get angry with each other sometimes, don't they?” He looks at me questioningly. It's like he really wants the answer to that question.

“Yes,” I say. “But I meant what I said back there. You have to realize that the way your father treated you is influencing

how you're treating Fletcher.”

It's true, but it's also the wrong thing to say. He goes rigid with anger and suddenly he's a million miles away from me. He takes a couple of steps back, and his eyes have gone stormy again. “Don't mention my father to me again.” His voice snaps like a whip, stinging me.

I swallow my frustration. Joshua's father is like a lead anchor dragging him down, and he won't acknowledge it or try to deal with it. But the more I push, the more he'll close himself off to me. “All right. Please just go easier on Fletcher tomorrow, and don't hold a twelve-year-old boy from the suburbs to your standards. Or stop having him spar.”

His forehead creases, and he looks away. “I should go back inside now.” And he turns and walks off without another word, shoulders hunched, and I sit down in the bright, warm sun, feeling cold and lonely.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JOSHUA

I fight sleep for days on end, but even a beast like me can only deny biology for so long. I'm sitting at my desk with my eyes fluttering shut when I lose the battle, sinking into the dark, sticky tar of my unconscious mind.

I come to with a start, my heart in my throat. What's that sound?

Tamara. She's screaming.

She's facing a wall, hands tied over her head. She's naked, her back raw and bleeding, and I can smell the blood. I can *smell* it, which must mean that this is real.

I shake my head to clear it.

We're back at the old property on our cabin.

How did we get here? Was it Charlemagne? Did he slither his way through all my defenses?

I'm struggling to cry out. My tongue is thick in my mouth, and I can't force out so much as a weak little snivel. We're in the room where my father used to take his little girl prisoners. My stomach convulses when I hear thudding footsteps, then my father strides through the door, stripped to the waist, carrying a curled-up bullwhip.

He pushes past me, and I try to lunge at him, but I'm too weak to move. Always too weak.

"You like that, girl?" he roars at Tamara, and he slashes with his whip, tearing a long red wound into her back.

Her answer is a shrill scream of agony that tears my heart in two.

This can't be happening. *I killed my father.*

And how did he get us here? How did he get past my men?

The old terror of my childhood days comes roaring back. *My father is all-powerful. He can't be defeated. He can't be killed. Obey him or die.*

My legs are weak. I struggle to move toward him, and fall to my hands and knees.

My father turns to look at me, scorn on his face. He hasn't aged a day in fifteen years.

*He's a god. He's immortal. I'm nothing.*

He turns his back to me and whips Tamara again, not even paying attention to me. I'm beneath his notice. Her wails hammer into my heart.

No! I've let him take too much from me. I won't let him have Tamara.

I'll fucking kill him, as many times as it takes until he stays dead.

I struggle to my feet at last, but then Charlemagne strides into the room and launches himself at me, knocking me to the ground with a painful thud. I lie underneath him, helpless.

"You left me," he says. His eyes are blue whirlpools of madness, his lips skinned back from his teeth.

Guilt makes me nauseated. I've never felt guilt before. It tastes like vomit and dirt stuffed into my mouth. "I thought you were dead. I checked your pulse. You weren't breathing."

The whip cracks again, and Tamara's answering scream is weaker this time. *She's dying.*

"Lying sack of shit." His eyes are crazed. "You took Elizabeth and left *me*? I was your brother!"

Something smashes, and I'm falling, falling...

And I land with a thud on the floor of my bedroom. My heart is jack-hammering against my ribs. I scramble to my feet, crouching low, instinctively scanning the room for threats.

I'm alone in the dark, with the faint glow of a nightlight on the far wall.

I'm next to my bed. I was in bed. When did I get into bed? I thought I was sitting at my desk.

I've shattered my bedside lamp into pieces, and my hand is bleeding. I struggle to slow down my heart rate as I walk into the bathroom to rinse off the blood.

I've had this dream every night for more than a month now.

It's been happening ever since I found Tamara. I did what I had to do while I was searching for her. I maintained an iron grip on my feelings, but the moment she was safe, I lost control.

All of those dammed up feelings came flooding out, just as I'd known they would. Every feeling that I've repressed for my entire life is raging through my mind. And the worst of it is, I need my focus more than ever. I'm trying to build a

normal relationship with Tamara, and search for my brother, and maintain my mask of civilization, while every nightmare from my past is tearing into me the minute I close my eyes.

I shouldn't have brought Astrid and her children here. It's hard for me to maintain that veneer of normalcy in a crowd like this. I wasn't lying when I told Tamara that, with the exception of her, being around people for any length of time is physically painful for me.

The old voice whispers in my ears, the cruel, calm voice that has guided me through the world for years.

*These people are nothing to me. If they all die, I will feel nothing. Their presence here is not helpful. They're nothing but noise. When I see Fletcher and Paul, in particular, I keep flashing back to my childhood. I see weakness, and I want to beat them until they're strong. So they have to go.*

But Tamara is right. I do actually care about them. Not as much as Tamara, of course. If they died, I'd feel mild sadness. If Tamara died, I'd burn down the world.

But as angry as I am with Paul and Fletcher for being weak little boys who don't even seem as if they're trying to be fierce, I also feel a strange protectiveness toward them.

*I should send them all away. They are a distraction, so having them here doesn't benefit me.*

But I can't send them out into danger. I won't.

I'm changing, and it should be a good thing because I was a monster before. The problem is that I don't know what I'm changing into. I've shattered and am trying to put the sharp, broken pieces back together, but they don't fit together right.

With a sudden start, I realize I've washed my cut hand and put a bandage on it and picked up all the shards of the lamp,



all without even noticing. I'm standing in the middle of my bedroom That's another thing that's happening to me these days; I find myself doing things without even noticing. And considering what I'm capable of doing at my worst, that is very bad.

Clenching my fists, I hurry to Tamara's room to make sure she's all right. She's sleeping on her side, curled up, and I see faint lines creasing her forehead. She doesn't sleep easy these days either. Maybe she'd sleep easier if I was lying next to her, holding her in my arms, but I'm afraid that if I do that, I'll end up killing her the next time I have a nightmare.

Watching her breathe, my anger and panic fade. She's here. She's alive. The hell I lived in for those eight days that felt like eighty years is over. This place is crawling with security, locked up like Fort Knox. Nobody can hurt her.

The demons of my past will not defeat me. I am stronger than my demons. I killed my father, the devil in human form. If he couldn't best me, nothing can. I draw strength from my Tamara.

I fetch a broom and dustpan and sweep up the lamp's shattered lightbulb. When I'm done, I stand in the middle of the room and close my eyes and take deep breaths, drawing them in slowly and then releasing them.

Since the day I killed my father, I have never been defeated by anyone or anything. I will force the dark parts of me down into the depths where they belong, and I will not let Tamara slip through my fingers.



*Tamara*

Joshua doesn't join us at breakfast, and he doesn't bathe me, so I shower by myself and wonder if I did something wrong.

When it's time for us to spar, though, he shows up. His hand is bandaged, and he still has circles under his eyes, but he seems perfectly cheerful—so cheerful that I ask him if he's made any progress with the search for Micah.

“Not yet,” he says. “But he can't hide forever.”

He and Garrett start putting us through our paces. Joshua takes Fletcher and Paul aside and watches them with the intense concentration of a hawk, and at the end of our session, my stomach twists as Fletcher and Paul stare at him with huge eyes.

“Better,” he says to them calmly, then walks out of the room without a word. I see them start to breathe again, and I realize that my hands had clenched into fists. They high-five each other, and Astrid breaks out into a smile of relief.

When he said that single word, I saw the tiniest quiver of his jaw, then I saw him flick the quickest of glances in my direction. He was lying to them. He thought they were awful. But he spared their feelings. Because I asked him to.

And I realize that I can do this. I can be with him. I *will* be with him. Whatever it takes, I'll do it. Joshua will never be whole, he'll never be sane, he'll always be a psychopath. But he's my psychopath. He's pledged himself entirely to me, and he's changing as much as he is capable.

He joins us for dinner that evening and sleeps in his own bed again afterward. But the next morning, he eats breakfast with us all, then he takes me into his bathroom again.

Days pass by, stretching into a week, falling into a routine.

Every morning after breakfast, Joshua cuffs me in the bathtub. I remember how I fought it when Joshua first kidnapped me. It made me feel so exposed and vulnerable to be chained up and splayed open. Now it's a ritual I've come to crave. It's a time of peace for both of us. We're silent when he bathes me, and I drift off into my own world. The pure sensual pleasure of him running the sponge over my naked body, the light fragrance of the bath suds... and the way he's entirely focused on giving me pleasure.

After he bathes me, we end up with me on my hands and knees on the fluffy bath mat, with him lapping at me from behind until I cry from frustration and beg him to fuck me. Or I'm on my knees, taking him into my mouth and glorying in how the swirling of my tongue wrenches cries of pleasure from him.

Then we have sex. It's not making love, because neither of us want that softness or tenderness. It's raw, hungry fucking. He pounds into me, and I come explosively every time.

But that's the only time he gets close to me. During the day, he's there in body, but I feel as if his mind is somewhere else. He spends hours poring through computer programs, tracking down private flights, train and bus passenger lists, car rentals, border crossings, facial recognition programs, anything that might give him a clue as to where his brother is.

He's withdrawn and not speaking much. The only time we have sex is in the morning. He walks with me sometimes in the afternoon, making conversation. And he yawns a lot these days. I see him doing it, but I don't ever dare bring it up.

A dull resentment is starting to brew inside me.

I realize that when he kidnapped me this time and swore he'd make me his, part of me was angry, but part of me was

expecting the full court press. I thought he'd try to seduce me. Woo me. Talk to me all night and day, drown me in flowers and chocolates, open himself up to me as he'd never done before. I remember how passionate he was the first time he took me. This is a man who could make love to me half a dozen times in a day, who never seemed to tire of pleasuring me. A man who wanted to know every part of me, my mind and body.

This is *my* man.

I can't deny it to myself. There will never be another man for me. It's Joshua or nobody.

Who could replace him? The madness that he calls up in me, the intensity of our relationship, the swooping highs and terrifying lows, have opened me up to a new kind of feeling that I can't even name. And I thought he felt the same way about me.

*So why isn't he fighting for me?*

I keep waiting for him to snap out of it, but instead he's more and more remote with each passing day.

One morning, he snaps at Fletcher again while they're sparring.

Fletcher freezes where he stands. Astrid flashes Joshua a look of hurt and confusion, and the girls look at us in bewilderment.

"Joshua." I clench my fists and stalk over to him. "Whatever the hell is bothering you, don't take it out on Fletcher!"

Joshua turns and walks out of the room without a word.

"I'm done for the day," Fletcher says miserably.

We all finish up early and head back to our rooms.

At lunch, Joshua doesn't join us. Garrett tells us that Joshua won't be taking part in the training anymore.

He disappears for the rest of the day. I end up sulking in my room, boiling with frustration. Is it going to be like this forever? Is he growing tired of me and is too chicken to say so?

Before dinner, his butler-slash-bodyguard comes and tells me Joshua wants me to have dinner with him out in the garden.

I join him at a round table inset with colorful mosaic designs of salamanders, under trees that are festooned in tiny twinkling lights, and we eat prime rib and steer clear of talking about what happened earlier today.

"Any progress at all on your brother?" I ask him.

He shakes his head. "Nothing at all. He's gone to ground."

He spears a piece of meat savagely and shoves it in his mouth. He chews it and stares off into the distance.

"You're not even tasting that, are you?" I ask him.

He looks back at me, startled. "What?"

I push my plate away. "You should go on a hunt. You said you would. We're safe here, Joshua. We'd be fine if you went away for a few days."

"I told you, I can't do it until Micah is gone." His brow knits in frustration. "I won't leave you."

"You already have."

"What do you mean?" He sets down his fork and stares at me in blank confusion.

Hurt wells up inside me, and I blink back tears. “I mean you’re here in body only. Your mind is off somewhere else, and you won’t tell me why.”

“When my brother is caught, it’ll be different.” But the tiny pinch of a frown between his brows tells me that he doesn’t believe that any more than I do.

I try again. “If you’re tired of me, I wish you’d tell me. Do you want me to leave?” Tears spill from my eyes and trickle down my cheeks, and I grab my napkin and dab at my cheeks.

He slams his palms down on the table, making me jump. “Tamara, I’m sick of this shit.” Ice drips from his words. “I told you how it’s going to be. I own you from head to toe. I didn’t claim you for a couple of weeks. I claimed you for the rest of my life and yours. If you even try to leave me, I’ll fucking chain you up in your room, I’ll put a GPS tracker in you, I’ll move us to the middle of nowhere so you’d have to walk a thousand miles through a burning desert to get to the nearest road.” His eyes blaze with anger. “Why are you so eager to leave? Someone out there you’d rather be with?”

I glare at him. “I’ve already answered that several times, so I’m not going to dignify it with a response.”

“You should.” His eyes bore into me, and they don’t look blue at all now. They’re dark pits of hell. “You really, really should. Or I’ll need to take time away from looking for my brother and start investigating who the *fuck* you want to leave me for. Cassius Fuller, the dentist? Someone else?” Jesus. He found out the guy’s last name and what he does for a living. His steak knife is in his hand and he’s gripping it hard, his knuckles whitening. He holds it up, staring at the blade, and the lights glint off it. “Can you imagine what a man looks like

after he's been skinned alive? Do you want to know how long it takes to finish the job, from scalp to feet?"

My stomach lurches. "No, Joshua, there is nobody else I want to be with." I force the words out, strangling with frustration. "I want to be with you. And I want you to be with me, not shutting me out like I mean nothing and I'm just some distracting annoyance. Someone for you to bang once a day and then send away when I try to talk to you."

His face goes blank, and he stands up abruptly, setting his steak knife down with a clatter. "I'm going to go check in with my security team, see if they've made any progress."

"You know what? You go do that, because I'm sick of the sight of you right now. Fuck right off."

I storm off and go find Astrid and her kids. They're watching a movie in the media room. I flop down into a chair facing the giant media screen and try to reassure them that Joshua's just preoccupied with the hunt for Micah and everything will be fine, but it's hard when I don't believe it myself.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



## TAMARA

Days and days go by, and now he's barely speaking to me at all. He skips breakfast. He comes to my room to fetch me after I've eaten, then takes me into his room to bathe me and fuck me. Our couplings are frantic and wordless.

It's mid-November, and the weather is a little cooler, but not much. I throw myself into sparring, spending hours and hours on the mats, pounding into the punching bag. I'm getting stronger, to the point where I can pull myself up on the ropes outside now. That happened much faster than I thought. When I'm not sparring with Garrett or one of the other guards, I'm on the internet studying survivalist techniques, learning how to lay traps and escape from car trunks and break out of handcuffs and improvise weapons from rope.

Astrid and her children are getting better with their techniques too. Like most crime victims, they relish the chance to learn how to protect themselves, and they're really throwing themselves into their training. "I wish Joshua could see me now," Fletcher says to me one afternoon. "Do you think we should invite him to watch us?" He's so polite, so formal, so hopeful, that I want to find Joshua and pound his face in for hurting this vulnerable little boy's feelings.

More days drag by. I email Sarah, lying and telling her everything is fine, and I get angrier and angrier.

One morning when Joshua heads to my room after breakfast, I stand against the wall by the side of my doorway and scream for help. I'm howling as if I'm being murdered when he races through the door and trips and falls over the tripwire I've strung up. He sprawls on the tiled floor with a heavy thud and rolls over, shouting and swearing. While he's down, I swing a vase at his skull as hard as I can, and he doesn't bother to get up, he just kicks it out of my hand. It hits the wall and shatters.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he yells at me, leaping to his feet with catlike grace.

In response, I lash out with my foot and kick him in the shin, hard. I'm wearing my steel-toed boots, and his grunt of pain tells me I hit my target.

"What am I doing? I'm getting sick of you being a moody, temper-tantrum-throwing asshole!" I snarl.

He grabs me by the throat and shoves me against the wall, his fingers tightening. I blade my hands and slam them on the inside of his elbows, and he releases me. His hands slide down, grabbing my arms and pinning them to my sides.

"You're the one throwing a tantrum. What did you think you were doing, you moron? I could have snapped your damn neck! Do not fuck with me, Tamara."

I've been growing my nails out and I've filed them so they're sharp. I sink them into his hands, piercing his flesh. He doesn't seem to notice, just holds me pinned against the wall, his eyes blazing with anger.

“We haven’t had so much as a conversation in the last week,” I spit at him. “If you think I’m going to just sit back and let you treat me like this, you’re dumber than I thought. Talk to me, tell me what the hell is wrong with you, or let me go.”

“Or?” he sneers.

All the rage and hurt I’ve been stuffing down inside swells up. “Or next time I’ll hurt you in ways that don’t heal.” I spit the words out, wrenching my arms and trying to pull free of his grip.

He tightens his hands until the bones of my arms creak, and I hiss in pain. “Don’t write checks with your mouth that your ass can’t cash,” he sneers. “You couldn’t beat a toddler in a pillow fight.”

“Knocked you on your butt, didn’t I?” I taunt him. “Weak little me. What does that say about *you*?”

His eyes snap with rage. “That’s it.”

He picks me up, throws me over his shoulder, and carries me out of the room and down the hall.

I fight him the whole way. I claw at his back and draw blood. I swing my legs around and almost make him trip and fall.

When we get to his room, he drags me over to his bed and throws me face down so hard I bite my tongue. He straddles my back, and I squirm underneath him while he strips my skirt off. I fight him, panting for breath as he hauls me up. There are handcuffs dangling from the bed frame, and he cuffs me, then pulls his belt from its loops.

The first stripe across my butt makes me shriek. He keeps going, slashing his way from top to bottom, and I shout curses

at him. My back is on fire, and I writhe, bruising my wrists against the cuffs. I kick behind me, landing a couple of good, solid blows, but he just keeps smacking my ass and thighs until tears pour down my cheeks and my gasps sound more like sobs.

Finally he stops, and I hear the belt fall to the ground. “Nice job ambushing me. How’d that work out for you?” He punctuates his words by spanking my left butt cheek with a vicious slap across my stinging flesh.

“Are you kidding?” I taunt him, panting for breath. “It worked out great. This is the least boring you’ve been in weeks.”

He grabs me by the neck and squeezes hard with his hands. I gasp for breath, and everything goes black with red sparks flying.

Then I realize he’s released my cuffs and I’m sagging to my knees. He tangles his fingers in my hair and yanks my head back as my vision clears.

“Open your mouth,” he growls, and forces his cock between my lips. I drag in air through my nostrils as his cock slides down my throat. Gurgling, flailing, I suck as hard as I can. I suck as if my life depends on it, and he fucks my mouth as I fight to breathe.

His tortured pants of pleasure turn me on. Fierce joy sizzles through me. I’m proud that I can make him feel like this. Only me.

When he finally explodes, his hot cum runs down my throat, and I greedily drink every drop of it. He slides out of me, and I like to think that the sounds he’s making are groans of surrender.

“Turn around. Hands and knees,” he snaps. I scramble to obey. He grabs a condom out of his drawer, and it feels like only seconds have gone by before he’s inside me. I close my eyes and lose myself in the sensation as he rams so hard that my knees drag across the carpet. I’ll have vicious rug burn later. The thought makes me even hotter, and I hold my hips still so that he can tear into me.

The heat inside me rises with each brutal thrust, and I come within a minute, crying out with pleasure as my inner sheath squeezes his cock. Joshua’s answering shout tells me I made him come a second time.

“Fuck,” Joshua screams out loud, tormented, enraged, as he slides out of me. “Fucking hell, Tamara!”

I smile to myself, relaxing and resting my cheek on the carpet. My pussy is pulsing and I’m glowing inside. “Joshua, I knew your inner psychopath was hiding in there somewhere. Too bad I had to kick your ass to get him to come out to play.”

“I could have killed you, you idiot,” he growls at me. “You can’t ever do that again.” He bends down and scoops me up in his arms like a child and carries me out of the door and back to my own room.

He sets me down on my bed and sits there with his arms around me, burying his face in my hair. My knees and my ass are throbbing, but it was worth it, so worth it, because he holds me and rocks me like a lover, and it’s been so long since he held me that way, and I never want him to let me go.



**Joshua**

We're in the cabin again. Night after fucking night, I'm back here. I'll never be free of the cabin. Tamara's tied down to a table and my father is slicing into the skin of her stomach with a carving knife, and she screams and cries and begs me for help, but my feet are sunk into the floor up to my ankles and I can't move. I'm flooded with despair. Blood runs down her torso and splashes onto the floor.

*Weak, helpless, stupid.*

"See how it's done, boy?" My father twists around to make sure that I'm watching. "Next I'm going to shove that knife right up her pussy. Fuck her with it real good."

"No!" Tamara screams. "Please, no! Stop, Joshua—it's me, Tamara! Please stop!"

I come to with a start. I'm in my bedroom, and the echoes of a scream are bouncing off my bedroom walls.

It's Tamara.

She's sprawled on the floor at my feet. She flings her hands up in fear when I bend down to reach for her. Her nose is bleeding and there's a mark on her cheek

"Stop!" she cries out.

"Who hurt you?" I shout, furious. "Who did this to you?"

She scoots back away from me, hugging herself. "You did! Are you back now? I was yelling your name and you didn't answer me."

I look around wildly, struggling to orient myself. "How did you get in here?"

"I came in here to sleep with you. When I lay down, you were having a nightmare, and I tried to wake you up. You went crazy."

Oh God. I could have killed her. “Fuck! I’m sorry, Tamara—I’m really sorry. I was having a nightmare. I didn’t know what I was doing.”

The fear in her eyes fades a little. “I know you didn’t. It was like you couldn’t even see me.”

“Why did you come in here?”

“I get scared at night, being alone.” Her face puckers in misery. “Remember how I never used to remember my dreams? Ever since your brother took me, I remember them. I just wanted to sleep with you. I thought I’d feel safer.”

Self-hatred roils up inside me. *I am such a useless failure. She needs me, and I can’t be there for her. I swore I’d protect her, and I almost killed her.*

I’ve never felt self-doubt before, but now it consumes me.

I reach down and hold my hand out to help her up. She winces as she slowly climbs to her feet. “Careful. I think my ribs are broken.”

“Fuck. I am so sorry, Tamara.” I gather her in my arms very, very gently and slowly, and carry her over to my desk chair, which has wheels.

I make a quick call on my intercom. “Meet me in the clinic.”

Then I roll her in the chair through the house until we reach a mini-clinic that I have set up. She looks around in surprise. “This is like a surgical suite.”

“Yes. I’m taking absolutely no chances, and I don’t want anyone to have to leave the property for any reason until my brother’s either dead or in prison.”

One of my bodyguards comes running in. Dr. Miller. He was a trauma surgeon in the army. I pay a fuck-ton of money to have him on my payroll, standing by.

First he palpates her ribs, making her suck in painful breaths. I resist the urge to kill him for hurting her. I don't have the time; it would take me at least a couple of days to hire somebody new. Then I carry her over to my portable X-ray machine, and he snaps pictures of her.

"You have your own X-ray machine?" she says in amazement as he leaves to develop the film. "Aren't they like a million bucks?"

"Nah, you can get the smaller portable ones brand-new for like sixteen grand. I built this one myself. It's not hard."

She manages a smile. "You think of everything."

I grab her hand and wrap it in mine. "I'm sorry."

"You said that like six times already." She brushes her hair out of her eyes, wincing in pain. "I don't want your apologies. I just want you to be honest with me. Let me in. If you had told me that I couldn't sleep with you because you were having nightmares and you were afraid you'd attack me, it would have spared a lot of hurt feelings these last few weeks." I can see the reproach in her chocolate-brown eyes, and it stabs into me and twists. "And I wouldn't have tried to come into your room if I'd known."

I'm going to lose her if I'm not careful. Or hurt her really badly. I won't let that happen.

"You're right. I'll talk to you. I'll tell you anything that you want to know." Will talking be enough to make her stay?

I feel a new kind of fear chewing at me.



The doctor comes back in, holding the X-rays. He shows them to us.

“She has a hairline fracture,” he tells me, pointing at the dark line on her rib. “We don’t tape up the ribs in cases like this. It increases the risk of pneumonia. Bedrest for the next few days, painkillers as necessary, and she’s going to need to take it easy for the next six weeks. No more sparring.”

I put her back in the chair and wheel her back to her room. It’s five a.m. I put her into the bed very slowly and carefully, as if she’s made of fine china, then I slide into bed next to her.

“I’ll tell Astrid and the kids that I can’t work out because I pulled a muscle,” she tells me.

“Instead of telling them that I’m crazy?”

She manages a little smile and rests her head on my shoulder. “I don’t want people to think badly of you.”

My heart melts, and I stroke her hair with the lightest of touches. We lie for a few minutes, and I think she’s fallen asleep, but then she rolls over and looks at me.

“Please tell me what’s been going on with you.” Her voice is soft and pleading.

I stay silent.

“What did you dream?”

Sweat plasters my hair to my scalp.

“Sometimes talking about it helps.”

I don’t believe that talking things out helps, but I promised her I’d answer her questions.

“I was back in the cabin where I grew up. I dreamed that my father was hurting you, and I was stuck to the floor and

couldn't help. Sometimes my brother is there too.”

She shudders. “I’m sorry. Have you always had bad dreams?”

“Never before. Not until my brother took you.” I’m staring at the ceiling, and something inside me is coiling tighter and tighter. “That broke something in me.”

“Please be all right, Joshua.” Her soft voice tears my heart to shreds. “I need you to be all right. You don’t have to punish yourself. I survived your brother. I’m fine now. Really. And none of it was your fault.”

I close my eyes, and the videos of her torture unspool behind my eyelids, so I open them again.

“My brother’s not the only one who hurt you.” A sick feeling curdles in my belly as I think about the things that I’ve done to her.

“Would it help if told you I forgive you for everything? I know why you are the way you are.” She snuggles into my arms and presses her face into my shoulder. “I don’t condone it, but I forgive you for it. You’re different now. You’re really trying. I’m willing to try too now, but I wonder if you’re willing to meet me halfway.”

She looks up at me questioningly, and I think I feel my heart breaking.

“I don’t deserve your forgiveness. But I thank you for it.” I remember her in that basement cell, chained up in the dark and crying out to me...and a wave of self-loathing rolls through me.

What the *fuck* is wrong with me? I cared about her even then. Even before she became Toy for me, then reclaimed herself as Tamara. How could I have done that to someone I

cared about? I want to punish myself for torturing her. Hurt myself, scar my skin, burn the flesh from my own bones. But I can't. I have to stay strong if I'm going to protect her.

“You can talk to me any time, you know. It'll help. Really. When something's bothering you, will you please tell me?”

How did this angel fly into my life? Does she even belong here? I need her goodness, but what do I bring to the table? Rot and ruin. Shouldn't she be with someone decent and kind, someone who deserves her? “I'll try. I'm not much of a talker when it comes to my personal feelings. It's only since I met you that I even became aware I *had* feelings.”

She sighs, her breath warming my neck. “Remember when you forced me to talk to you, to tell you what was bothering me? It was hard, and I hated you for it at the time, but in the end, it lifted an enormous weight from my shoulders. You helped me back then. I wish you'd let me do the same for you.”

“I'll try,” I say, but I wonder if it's too late. I wonder if I'm beyond redemption, beyond sanity, beyond the ability to keep the woman I love safe from all the nightmares in the world.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Astrid's kids are struggling up the ropes on the obstacle course. Joshua's men adjusted the wooden wall so it's at an incline rather than a sheer drop. Her eyes never leave them, and her brows pinch together.

"I don't want to let them climb that wall," Astrid says to me, wincing as Paul drops back. Robin reaches behind and grabs his hand and pulls him forward. Astrid runs her hands over her face. "I don't want them to spar because they might get hurt. I want to hire a food tester to make sure their food isn't poisoned. I don't want to let them leave the room unless I'm with them. I used to be fine with them bicycling to their friends' houses, and now if they're not directly in my line of sight, I have panic attacks. How will I ever be able to let them go to college? How can I let them move into their own homes?"

I squeeze her shoulder sympathetically. "One step at time. They're years away from college. Get comfortable with them climbing the rope ladder and being in another room. Then move on from there."

That bastard Micah.

"You are wise beyond your years, grasshopper." She smiles at me, then tenses again when Darlie makes it to the top

of the wooden wall. “Maybe Darlie’s too young for that course. Am I being crazy? I am, aren’t I? I can’t even tell anymore.”

“Joshua made that thing pretty safe. If she falls, there are piles and piles of cushioning for her to land on. If she’s going to fall anywhere, this would be the place to do it.”

“You’re right.” She looks down at her hands and forces her fists open. Her nails have dug little half-moons into her palms. “Let’s talk about something besides my paranoia. It’s going to be Thanksgiving in a couple weeks. And then Christmas,” she says. “Joshua told me that if we’re still here, I could order anything I want for the kids.”

I feel a surge of warmth toward him. He’s been trying the past few days, ever since the incident with the nightmare. He’s made an effort to be with me—even though I can tell it really is an effort for him, like he’d rather be alone, and it hurts my feelings.

But he wants to be different. I know he does.

“Was that his idea or yours?” I ask her.

“His. He brought it up. Why?”

I choose my words carefully. “He has this image of himself as being very similar to his brother. And to their father. He thinks he isn’t capable of feeling empathy or compassion. But then he does things like offer you guys protection from his brother, and thinks about your needs, like getting things for the holiday season, and I know he’s not seeing himself the way he really is.”

She nods. “Are you familiar with the concept of the unreliable narrator?”

“In fiction, yes. It’s when someone’s telling a story from first person point of view but they’re not telling the whole truth.”

“Exactly. That’s Joshua. But it’s not because he’s lying. When he tells his own story, he doesn’t see the whole truth of himself. He’s telling his story as best he understands it.”

“That’s a beautiful way to describe an ugly problem.”

“I’m here rattling on and on about me, but how are you these days?” She looks at me with concern. “We can all see that Joshua’s...preoccupied. I’ve been doing my best to keep the kids out of his hair. Is everything okay with you guys?”

I bite my lip. It’s so hard to talk about Joshua when I can never reveal the whole truth, but it’s also nice to have a sympathetic ear. “Not really. He just doesn’t seem to know how to be in a normal, healthy relationship.”

“It’s hard to be normal when we’re all locked away here, in the middle of nowhere, hiding out from Micah.” She purses her lips. “Just try to get him to do normal couple things. Go through the motions, and maybe he’ll get more comfortable with it as time goes on.” She glances at me. “What did you guys do together before Micah kidnapped you?”

I stammer, trying to think of a way to answer that question that won’t send Astrid screaming for cover and put Joshua in prison.

And Darlie falls off a rope bridge and plummets six feet onto a pile of foam, and Astrid’s bolting over there so fast she practically burns scorch marks into the dirt.

Saved by the bell—or rather saved by the falling child.

Darlie’s fine, of course, and when Astrid comes back, I change the subject.

The next day, we have a rare thunderstorm, so Joshua invites me to eat lunch with him in a glassed-in three-season room. I think about what Astrid said. Do normal couple things. Go through the motions until it feels natural.

What would a normal couple be doing at this point in their relationship? It seems as if we've agreed that we're committed to each other. So the next step would be to talk about our plans for the future.

"Where do you see us in a year or two?" I blurt out. He sets down his glass of wine and looks at me. It's his third glass. He never used to have more than one glass at meals.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, let's be optimistic and assume that your brother is in prison by then and we could do anything. What would your plans be?"

His face is drawn and the hollows under his eyes are more pronounced. "Why are we talking about this now?"

"I mean...isn't that what couples do?"

"I suppose." His voice is so lackluster it hurts me.

He stabs at his battered fish, then lays his fork down without taking a bite.

"Do you want children?" I press on. "Do you see us... getting married?"

"Do *you* want children?" He looks at me intently.

"I don't know. I used to dream about getting married and having children. After everything I've been through...I don't think I do anymore. I'd always worry about being able to keep them safe."



There's a troubled look on his face. "That's good. I can't see me ever being a father. It wouldn't be fair for me to father a child. The blood of monsters runs in my veins."

I don't completely agree with that, because I believe that if he and his brother hadn't been raised by a sadistic tyrant, they wouldn't have grown up to be the way they are. But it's also not a point worth arguing, because I'm starting to worry there might not be any future for us even to speak of. I'm afraid Joshua's just given up on us, and I don't understand why.

I'm trying to talk about our future, yet he's not even looking at me; he's staring over my shoulder at something a million miles away. It wasn't so long ago that he laid claim to me, body and soul, vowing never to let me go. Trying to make me decorate our imaginary future home. Threatening terrible punishment if I tried to escape him.

Now I don't even know if he'd notice if I got up and walked out of the room.

The thought of Joshua leaving me sends a spear of pain through my heart.

I start babbling, nervous and frightened. If I talk about our future, it will make it real, won't it? "So what do you imagine will happen once your brother's caught? I'd like to go back to school."

He scowls at me.

"Tamara, I haven't slept in four days and I don't want to talk any more."

*Damn it.* How can he not see how bad things are between us? "What are you going to do about it?" I cry out. "You can't keep going on like this. You said you'd talk to me, but you keep pushing me away. You need to see a therapist."

“Excuse the fuck out of me? You don’t tell me how to live my life.” He slams his hand down on the table and shoves his chair back.

Now I’m getting pissed. “You aren’t living your life! You’re like a damn zombie. Joshua, you can barely function.”

He draws in an angry breath through his nostrils. “I can function just fine. I’ll deal with it.”

“How?” I challenge him.

He stands up, turning away from me. Dismissing me. “The way I always have.”

I jump to my feet, in tears. “By killing your father over and over again?” I yell. “How’s that working out for you?”

He twists around to stare at me, and the look in his eyes is dark and alien. “What did you just say?” A chill runs over me at the sound of his voice.

“Those men you chose to kill—you showed me the pictures of your future targets. Men in their late forties and fifties. They all have dark hair and strong cheekbones. Most of them have light-colored eyes. They all look a little bit like you, which means they probably look a little bit like your father did.”

He’s growing agitated. He starts pacing, not looking at me, his expression wild and his body tense. “No. They don’t. That has nothing to fucking do with it. I told you how I select the men.”

Yes, he did. He picks men who are predators, and who he also thinks are worthy opponents. Men who are physically strong, who can fight back. But that’s only part of it.

Why is he denying the obvious? It's not even that big a deal. He kills bad guys. They happen to look like his father. He needs to just acknowledge it and move on. I'm sick of his denial. "Joshua, out of all the abusers out there, you've narrowed it down to men who look like your father, and who specifically abuse women and children. Middle-aged white guys with dark hair, the same age your father probably was when you killed him. Did you never realize that before?"

Suddenly the look on his face terrifies me. He barely looks human.

"Get out."

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I yell at him.

*"Get out before I kill you!"* The voice that's coming out of his throat is barbed with hatred and deadly intentions.

I take one look at him, and I get up and run for my life.



## ***Joshua***

When I return to my senses, I'm standing at the very back of my property, and I'm fucking terrified, scared out of my mind like I've never been before. Scared down to the depths of my sick, deformed soul, choking and gasping with panic.

I'm not afraid because I'm alone in the dark and I don't remember how I got here.

I'm afraid I might have killed Tamara.

The last thing I remember is her telling me that I was killing my father over and over again, then there was a sudden supernova of rage in my chest and I screamed at her to run.

And then everything went black and red, and I think I remember swinging my fists. I remember screams. I remember pain...

My knuckles are bleeding.

The fury she woke in me is still roaming inside me, a crazed beast that needs to rend flesh and snap bone. I suck in gulps of chilly night air and struggle to regain control.

*She shouldn't have said the things she said.*

Even if they're true.

Are they true?

I start jogging towards the house, weaving past the giant potted cactuses and the gurgling fountains, running at full speed. Oh God, what have I done to her?

Several of my men are standing by the back door, talking, but they all fall silent when I run past them. Their eyes stay fixed on me. I know I'm bloody. I must look crazed. I don't have time to check my reflection in a damn mirror. I have to know. Did I hurt her? Did I kill her? Whose screams do I remember?

I can't live with myself if I've killed her. It will be the end of me.

My heart slams against my ribcage as I tear through the house and into the TV room, where Tamara is sitting on the couch, talking to Astrid and the kids. She's fine. Not a scratch on her that I can see.

Relief makes me dizzy, and I stagger back and lean against the wall. After a minute, I realize they're all staring at me, wary, and Astrid's kids are crowding closer to her on the couch. She's got her arms around her two younger daughters,

and Tamara's moved to put her body between me and the boys.

I look down and realize that there's blood streaming from my arms and my shirt is in tatters. I'm barefoot. How did I not notice that before?

I turn around without a word and head outside again.

Garrett approaches me as I walk through the backyard. "Sir? You all right?" He glances at my arms. I see little pieces of glass and plaster sticking to my wounds; I must have punched walls and mirrors.

I'm numb, in a trancelike state. "I'm sleeping outside," I say.

"But you— Yes, sir." He doesn't like it, but he's not going to argue.

When I reach a mesquite tree at the back of the property, I sink down underneath it, leaning back against the trunk. I stare down at the drying blood on my arms, but I can't summon up the strength to wash it off and bandage my wounds.

I've never felt like this before. I'm filled with bitter, freezing despair that's rising in my throat and choking me. If I've been killing men who resemble my father, if I've been letting him guide me and control my choices from beyond the grave, it means I never really escaped him after all. It means he still has a hold on me, after all these years.

The thought makes me sick.

How fucking weak am I?

And how could I not have known that?

The face of every one of my kills swims in front of my eyes, and I see she's telling the truth. I have lied to myself my

entire life. I don't know myself at all.

The dark night swallows me, and I hear howls of rage and despair and realize they are tearing from my own throat, tearing me apart.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TAMARA

*Tamara, I used to think I was brave, but what I'm doing now is pure cowardice. I know you'll never forgive me, and I do not deserve your forgiveness. Please know that I love you, and please know that I am doing this for you. I am breaking apart. I cannot control myself any longer. I cannot keep you safe from me. I haven't slept in days, and I cannot tell the difference between nightmares and reality. There is a real risk of me killing you even in broad daylight.*

*I have to send you away.*

*You do not need my protection anymore. Micah has been captured. He was found hiding out in a state forest in Nebraska. After he made fools of the prison system last time, they will be watching him 24/7. I also have men on the inside, and they will be watching him around the clock as well. You're safe. You're free—from him, from me, from the evils of our past.*

*I won't send my men to watch you again. I no longer have that right. If you ever need help, I will send it, and if anyone ever tries to hurt you, tell Garrett, and my employees will take care of it.*

*The district attorney will want you to testify against my brother during his trial. Say whatever you want to. I accept all*



*consequences for my actions. Stay safe, be well, and always remember I live only for you now. And living only for you means I must make the ultimate sacrifice. I must give up the only thing in the world that matters to me, to keep from breaking it beyond repair.*

I stare down at the note, and it doesn't make me cry anymore. It makes me very, very angry.

There's a card stapled to the note with Garrett's phone number on it.

I'm sitting in the very fancy hospital suite in New York City where I woke up five days ago. The skin on parts of my chest and my butt are achy and tight. Those are the areas where the plastic surgeons performed a full-thickness skin graft to cover the places where Micah carved and burned his name into my body. There are also two stitched-up areas on my abdomen where the doctors removed the skin for the grafts.

I very carefully tear up the note from Joshua into tiny little pieces and let them drift into the trash bin next to my bed. They fall like snow. They fall like the tears I shed when I first read it and realized that Joshua had abandoned me.

I've read the note so many times I have it memorized. It's branded onto my heart. I will never forget a word of it.

He won't let me stay with him and help him heal.

He won't try to get better for me. *I'm not worth fighting for.*

I cried all day the first time I read the note. I haven't cried since.

Inside me, there's a hollow, aching void. I don't know what to do now. I feel no purpose.

I miss him every second of the day. I miss him when I eat and have nobody to talk to. I miss him when I sleep and Micah chases me through my dreams. I miss him when I slowly, awkwardly give myself sponge baths while sitting up in the hospital bed. The nurse offered to help me, but I waved her away. I can't bear the thought of anyone else's hands on me. Ever.

I saw on the news today that Micah has already announced he will plead guilty to the charges of kidnapping Astrid and her children, of murdering Dr. Barnard, whose body has not yet been found, and of kidnapping and torturing me. He is refusing to speak to a lawyer.

He doesn't feel remorse, I know. I'm sure that he plans to try to escape again at some point.

And Joshua is selling his company. I saw that on the news too.

What will he do with the rest of his life?

Will he dedicate himself to hunting?

Will he find another woman? Or a lot of women? Throw himself back into fucking high-end escorts who don't make any emotional demands on him?

Thinking of that hurts me so much I can't breathe, so I force it out of my head. I stand up, and I find I'm pacing the room aimlessly.

I asked my nurse how long I have the room booked for, and she told me that I could have it for as long as I want it. Like a fancy, overpriced hotel room. Even the food here is excellent.

I look at the torn-up pieces of paper in the trash.

“I’m going to leave today,” I tell her.

When I woke up in the hospital room five days ago, I found my suitcases full of clothes—my old, battered suitcases and the thrift store clothes that I bought myself before I met Joshua. There’s also the cash I had saved up before I met him.

He knows me well enough to know that I wouldn’t accept anything at all from him—not money, not new clothes, not a fucking bus pass. I could ask him for everything he owned, and he’d give it to me. I know that with a dull, aching certainty. But he won’t give me the one thing I want.

He won’t let me stay.

There’s one thing that he left me that I will use—a fake ID, and a card with an appointment at a beauty salon.

I know what he’s doing. He’s giving me a way to change my appearance, and a new name, because my face has been all over the news and it will be hard for me to start over as Tamara Bennett. The fake ID identifies me as Jennifer Dawson

Whatever. I’ll use the name for now.

I check out of the hospital that day and stand on the street with my suitcases at my feet and a yawning sense of emptiness ballooning inside me.

With nowhere else to go, I call a cab and head to the beauty salon. A stylist named Esme seems to have been expecting me.

She does an expert job of bleaching my hair blonde, straightening and layering it so I look nothing like myself. She offers me green contact lenses.

Sure. Why not? Green eyes, purple, silver—who gives a damn?

I'm like a robot, moving and answering mechanically, with no feelings behind my words or actions. Feeling hurts too much.

I spend the night in a hostel, then use my money to buy a bus ticket to Illinois. New York has too many memories for me. I can't stand to be here anymore.

Once I'm there, it's not hard for me to get an off-the-books job waitressing, and I rent a room in a weekly motel. I work night and day. I save every cent that I earn.

I call Astrid and Sarah the first week I'm there, but I refuse to tell them where I am. I just tell them I'm okay and I hang up when they try to ask questions.

I used to be Tam with a plan. I knew what I was going to do with my life. I would live a life of meaning and service. I'd shield the people who were most vulnerable. I knew that was why I'd been put here on this Earth.

And then I met Joshua.

Joshua swooped down on me and carried me off and forced me to live for him, only for him, every minute of the day. He invaded my body and my mind, demanding I give up all my secrets to him. I was deprived of companionship and any sense of purpose except that of pleasing him.

I fought and I fought, but on a level far deeper than I realized, I surrendered completely. I believed him when he said I belonged to him. I came to depend on his strength and his possessiveness and the way he made me know that I was precious to him.

He was my higher purpose.

Without that now, I feel like nothing. I feel like I was a fool to believe he ever loved me.

Days drift by, and I keep thinking he'll change his mind and come for me, but he never does. Days melt into weeks. I spend Christmas and the New Year alone. I spend Valentine's Day in my room, staring at a phone that doesn't ring and hating myself for my weakness.

I get to know some shady characters. I buy a gun without serial numbers and pay Z, the sleazeball who sold it to me, to give me lessons out in the woods where nobody will spot us.

As time drags on, I start to understand why I decided on Springfield, Illinois as my new location. It was subconscious on my part, but now I remember why this particular location appealed to me.

Joshua stripped everything away from me, and I don't have the will to go back to school, but there's still one thing I can do with my life.

One way I can make the world a better place, just like I used to dream of.

One thing that will make Joshua remember the girl he crumpled up and threw away like trash.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

JOSHUA

“*Que mierda*, what is that smell?”

I sit up and look at Sergeant Carter, my eyes bleary. I rub sleep-crusting eyes and try to orient myself. I’m on the couch in the living room of my Manhattan penthouse. Daylight streams through the windows.

Maybe Sergeant Carter is just a nightmare. I have them all the time now, and I can rarely tell whether I’m asleep or awake when they’re happening. I’ve seen my father stalk through my living room, dragging Tamara’s dead body by the ankle. Her eyes were vacant, staring at the ceiling, and she left a long trail of blood behind her. I ran over and grabbed at her, but she melted away, and I was standing in the middle of the room alone.

Charlemagne has hacked my limbs off while I lay helpless on the kitchen table. Elizabeth—poor, stunted girl who lived her life for me and died when I couldn’t love her—howled wordlessly and clawed at him, but he didn’t even see her. My mother...she just stays curled up in the corner of the room, hugging her knees, sobbing wordlessly.

I open my eyes again. Sergeant Carter is still standing there, looking down at me impatiently. Except he was fired, so now he’s just Geoff Carter.

The answer to his question is, I don't know. That smell might be me, or it might be the piles of trash lying around me.

I've disabled all my security systems and fired my entire security team. Garrett remains on retainer, in case Tamara ever needs anything. That's it.

I've got all the money in the world. I could have anything I want—any woman, any toy, with the snap of my fingers.

It doesn't matter.

I broke my promise to the person who matters most in the world. I broke her heart.

I haven't bathed in...days? Weeks?

I drink myself into a stupor every night. In the morning, I wake up and start drinking again.

Carter doesn't look too hot himself. Tired and rumpled, he has circles under his bloodshot eyes. His hair, usually gelled back, is greasy and sticking up in all directions.

"I should get a fucking hazmat team to torch this place," he growls. He walks away from me and heads into the kitchen. He returns with a box of trash bags and starts picking up half-filled takeout boxes.

"Cut it out," I snap at him. "And get the fuck out of my house."

He rakes me with a look of scorn. "Who's going to make me, princess? You?" And he goes back to work, turning his back on me, dismissing me completely as any kind of threat. The man who should be prey, taunting the predator in his lair. *You're a weak little puppy*, is what his scornful gesture says to me.

That's it.



Fury roars through me.

*Nobody speaks to me like that.* You're king or you're nothing.

I leap up and run at him. He drops the garbage bag and turns to face me, so slowly that it's insulting.

We start to spar. For the first couple of minutes, I'm dull and sluggish, my hangover clouding my brain, my muscles slack from lack of use.

But then the old instincts come roaring back to life, and the next thing I know, he's down on the floor, his face purpling as I strangle him.

I almost laugh. This feels like old times. The gurgling noises he's making are kind of funny, and so is the way his eyes are bulging from his head like a cartoon.

But he's not prey. He doesn't fit my requirements, so I let go and he sits up, gasping, wheezing and rubbing his throat.

"Call me princess again," I challenge as I stagger over to the couch and collapse. There's a mariachi band marching through my head. I never realized how much I hated mariachi. They're pounding a brutal rhythm on the inside of my skull with their drumsticks.

"Oh really? Didn't know that was your thing," he sneers, his voice raspy from being choked. He remains unafraid and resumes picking up trash.

"I told you, knock it off and get out of my house, you piece of shit."

He stops. "You're talking to me about shit?" He picks up a takeout carton and tosses it at me. It splatters on the couch. It's crawling with maggots.

“What the hell?” I yell at him, jumping up in disgust.

“You want to live like this? Like a pig in slop?”

A killing fury swirls through me like a tornado. Any sane man would run from me right now. Hell, I made even Tamara run from me, the last night I saw her, and she loved me more than the moon and stars. “Get the hell out!”

Carter has apparently lost all sense of self-preservation. He stands there, looking around. Still not leaving.

Then his squinty brown eyes focus on me again. “I guess you really did love her. Boo fucking hoo. Poor little baby. Of course she dumped you. What did you expect? You’re a fucking nut job.”

“I let her go. I sent her away.” Why am I even bothering to explain myself to him?

“Yeah, whatever.” He turns and heads for the door.

“Wait,” I call after him, my voice raspy. He’s the first person I’ve spoken to in days, unless you count the hallucinations who sweep through my house on a regular basis. And I don’t talk to them much—just scream threats or pleas.

He looks back at me with disgust. “Why? I came here to ask for your help. I wasted my time and my subway token. You couldn’t fucking kill a kitten.”

Someone needs killing? I feel vague interest stirring, underneath the heavy blanket of misery that’s wrapped around me like a reeking cloak.

“Hold on. Give me a few minutes. Please.” Saying that word nearly makes me vomit, but he pauses.

I hurry into the bathroom without looking back to see if he's staying or leaving.

I shower fast, then scrub the foul taste from my mouth with a toothbrush. I dress in wool slacks and a button-down shirt and don't bother with the cuffs, shove my feet into loafers without socks, and return to the living room. He's made significant headway with the trash; there are two big garbage bags stuffed full, and a bin filled with empty wine bottles.

I push a pile of dirty clothes off a leather armchair onto the floor, and sit down. "Who do you want me to kill?" I ask him.

"Gideon Culpepper. That little shit who killed my Molly." He swallows hard and sets down the third bag. The bravado has vanished, and tears shimmer in his eyes. Gideon was a rich little trust-fund brat who introduced Molly to heroin. She overdosed and he split, leaving her to die. And he never did a day in jail.

I gesture at the chair facing mine, and he sinks into it.

"I can get you a drink," I say uneasily. A man is crying in front of me, and it's not because I'm planning on gutting him in the next few minutes. How can I make him stop crying? I don't want to watch him snivel and I don't know how to be comforting.

"Nah, I tried that." He shudders. "I just wake up feeling like shit the next day, and she's still gone."

Yeah, been there, done that. For months now.

Carter's tearstained eyes meet mine, and the only reason I don't puke is because I see the fury shining behind the tears.

"I saw his wedding announcement in the paper, and I thought that maybe he had changed. Maybe he was truly remorseful, maybe my Molly's death turned him around, made

him rethink how he's living his life." His face contorts in grief. "I mean, I thought if he was truly redeemed, then I had to be happy for him. I prayed to God to find the strength to forgive him. I went down on my knees and prayed."

*Yeah, and how'd that work out for you?*

It was my cruel, sarcastic voice. Had I said it out loud?

I glance at him.

Nope, doesn't look like it.

Carter's fists clench. "Then I did some checking around. Nothing's changed. He's beating her, and she wants out, but he told her if she cancels the wedding, he'll kill her little sister and nobody will ever be able to pin it to him. He bragged about getting rid of other girls. *Like my Molly.*"

Something clicks inside me. I nod.

Tamara would want me to do this.

I didn't lie when I told her that I live only for her. I can't talk to her, I can't give her false hope, but I can do things that I know would make her proud.

And the grief that drenches his voice and wrecks him every time he speaks of his lost daughter and calls her "my Molly", I understand that too—horribly, painfully, in a way I never did before.

Empathy sucks. What a useless, stupid emotion. I hate it. If I could scorch it from my soul, I would. But it's in me now, and apparently it's not leaving any time soon.

"All right. Give me his latest location, or I can find it out myself. It's done," I tell him.

Geoff shakes his head vehemently. "No way. It's my kill."

I start to argue, but he interrupts me. And I let him. I am not the man that I once was. “This is my revenge. He hurt *me*. If I let some someone else take my revenge for me, what kind of man am I?”

“So why come to me, then?”

He hesitates. “I don’t know. You’ve done it before. I have to figure out the logistics of transport and all that. How to keep him subdued until I get to where I need to take him. Hell, where to take him. Because I’m going to take my fucking time.”

I think he wants a little more than that. I think he someone to share the burden of sin with him. “All right,” I say. “Let’s start planning.”

“Really?” He’s like a kid who just found out he’s going to Disneyland. He lights up and suddenly looks as if a thousand-ton weight has dropped from his shoulders.

As for me...I still feel vacant. Dull. Thick and ugly. But knowing I’m doing something that would make Tamara happy is enough to cut through my haze of self-pity and get me moving, at least. If only I could tell her about it myself.

A quick glance around the room reminds me why I can’t.

I’ve shattered the mirrors, the vases, and most of the furniture. I’ve stabbed paintings over and over again. Hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of furniture and artwork, destroyed. And I don’t remember doing any of it.

I already broke Tamara’s ribs without meaning to. God only knows what I might do to her if we were together again. And even knowing the danger, she wouldn’t leave me. She’d stay with me, trying to help me, until I killed her.

“Fair warning,” I say to Carter, rubbing my numb face with my hand. “I go for days without sleep and then when I finally pass out from exhaustion, I have nightmares and walk in my sleep and smash the shit out of everything around me.”

His gaze sweeps the room. “So you’re not just a serial killer. You’re a ticking time bomb who’s going to go off at any moment and take out everyone around you.”

“That sums it up nicely.” I manage a brittle smile. “Still want to go ahead with this?”

He scowls in disgust. “Like I have a lot of options? ‘Serial killer team member’ isn’t a job category on LinkedIn. Try not to flip your shit until after we take care of Gideon, okay?”

“I can’t make any promises. All right, let’s talk logistics. You’d be the most logical suspect if he disappeared, right? Everyone knows you tried to get him prosecuted after Molly died, and with you being fired, they’ll be thinking rogue cop on a revenge spree. Which is true. So you need to set yourself up with an ironclad alibi while I grab him, and we can meet up after I’ve held him for a couple of days. It’ll take the heat off you.”

“That’s easy. I work security at a nightclub now.” He frowns in thought. “Tools. I have to think what I’m gonna bring with me.”

I haven’t even searched him to see if he’s wired. I could be handing myself over to him for a prison sentence. But I’m reckless and uncaring now. The hell with it. “I like knives,” I say with a smile that would freeze the blood of a sane man. A man who wasn’t crazed with grief.

Carter just nods in appreciation. “I feel like I’m gonna be more of a hammer man.”

*“Gonna be”, like this is going to be a regular thing?* I wonder. But hey, nothing wrong with hammers. They get the job done.

“Hammers can be very effective tools,” I say. “I’ve got a property in upstate New York you can use. Nothing fancy—a cabin out in the woods, incinerator to dispose of the remains, lots of bleach. Let’s pick a night.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY



## JOSHUA

Gideon's been chained up to the wall of my cellar for two days now. I let him drink bottles of water and I feed him; it's no fun killing someone who's ready to pass out from hunger and dehydration. Weak prey is boring. The prey needs its strength so it can put up a good fight.

Gideon mistook my feeding him for mercy.

He started out arrogant, threatening me, sneering, telling me I didn't know who I was fucking with. That was funny. If the loss of Tamara hadn't burned away my ability to feel happiness, I'd have laughed my ass off.

Gideon moved on pretty quickly to desperation. He wanted to know how much ransom I was asking for, how the negotiations were going, and how much longer he'd be here.

I didn't speak to him. Not one word.

That's started to scare him.

He's begun offering bribes, throwing in more and more money until, just as Carter walks in the door, he's weeping like a little girl and promising everything he has and a lot of shit he doesn't if I'll just let him go and please, please, he'll never say a word about who took him, and...

When his eyes light on Carter, his face goes fish-belly white.

“Remember me? Remember *Molly*?” Carter’s eyes have a crazy light I recognize all too well. It’s almost a shame. Carter was a very good man, once upon a time. And now he’s my spiritual brother.

Carter and I unchain Gideon, then carry him over to the table in the middle of the room as he struggles and screams. I was hoping for more fight. Gideon’s much weaker than the type of prey I normally hunt, but then again, he’s Carter’s prize, not mine.

I pull the chains up from the table legs, and Carter and I chain Gideon down. His pale, skinny body convulses, and when Carter sets a toolbox down next to Gideon’s head and opens it, Gideon makes beautiful music with his screams.

I settle back to watch as Carter goes to work.

He starts with the hands, mashing Gideon’s fingers to pulp. He moves on to his ribcage, his arms, his nose. He takes his time, drawing it out, savoring every moment.

He’s good. He knows where all the pain points are.

I stand by with a bucket of ice water, dumping it on Gideon’s head whenever he passes out.

Gideon’s a waste of space, but I will say this, he has very healthy lungs. He makes noises long past the time I thought he’d be unable to draw breath.

Many hours have passed when Carter finally drops his hammer to the floor. I look over at him to see how he’s taking all this. His purpose in life used to be the pursuit of justice. Will this tip him over the edge? Will he sink into self-loathing and remorse for what he’s done?

Apparently not.

He's breathing like he just ran a marathon. And grinning.

Gideon's six feet of mashed, quivering flesh.

"Shall we finish him?" I ask Carter.

"Nah." His fierce grin is fixed on Gideon. "I want to sit here and watch the light fade from his eyes."

Damn. He's really got what it takes.

I look at the red, ruined thing that used to be Gideon, and try to summon up joy, triumph, satisfaction. Instead, a great weariness washes over me.

"I'm going to sleep," I tell him. There's a cot in the corner, and I collapse onto it and am asleep within seconds.

I wake up on my feet, looking around wildly. Carter is standing there, gun pointed at my head.

"What the fuck?" I yell.

He narrows his eyes, gun still pointed at me. "You were screaming you were going to kill everyone."

I shake my head, and fuzzy images of my father swim in front of my eyes. I blink and shake my head. "Sorry," I mutter.

"We good?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." I blink hard again and look around the room. It stinks of bleach. Gideon is gone, and the table and floor are so clean they gleam. Carter has showered and is wearing jeans and a sweater. He looks ten years younger.

He shrugs and lowers the gun, tucking it back in its holster.

I actually feel better than I have in a while, physically anyway. I'm not exhausted and I'm not hungover. "How long

was I asleep?”

“Ten hours.”

“Damn. What did you do with Gideon?”

“Fed him into the incinerator. He wasn’t quite dead when I put him in. Now he is.” Carter has got a predator’s grin curving his lips. Damn. When he went dark, he went all the way.

My head’s still foggy. “I’m going to take a shower,” I mutter, and I leave Carter to go upstairs.

The cabin is warm; Carter kept the wood stove fed.

When I’m done with my shower, Carter has cooked breakfast, and I sit down at the table and eat powdered scrambled eggs and warmed-up freeze-dried bacon.

He sits down across from me, drinking black coffee. “After this, I want to grab Peter Brown. Unless you’ve got someone you want to take care of first.”

I take a big swig of coffee from the mug next to my plate, scowling at him. “What did you just say?”

He shrugs. “It’s only fair. We can take turns. After my wife’s boss, I’ve got a whole long list of shitheels who got away with too much and are walking around wasting oxygen they don’t deserve.”

“No, no, no.” I shake my head vigorously. “This was a one-time thing. Well, if you want to take out your wife’s boss, a two-time thing. That’s all I promised you. Then we’re done.”

“Done?” I think he actually looks kind of hurt. “Why?”

*Because what part of “fucked-in-the-head serial killer” do you not understand?*

I can't spend time with anyone without wanting to kill them. Except Tamara. And look how well that ended.

It ended.

Carter is a good guy. It would be better if I didn't hang out with him long enough to gut him during one of my waking nightmares.

"Because you get on my nerves," I spit the words out. "Because I don't like you well enough to enter into some kind of stupid serial killer partnership. I made a deal. I honored my side of the bargain. I kept my promise to help you get revenge. That's it. It doesn't mean we braid each other's hair and paint each other's fingernails now."

He's just staring at me. I need to pound this into his thick skull. "You wear cheap cologne, you use bad grammar, and you stink like a toilet." If I'm offensive enough, he'll just give up and go away.

He just snorts in annoyance and downs half his cup of coffee. "I don't like you either. And I'm talking about working together, not dating, asshole."

"I'm not even a good partner. In case you're too thick-headed to notice, I'm losing my fucking mind," I say to him. "I'll screw up at some point and drag us both down."

Carter should be insulted, but instead he smiles. "After today? That was a high I never want to come down from. I'm willing to take that chance. I told you when I first met you, I'm a man with nothing to lose. And you? What else have you got to live for? Either help me or go back to your castle in the sky and drink yourself to death." He stands and carries his dishes to the sink.

“Why exactly don’t you like *me*?” I say with annoyance. “I dress impeccably, I’m brilliant, and I excel at everything I do. What is there to dislike?”

“The fact that you say things like that.” He waves a dish towel at me. “I’m not your maid. Bring the fucking dishes to the sink.”

And just like that, I’ve got a partner.

But it won’t last long.

Because without Tamara, I feel like I’m dying. Without Tamara, I don’t really care that I’m dying. This is just something to do to pass the rage-filled final days.

A week later, I’m back home, looking through my list of potential kills. I managed to convince Carter that we need to wait a few months before we grab his late-wife’s boss. It’ll be too obvious otherwise. He’s eager to get back to work. He’s taken to this with an admirable and alarming ferocity. A man like him needs a purpose in life.

I’ve started taking prescription sleeping aids. I manage to catch a decent night’s sleep every two or three days now.

I still have nightmares, but the meds seem to help a little.

I wonder if I should try to track Tamara down. She’s completely off the grid these days, not using the ID I gave her, not using her real name either. Last I knew, she had taken a bus to Illinois. I’ve forced myself to refrain from searching for her. It’s brutally hard. The need to know what she’s doing, how she’s doing, is like a constant itch I can’t let myself scratch.

Is she dating someone else?

*I’d kill them. I’d carve them to pieces.*

No. That's not fair. I relinquished my claim on her. She can live her life any way she wants to now.

*Fuck fairness. When have I ever even claimed to be fair? Being fair is for the weak.*

With a mighty effort, I force myself to concentrate on my list again. I work on updating my information, reviewing where these assholes are and what they've been up to. And I see that one of my subjects, a millionaire who is addicted to kiddie porn, has been shot to death in his own home. Nothing was stolen, no sign of forced entry, police have no clues.

A faint warning bell sounds in my head, but it can't mean what I think it means.

Uneasy, I move on to the next name on my list.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



TAMARA

*Springfield, Illinois...*

It's a beautiful spring day.

There's a man lying at my feet, bleeding out on the sidewalk.

People are running away from me, ducking behind mailboxes and cars, screaming. People are staring at me through the glass storefront windows, mouths making enormous Os of shock and horror. They're looking at me like I'm a monster.

They don't know what kind of man he was. I imagine they'll find out soon enough, when they see the evening news.

Jonas Coulter was a social worker. He was a pedophile. He hired a fancy lawyer and managed to get the charges thrown out because he wasn't read his Miranda rights, and even got his job back.

He was on Joshua's list. But Joshua was taking too long to get to him.

Just like the last three I took care of.

Unlike Joshua, I'm not into torture. I got in, took them out with one shot, and got out. I used a different gun in each shooting. None of the men had ties to each other, and they were all in different states, so the police never connected the dots, but I know Joshua must have.

I waited for him to come find me, but he never did.

So I upped my game.

I eliminated Jonas Coulter in broad daylight, right on a crowded street corner, during his lunch break, on his first day back at work. The world is a better place without him.

I hear sirens, so I very carefully set the gun down on the sidewalk by my feet, and I wait.

*Not so long ago, Joshua Smith kidnapped a girl. A frightened girl who had no idea of the true evil that exists in the world. And now he's finally pushed me too far. He's committed the one unforgivable sin.*

*He abandoned me and broke my heart. He made our love a lie.*

*I'm not a broken, frightened girl anymore. Now I'm a woman. A very angry woman, who knows her own worth and who will not be trifled with again. A woman with nothing to lose.*

*When I woke up this morning, I didn't know I was going to kill Jonas Coulter. But I tucked a gun in my purse and found myself wandering downtown, right past his office building. And now...*

*I hear gurgling. I smell blood. I close my eyes and search for peace.*

*This feels familiar. I've come full circle from the night I saw Joshua as he really was for the first time. The night he took me. The night he killed the security guard and invited me into his world of love and madness.*

*I open my eyes and look down at Jonas Coulter and feel nothing but emptiness. Not the release I sought.*

*"Are you sorry now?" I ask, but it's not him I'm speaking to. It's Joshua.*



Astrid will be arriving to visit me soon.

I feel badly she came all this way, but it will be nice to see her again. I'm being held in a hospital for the criminally insane, just outside Springfield.

After I was arrested, Joshua came to the jail and tried to come and speak to me, but I turned him away. My whole body ached with longing for him, but I stayed strong. It's *April*. He sent me away in November. It's been four months. It's too late for him to say sorry.

Then he hired a lawyer who came and tried to speak to me.

As soon as the lawyer started trying to give me messages from Joshua, I held up my hand and told him to shut up if he wanted to keep representing me. He had a worried look on his face.

"Joshua said that I had to give his messages to you. He made it very clear what would happen to me if I didn't."

Should I feel pity for him? I couldn't tell. All my emotions seem to have been leached out of me. Pity, love, hate, hope,

desire. I feel nothing. I don't know if I'll ever feel anything again. No, that's not entirely true. I feel *anger*. A lot of anger.

When the lawyer kept talking, when he disrespected my one request, when he said, "Joshua says he missed you every single day and— *Ahhhh!*" I got angry and jammed my pen right through his hand. Because hearing about Joshua or even thinking about Joshua is the only thing that has the power to hurt me these days, and I think I've suffered enough for one life time, thank you very much.

After that, I received a public defender and I wasn't allowed to have pens anymore. Only crayons. The public defender was the one who got me moved to the mental hospital. He says it will be easy for him to get me a sentence of not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. After what Joshua's brother did to me, obviously I suffered deep, long-lasting psychological damage. And when I saw the news stories about Jonas Coulter, I developed an obsession with him and *blah blah blah*... I stopped listening and nodded politely.

Sounds good.

Whatever.

I toy with telling them about the other three men I killed. I haven't yet. I might someday, just for fun.

In the meantime, I'm content to be where I am. They have a good library here; I'm getting a lot of reading done. I've finally gotten my appetite back after months of barely forcing myself to choke down food. I'm eating all the time now, gaining weight. I've increased a clothing size at least.

The door to the room opens and Astrid comes in. She looks good. The circles are gone from under her eyes, and so is the pinched look of worry. Her hair is styled again, honey

blonde, flat-ironed and shiny. She's wearing a pale blue sweater and slacks. No purse, no coat—they must be holding them for her outside the room. She does have an apple Danish for me.

There's a guard standing by the door, arms folded, watching my every move. The only furniture in the room is two folding chairs.

Astrid's face is creased with pity as she reaches out to hug me.

“No touching!” The guard barks at her. Astrid shoots him an exasperated look and sinks down in the chair.

“Sorry,” I say to her apologetically. “Can't get good help these days.” Astrid hands me the pastry, and I wolf it down.

“My God, Tamara. I've been so worried about you. But I talked to your lawyer and he seems optimistic.” She gives me a hopeful smile as she says that.

“Nothing to worry about,” I say. “I mean that, Astrid. I don't want you to waste mental energy on me. I want you to concentrate on yourself and the kids. How are they doing?”

“Well, Joshua bought our house— Sorry,” she says, when she sees me twitch. “I won't say that name again. Our house sold. We got a very good price for it, and we're buying a house in Colorado. Starting fresh.”

“Any sign of...” I let the words trail off.

She manages a tight smile. “My ex-husband? He's my ex now. I was granted a divorce. No, there's no clue where he might be. We all know what happened to him, though, don't we? Despite everything, I hope it was quick.”

But we both know it wasn't.

“Anyway,” she continues, “the kids and I are going to testify during your trial. We’ll be character witnesses. I know the temporary insanity plea will work. The media coverage has been really sympathetic, you know. The publicist has people rallying for you. They’re calling you a hero for killing that scumbag.”

“Publicist?” I ask, then I see her wince.

Joshua.

He hired a publicist.

Fucking hell. I just want him to leave me *alone*.

Well, I want more than that. I want him never to have left me. I want him to break through these doors and carry me away... But I can’t have all that, so I want to forget he ever lived.

“Anyway. Change of subject. Geoff says hi,” she says, shifting in the chair.

I’m momentarily baffled. “Who?”

“Oh. Sergeant Carter. Ex-sergeant. He lost his job when he came to California to rescue us. He’s doing security work now.” She’s blushing a little and looks away.

I actually feel a tiny spark of happiness for her, shining brightly above the dullness. “Geoff, huh?”

She tries to hide her smile and fails. “We’re sort of dating, I guess.”

I arch a skeptical eyebrow. “How’s that work? Is that like being sort of a virgin or sort of dead?”

Astrid snorts and rolls her eyes. “Okay, okay. We’re dating. He’s been flying out to Colorado to visit me and has a

job lined up there. Is that weird? I mean, given how we met?”

“Not weird at all. You guys share a unique bond. And he’s a really good person, I could tell. He visited me in the hospital after I was rescued.”

“The kids like him a lot. My boys need a father figure.” She sounds a little defensive.

“Astrid. Seriously, I’m delighted.”

“Sorry.” She shifts in her seat, brushing imaginary lint off her pants with flattened palms. “I guess I feel like it’s a freaky way to meet a man, but...I really like him.”

“You deserve this, Astrid.”

“Thank you.” She looks at me with worry. “I feel like I failed you.”

“You did no such thing. I’m a big girl. I make my own decisions, and I live with the consequences. Nothing you could have said or done would have stopped me.” She doesn’t look convinced. “Astrid, you were the bravest person I’ve ever met when we were at Micah’s house, and the best mother. I will always be grateful for what you did for me. I want you to live your life and be happy and not worry about me at all. You don’t even have to come to the trial. You should put all this behind you.”

She reaches out and grabs my hand. “Never,” she says firmly.

“No touching!” the guard yells, louder this time.

After Astrid leaves, I settle back into my routine for the next few days, watching TV, reading, sleeping, eating. A lot.

One day I feel something weird in my stomach, something I can’t describe, and I ask to go to the clinic. They run tests,

the nurse calls the doctor in, and they look at me with dismay.

And what the doctor says to me changes everything.

I call up my lawyer and beg him to ask Joshua to visit me.

A day goes by. Two days. I start to panic.

He's not coming. He's really not coming. If he doesn't come... I can't even think of it. I've lived in the darkness before, but this is my worst nightmare.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

## JOSHUA

A storm of emotions swarm through me when I see Tamara sitting across from me, so pale, her face strained, swallowed up by baggy beige hospital clothes. I'm grateful and happy and guilty as hell.

She has bluish half-moon circles under her eyes. Her hair was bleached blonde when she came here, and now she has six inches of dark roots and her hair hangs limply around her shoulders. I want to bathe her. I want to make her clean and new again. I want to run my fingers through her hair. I want to wash away her sorrow and anger and kiss her from head to toe until she forgives me.

“Tamara, I'm so sorry this happened. It's all my fault,” I say, sitting down in the metal chair next to her—under the watchful eye of the guard who's standing across the room from us, waiting to pounce in case this frail little waif should attempt to attack me. Thanks to a fat bribe, the guard is farther away than she normally would be, so I can speak without her overhearing, but that's all she can do; she can't leave me alone with Tamara.

Tamara manages a smile, or maybe it's a grimace. “No argument there.”

I take her hand in mine. “I was losing my mind. I really thought I’d kill you. I was sleepwalking and destroying the furniture and smashing windows without realizing it. I was hallucinating, seeing my father running at me with knives and lashing out at him, then I’d wake with my fists inside the holes I punched in the wall.” I hold up my hands, which are covered with new pink scars.

“You could have done other things besides send me away.” Her voice is tight and angry, her eyes accusing. “You could have had guards watch over you. You could have at least tried therapy. You didn’t even try.”

I swallow as my throat closes with guilt. “You’re right,” I tell her. “I see that now. I just... I felt like I was falling into a black hole, and I was never going to climb out of it. I thought that it wouldn’t be long before I went stark raving mad. I didn’t want you to be there for that. I’m really dangerous, Tamara, you know that.”

“And now? How are you now?” She’s looking at me intently. Like my answer is really important.

I don’t deserve her concern. I don’t deserve her, but I want her, and I’ll fight for her.

“I think I’m coming out of the worst of it. Bit by bit. I’ve been taking some prescription medicine that helps me sleep. When I’m less tired, I don’t hallucinate, and I’m not having the nightmares as often.” I lower my voice, even though I know the guard can’t hear us. “I’ve been hunting. A lot. It’s helped me. I think I needed that. Denying that need, on top of everything else that happened, might have been what tipped me over the edge.”

“So you’re better now?” she prods.

“Yes. I am.” I’m better now that I’m in the room with Tamara. Sending her away was a stupid, unforgivable mistake, and I am grateful beyond words that she’s agreed to let me see her. The dull fog of despair that’s been clinging to me is lifting. I can see more clearly now than I have in ages. “I’m going to be with you right through the trial. We’ll get you moved to a halfway house, I’m completely confident of that. And then I’ll see to it that they fast-track you for early release. Are they treating you all right here? If not, I’ll get you moved to another facility.”

“I can’t wait for the trial. I need you to get me out right away,” she says in a low voice.

“Why? Is someone hurting you?” A supernova of fury flares up inside me.

She grabs my hands and clings to them. The guard pretends not to see.

“Promise me you won’t leave me.” Her voice is low and intense.

“I promise.” My heart lifts with joy. “Never again. If you can put up with my fucked-up self, I’ll never leave you again. If the nightmares are too much, I’ll hire guards twenty-four hours a day to keep you safe from me. I’ll do anything. I’ll talk to a therapist, I’ll take medication—whatever needs to happen. I’ll build you a safe room if you need it. Or me. I’ll lock myself in a cage at night.” The words tumble from my mouth, one after the other, in a rush to grab her and bring her back to me.

Her eyes grow huge, tears spilling down her cheeks. “Promise me you won’t take her from me.”

“Take who?” Now I’m worried. Has she really lost her mind? When she killed those men, I thought she was doing it to get my attention. I didn’t think she’d gone crazy, but the look in her eyes right now is pure madness.

What have I done to her?

“My baby.”

*Her baby?*

“I’m almost six months pregnant. I couldn’t believe it, because I’m just starting to show, but I felt the baby move and went to the clinic, and they confirmed it. A little girl. The doctor said it’s unusual but not unheard of, that some girls who are naturally skinny and who are having their first child don’t show right up until the baby’s born. I haven’t had my period in years, and when you and I were together... I know you always used a condom, but...”

How did I not notice that she never got her period? I mean, I had her locked up for months.

*Because I never think of anyone but myself.*

Shock ices my blood. “Do you remember that time you ambushed me and we screwed right after? And I yelled out ‘fuck’?”

“Kind of?” She hugs herself, and more tears run down her cheeks.

“The condom ripped. That’s why I yelled. But I just... I didn’t think... I guess I was too busy going crazy to let myself worry about the fact that I might have gotten you pregnant.”

I’m going to be a father.

Me.

Murderer. Ruthless psychopath.

Daddy.

She's crying so hard she's shaking.

“They won't even let me have utensils in here, Joshua. They'll never let me keep my baby. They'll take her away from me and put her up for adoption. Or once they do a DNA test and you prove you're the father, they'll let you have her but never let me see her. And there's a serious chance that the only way you'll be able to keep her is if you promise not to let me near her. Please, Joshua, please. I'm begging you. I'll do anything if you get me out of here. Anything.”

A great calm descends on me.

“You want me to get you out of here? You want us to be a family? Then you have to promise me that you belong to me and that you're mine forever. Promise that you forgive me for my stupid mistake and you'll never try to leave me,” I say. And that is when I know that I am truly evil, for extorting her when she's as helpless as she'll ever be, but I also know that I will give everything I have to give Tamara and my daughter a good life. They will be safe and loved as I never was.

“I swear I'll do whatever you want. Please, Joshua, please help me.” Her eyes are enormous, shimmering lakes of tears. “I want us to be a family. I love you. I've always loved you. I loved you so much that when you left me, I went crazy. You're the strongest man I've ever known. You're the man who can keep our daughter safe from the world. I'll go down on my knees for you, Joshua, I'll crawl for you. Just get me out of here. Get *us* out of here.” She glances down at her belly.

God, I love it when she begs.

“You will be my possession. My property. My slave and my lover.” I stare into her eyes, capturing her gaze. “I will punish you when I want, how I want, as hard as I want, and I won’t need a reason. I’m going to make a special collar just for you, and somewhere on your body, you’ll always be wearing it. Our daughter will never know that side of our life, but it will be there, always. We’ll have nannies to watch her when I want to take you. In private, you’ll call me Sir. I’ll fucking tie you down and spread you open and take you any time I want.”

I’m getting hard as I talk. The dark, dirty side of me is excited by what I’m doing to her right now. How I’m claiming her. How primal and right it feels.

“Yes,” she breathes. I can smell the musky scent of her arousal. “I will belong to you. I’ll be yours.”

Triumph makes me giddy. “Say ‘Yes, Sir’.”

“Yes, Sir.”

My smile turns cruel. “Yes to what, Tamara? The answer is very important.”

“Yes, I’ll be yours.” There’s an edge of desperation in her voice. “Your slave, your property, your fucktoy, your whipping post. As long as I can also be her mother.”

“Time’s up!” The guard calls, and Tamara stiffens with panic.

I hide my smile. Good. Let her feel afraid for a little while. It’ll make her that much more obedient when I get her out. “Hang in there. It won’t be long.”

## EPILOGUE



JOSHUA

*Five years later...*

It's a glorious summer day in a countryside village near Lyon, France. That's where we fled to start our new lives after I paid for Tamara to be smuggled out of the hospital. Except her name is now Celeste, and mine is Darcy.

With plastic surgery and colored contact lenses and fake ID, we slipped into our new roles easily. We both speak French fluently now, with no trace of an accent.

We live in a beautiful chateau that was once a medieval fortress. We're surrounded by hundreds of acres of lavender fields, vineyards, and apple orchards.

My brother remains behind bars. I still have an entire team working undercover who are dedicated to watching him at all times. He'll never be free again. I managed to recover the money he stole from me, after several years of effort.

We are still in touch with Carter and Astrid. Once they fell in love, Carter lost the urge to kill. His passion for vengeance was pushed aside by his passion for Astrid. They're married, and the happy parents of a three-year-old girl and a two-year-old boy. Late-life parenting seems to agree with them. He

owns a private security company that I funded. They all fly out to visit us during holidays.

I'm paying for Astrid's daughters to go to college, and I have a team of men assigned to them too. That was at Astrid's request. She still worries about her children. She should worry more about what would happen to any man who even looked at them the wrong way. His death would be long and painful.

Paul and Fletcher will be going off to college soon enough. I built an aviary for Paul so he could study birds up close. Fletcher's a black belt in Tae Kwan Do.

My wife, my slave, my lover, was not able to go to law school, so I created a charitable foundation for her to run here in Lyon. It provides free legal services to battered women, and education and homes for them as they rebuild their lives.

My wife also helps me to plan out my hunts. She loves to do it.

My hunts span the continent of Europe. I have noticed that I am no longer drawn just to men who look like my father. One could say this is a sign that I'm less crazy than I used to be, but then again, I slowly torture and kill half a dozen men a year, so that's probably giving myself too much credit.

I still have nightmares sometimes. We have a protocol in place for when that happens. She leaves the bedroom immediately, not trying to speak to me or interact with me in any way. She contacts my security team and they tranquilize me and then strap me down until I wake up. It happens every couple of months.

It's a crazy, fucked-up way to live.

But then, *we're* crazy. Both of us, in our own special ways. That's why we work. We're two puzzle pieces who fit together

perfectly and make a whole. Separated, we're broken, empty vessels. Together we're a unit, strong, unbreakable.

Celeste/Tamara and I have three blue-eyed children—Emilie, Francois, and Bastien—who are sweet and happy and deeply loved. I watch them all the time, secretly, searching for signs of madness. I know my wife does too. We have many animals here, and we watch the children play with their pet rabbits and puppies and kittens. They never try to hurt them.

Bastien is intense, fierce and focused like I am, but that is all. He has never shown the slightest inclination toward cruelty. He doesn't even like it when we scold the animals for misbehaving. He gets right up in our faces and shakes his little finger, chastising us, fearless, if we raise our voices to his puppy. And Emilie and Francois are so kind and gentle, like their mother, that if they didn't look just like me, I'd wonder who their father was.

It makes me wonder if what my wife believes is true—if I was made into the monster I am, rather than being cursed with it from birth.

But either way, I am still a cruel, cruel man.

That's why I'm smiling to myself as I walk into the bedroom where my wife has been strapped down to a chair for the last hour. The children are with their beloved nanny, Marie, and I've got my wife all to myself until tomorrow morning.

The room is glorious, with flagstone floors, antique silk wallpaper and hand-painted wooden timbers running overhead. Our furniture is Louis XIV style – much of it modified so that I can restrain my wife in whatever position I want her to be in.

She looks up when I come in the bedroom. She's naked, legs spread open and squirming with need. I have a vibrator inserted inside her, and I set it to go for thirty seconds at a time. Then it stops for a minute. Then it starts up again. Enough to get her desperately aroused. Not enough to let her come.

Very slowly, I unbutton my shirt as she glares at me.

“This isn't fair, Sir,” she pants, speaking in English because we are alone.

“Oh, how sad.” I mock her with my tone and my eyes.

I carefully fold my shirt and lay it on top of the dresser. Just then the vibrator starts up again, and she cries out, eyes rolling back in her head. “Oh God, please, Sir... Please let me c-c-come... Uh... Oh God...”

I watch with interest as she writhes against the chains that hold her. Then I step out of my pants, fold them up neatly, and set them next to my shirt. Next I remove my socks and shoes. Finally, I walk over and unchain her. “You don't move until I say so.”

“Yes, Sir,” she gasps. “Oh, oh, oh...” The vibrator starts up again.

With my toe, I nudge the silver bangle on her ankle—the one shaped like a collar. Our little secret.

“What did you do wrong?”

“I got dirt on my collar... But Sir...you asked me to pick herbs from the garden. There was no way for me to keep it clean— Oh, oh, oh, oh...”

I take pity on my beautiful wife, and I grab her hand and pull her to her feet. Then I slide the vibrator out of her and put

it on the dresser on a tray next to my clothing. “Hands behind your back.”

She obeys instantly. I deliver half a dozen stinging slaps to her beautiful breasts, and she gasps in pain but doesn't move. “That's for complaining. Now bend over and put your hands on the bed.”

She hurries to obey.

I stalk up behind her and grab her by the hips. She's so wet, so ready for me, that I enter in one brutal thrust. “Who owns this pussy?” I reach around to stroke the tiny pink pearl between her legs, and she moans and pushes back.

“You do, Sir!” She gasps with the effort of forming words. I've got her so aroused that she can barely speak.

“Damn straight.”

The scent of her arousal is a sweet aphrodisiac. She's shaved bare for me, and her wet lips embrace me as we move in rhythm.

My beautiful, crazy wife.

She knew she'd get her ankle collar dirty. She went outside barefoot. I watched her on our security cameras. She dragged her ankle through the mud on purpose. She does these little things all the time. Defies me so I'll have to punish her.

She craves the punishment, the anticipation spicing her pleasure. She knows I'll never go too far with her. I am a master at dragging her to the edge of pain and ecstasy and then pulling her back just in time.

I am *her* master.

And she is moaning my name now, begging me to go harder.

I could draw it out, but there's no need to be greedy. We've got all night.

So I fuck her hard, holding her still, pumping into her until I have her right where I want her. Giving her exactly what she needs. I love to pour glorious, mind-bending pleasure into her body, because she deserves it so very much. She deserves the whole universe, and I am dedicated to laying it at her feet.

When she comes, her tight sheath squeezes me so hard I'm tipped right over the edge with her. I explode into her, filling her with my sticky seed. Then I hold her tightly, staying inside her for a long time. Have I planted yet another baby in my lovely wife? I hope so. I love her pregnant, so glorious and ripe and swelling with new life. I love our children, those strange, tender, sweet little aliens who look like me and have been blessed with their mother's kindness.

I slide out of her at last, and she sinks to her knees and kisses my feet, all the while murmuring, "Thank you for letting me come, Sir. Thank you, Sir." Then she looks up at me. "Do you love me, Sir?"

Her one insecurity. I can never say it enough, so I say it all the time.

This woman saved me from a life of loneliness, a cold, empty existence that lacked in purpose. I was standing on the top of a mountain, alone, separated from humanity, breathing very thin air, when she came to join me and warmed my icy soul.

She filled my life with warmth and unconditional love. She gave me beautiful children who showed me that I am not made of tainted meat after all. Perfect, kind, adored children, issued forth from my loins, and their happy smiles and sweet natures tell me that I was not born damned.

And I can love them, and I can love her, without wanting to ever cause them harm.

Because she loved *me*. Because she forgave the unforgivable and found the good hidden deep, deep inside, where others feared to look.

I smile down at her, and I make sure to give my fond look with that hint of cruelty that turns her on so much. “I love you, baby. I love you so much I’d fucking die for you. Now get your ass in the tub. You’re a very dirty girl, and dirty girls need to be washed. And then punished.”

Thank you for reading *Cruel Captor*. If you’d like to continue reading in this world, [click here](#) to pre order the next book in the series. *Cruel Endings* releases April 19th!