

A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark suit jacket over a dark shirt, is shown from the chest up. He is looking down and to the right with a serious expression. His hands are near his chest, and there are some red smudges on his shirt. The background is dark with scattered red spots, suggesting blood. The overall mood is dark and intense.

THE DESECRATION OF *What About Us* SERIES

CRUEL

Control

CANDACE WONDRAK

Cruel Control

The Desecration of Innocence: Book One

Candace Wondrak

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Author's note (so let's see how many readers will ignore this and the trigger warning stated in the blurb and give me one-star reviews for exactly what I'm about to warn you guys of, lol):

Be aware this book contains many triggers, and as the series goes on, it will contain more. These include but are not limited to: violence, gore, murder, assault, non/dub con, and kidnapping.

DO NOT read if you cannot handle love interests who are not nice. These guys are cruel. They take what they want. You've been warned multiple times.

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Chapter One – Juliet

When you spent all your time alone, stuck in the same place, your mind ran away from you. When you sat just outside the reach of the sun, wondering if you'd ever feel its unbridled heat on your skin, your daydreams took over. I was a good girl. I listened to Daddy, and yet, was my mind sane? Did I ever want to shed the invisible shackles on my body and run outside, go wherever I wanted and do whatever I wanted?

Daddy would want me to say no, but I knew the truth, and that was why I kept it tucked away, hidden in the darkest parts of my head. Only in my dreams could I truly be free.

I couldn't remember my mom anymore; she'd died so long ago, and Daddy had gotten rid of her face in the house. We'd moved since then, of course, but I still wondered how different things would be if she was still alive.

Would I be stuck in this house? Would I be alone so often, while Daddy was away, wishing I wasn't? Would I want things I could never have?

I often wondered what it was like, for those people out there who lived what I called a normal life. The kids who went to school, the ones who were going to college now. I was eighteen; I graduated my online school a few months back, but when I'd brought up college, showed Daddy the brochures we'd gotten in the mail, all he'd done was give me a disappointed look and tell me I shouldn't have gone out to the mailbox.

I was a prisoner here, you see, only Daddy never told me why. I could only go out in the backyard when he was home, when he could watch over me. I'd tried to sneak out once, years ago, back when I was feeling rambunctious like the young teenager I was... but he'd found me, caught me, and dragged me back home, giving me a lecture that the world wasn't a safe place for a sweet thing like me.

Was I sweet? Was I innocent? I didn't know the answers to those questions. Wouldn't a sweet and innocent girl blindly follow what her father told her? I did, yes, but in my mind I still entertained ideas of a different life. Daddy would be so saddened if he could read my thoughts.

Speaking of Daddy, he should be getting back anytime now. I sat on the couch in the living room, watching the TV—but not *really* watching it. It was on the news, and the news anchors were talking with a behavioral specialist, someone who spent their entire lives chasing the devils of this world.

Of which there were many, the Hillside Stalker the most recent.

I sat, half-paying attention, while my other half kept glancing to my right, toward the window that overlooked the front yard. I kept expecting Daddy's headlights to turn into the driveway, for his familiar car to pull up... but he wasn't home yet. The house was mine and mine alone.

When I turned my attention back to the television, the news segment had gone to a commercial. It did not surprise me the national news was spending most of its half-hour time slot talking about the newest killer stalking the streets of America. With how good technology was, everyone always thought serial killers were a thing of the past, but they weren't. They were your neighbors, your family members, the ones who you never saw coming. That was their gift.

I never understood the need to hurt someone else, but then, I supposed I didn't really have much in life to compare anything to, being stuck here all the time. I never wanted to hurt Daddy; I wanted to be a good girl, a good daughter, and that meant listening to him. It also meant never speaking to anyone else out there, never learning the true nature of the people in the world.

From what I could see on the news, people were mostly cruel, although sometimes they weren't.

Daddy was usually home by dinner, but tonight I had to make myself something in the microwave, swallow it down dutifully, and then clean up by myself. I went upstairs and

showered, taking my time in the steamy room. When I actually went to bed, it was almost nine o'clock, and he still wasn't back.

I lay there under the sheets, staring at the black ceiling above me. I hoped Daddy was okay; his work often took him all over the place. He had friends in high places, too. I wasn't sure what he did, for he was always tight-lipped about it, but I knew it had to bring in enough money to pay for this house and all the bills that came with it.

Sleep was slow to come to me, and when it did, I did not dream. Instead, my mind came alive with a memory. A memory of a time a few years ago, when I'd been a wide-eyed sixteen-year-old girl, breathing air that, finally, was not in this house.

I'd all but begged Daddy to take me with him. It wasn't a job from what I understood; more like a little party. Although, I hesitated to call it a party with what we had to wear. I had on my fanciest dress, a knee-length thing with black tights on underneath, flats on my feet. The fabric came up to my neck, tied behind it. I'd taken my blonde hair and curled it a bit, gave its length some waves.

Daddy looked handsome, too. He wore a dark grey suit, something I couldn't remember ever seeing him in. He was just twenty years older than me, but I knew taking care of me by himself was hard. He had wrinkles around his green eyes, a bit of grey in his light brown hair. Neither of which I inherited from him. I owed my looks to my mom.

The night sky above us was full of stars, entire galaxies whispering invisible promises. So much space out there, so much space here, on earth—space Daddy never wanted to let me run off into.

But tonight? Tonight, things were different. Tonight, things would be better. I was beyond excited, and I could not wipe the smile from my face as we drove along, to a city called Midpark.

I glanced at Daddy, at his stiff figure. Honestly, I'd been surprised when he agreed to take me along with him to this party. He never wanted me to leave the house, but I think every so often he grew worried that I'd try to run away again if I didn't get a breath of fresh air every now and then, under his supervision.

I couldn't run away. How could I? Daddy was all I had in this world. There was no one else out there for me. That's what I told myself, anyway.

Daddy looked strained. After a long while, he glanced at me, his lips frowning somewhat. "Do not, under any circumstances, leave my side tonight. Is that understood?" I knew he meant it; if I did not listen to him, things would not go so well for me back home. Instead of being stuck in a house, I'd be stuck in my room.

Being in such a small space, for days on end, only allowed to leave to go to the bathroom, it was not what I'd call a fun time. It could make you go mad, if you weren't careful.

"Yes, Daddy," I whispered, giving him a smile. My legs felt weird. I didn't want to wear the tights underneath the dress, but he'd told me to, so I added them to my outfit. Where we were going, he'd said, I was to look presentable and not like a whore.

I didn't think I looked like a whore in the dress without tights, but Daddy was always so old-fashioned when it came to those things.

Midpark, as it turned out, was a huge city, with equally huge mansions. Anyone who lived here had money, more money than they probably knew what to do with. I couldn't even imagine having that much money, although I figured those mansions probably could be just as much a prison as our house was.

Not that I blamed Daddy for keeping me inside. The world could be an awful place, and it would swallow me up. At least, that's always been what he'd told me. After years of listening to him, after listening to *only* him, how could I view his words as anything other than true?

Our destination was one of the mansions. The front gate was open, and we drove in a line of cars, right up to the front door, where valets were helping people out and handing them masks in exchange for their car keys.

Masks. My breath caught in my throat as we neared the front of the line. This was not just a party. It was a masquerade ball, for goodness sake. I could not stop myself from being excited. How many movies had I seen with dances at high schools that involved masquerades? It was always where the main girl stumbled upon her Prince Charming—her true love.

I wasn't stupid enough to believe I'd stumble upon anyone here like that, but sometimes the daydreams were what kept me going.

Oh, I'd never tell Daddy, for he'd scowl and call me a disappointment, along with a slut or some other word like that, but I did often wonder if I'd meet a boy who'd sweep me off my feet. Someone who I could see my forever with.

Did other girls think about things like that too, or was I the only one? Maybe Prince Charmings were not all they were cracked up to be.

Daddy put the car in park, leaving the key in the ignition when we reached the front of the line. I was in the process of getting out and gazing up at the tall, impressive mansion before me while he hurried around the car to stand at my side. "I left the key in the car," he told the valet, and the valet nodded, giving him two masks.

One black, one white.

As Daddy put his arm around mine, leading us up to the grand front door, he leaned down and whispered into my ear, "Black or white?" He was going to let *me* choose? I found that odd, and I opened my mouth, about to answer, but then he finished, answering himself: "The white, of course. The white for my beautiful angel."

I took the white mask from him as we stopped near the front door. A man stood there, dressed in all black, white gloves on his hands. "Masks must remain on for the entire

length of the party,” he said, and together, Daddy and I put on our masks.

I could not fight the crack in my smile. I didn't want the white one. I wanted the black one. But Daddy was probably right; white suited me much better than black.

Once our masks were on, the man opened the door for us, and we were ushered inside. The front vestibule of the house was immaculate, with tall ceilings and paintings that seemed almost out of their own time. We were ushered through the house, and Daddy never once released his hold on my arm. I wondered if he would really keep a hold on me the entire night. Kind of embarrassing... not like I would ever see any of these strangers again, though.

Still, it would be nice to pretend my prince was here somewhere, waiting for a strike of fate to meet me, for everything to change in the blink of an eye. The whirlwind of a romance that would happen shortly after, the fluttery feeling in my gut I would get anytime he looked at me. I'd watched enough sappy movies and TV shows to know the clichés and to want them for myself.

Was that so wrong?

We made it to what looked like a grand ballroom, and I sucked in a breath, taking in the sparkling chandeliers on the ceiling, the dozens if not hundreds of people crammed in here, all wearing clothes much fancier than mine, some with what looked like hand-painted masks. Some men and women held glasses, servers weaving through the throngs of people, holding trays of what had to be champagne or some other sparkling drink.

It was all so much. So much, and I loved it. This, I knew, was a night I would remember forever. Forever and a day. This was also a night I never wanted to end. Let me pretend to be someone else, if only for a single night.

One of the servers approached us, wordlessly offering us glasses. Daddy shook his head, and I remained silent, even though I was curious as to what it tasted like. Sometimes I found myself too curious for my own good; it was almost like

being sheltered to a ridiculous amount led me to wonder just what the dark side of life was like.

“Who are these people?” I asked, glancing around at them all. Every single one of them looked to have money flowing out of every orifice. Not normal people; I knew that much. “How do you know them?” I looked at Daddy, wanting answers. I think, with everything, I deserved them.

“Most of them I don’t know,” he told me, giving me a slight smile. All I could see, besides the mask, was the lower half of his face. His black mask was a plain thing, flat and smooth, simple in its design, much like mine.

A man walked toward us, and he extended a hand toward Daddy. Daddy finally unhooked his arm from me, only to shake the man’s hand. I took the opportunity to take a single step away from him, so it would be harder for him to take the same position with me again.

It wasn’t like I wanted to be attached to his hips all night. I wanted my prince, and even though I might not find him here, amongst all these older, rich folk, I liked to imagine I would.

“Fred Osborne,” the man started, grinning. He wore a rabbit mask, its ears painted gold. “Didn’t think I’d see you here.”

Daddy shrugged. “I’m here on business, I’m afraid.”

“Ah, right, right. Of course you are.” Behind his rabbit mask, the man’s eyes fell to me, and he appraised me silently. “Your wife?” He went to offer me his hand.

“My daughter,” Daddy corrected him, and after a quick nod from him, I took the man’s outstretched hand and shook it once. His grip was slimy, almost. I didn’t like him. I decided it right then: I didn’t like this man at all.

After shaking my hand, the man gestured for someone else to come over—a woman whose black hair was curled, its tendrils pinned to the back of her head. She had diamonds on her neck and fingers, and as she came over, she nearly pushed me out of the way, all to stand at the man’s side.

“This is Fred Osborne, the man I told you about. He helped us with our little... problem.” He put an unnatural pause there, and I couldn’t quite place why.

The woman smiled a million-dollar smile, turning those charms onto Daddy. “Oh, yes, how wonderful! I’m so glad to finally put a face to the name—well, sort of.” And then she laughed, like she’d just made the world’s funniest joke.

I didn’t find it funny, and the way they were talking made me wonder just what Daddy did for these people.

Daddy didn’t know everyone, but he did know a lot of them. So many people came up to him, in fact, I was blocked out. He was like the popular kid, surrounded by fans, for whatever reason. They whispered amongst themselves, laughing, making jokes and saying things I didn’t understand.

Something in my gut told me whatever they laughed at wasn’t right, though. Something innate, something I didn’t dare try to explain.

I stood there, near Daddy, for what felt like forever, and then I realized this might be my chance to get away, if only for a little bit. So, while Daddy was busy with his rich fans, I glanced around the ballroom and slunk away, moving to the outskirts of the big, spacious room.

It was purely accidental, but I stumbled upon a door that had been fixed open, a door that led right outside, into the somewhat chilly night, and I decided to take a step outside. Why not? It was obvious my prince was not here.

My arms were chilled by the night air, but I didn’t let it stop me. Inside, there were too many people. It was stifling, almost, choking and too hot. Plus, Daddy was distracted, so I’d take the moment of freedom while I could. At home, I got no such thing.

I walked into a garden, pushing away from the house, a pebbled pathway beneath my feet. I walked until the stone ended, until I gazed out at a well-manicured lawn just beyond the garden. The moon was almost full, hanging quite low in

the sky, its silver moonlight illuminating everything with an otherworldly glow.

Excessively huge house aside, the yard was pretty. So much bigger than what we had, back at home. We lived a few hours away, and I couldn't stop myself from wondering how Daddy knew these people. What problems did he help them with? Was that why he was gone for a week or more sometimes? He was here, in Midpark, working for these rich people?

"A girl like you shouldn't be out here alone," a low, serious voice entered my ears, and I spun to view its owner. My spine snapped straight of its own accord, the breath in my lungs suddenly too heavy.

A man stood a few feet from me, hands in his pockets, wearing a dark black suit and a matching black tie. He was tall, well over six feet, with wide, strong shoulders and a stance that, although it was at ease, looked as if it could crack and fade into aggression at any given moment. His hair was short and black, moonlight falling upon his features, the eyes set just above his square jaw a pitch-black hue. The mask on his face clung to just over half; mostly on the right side of it along with his nose and the area around his eyes.

And his mask was all black, just like Daddy's, although I'd be silly to ever compare them together. This man was not Daddy. He was a stranger to me, and I knew it in my heart immediately: this man was not my Prince Charming.

He was the opposite.

"Especially in a place like this," he went on, cocking his head as he studied me, taking a single step closer. He stopped when he stood four feet from me, and I had the strange urge to back up, to put more distance between us.

I did not know this man, but I knew, deep down, he was capable of so much. I did not trust him.

My voice almost didn't come out, and I sounded downright frightened, like a deer in headlights, "What's that supposed to mean?"

His lips thinned into a frown, and he took yet another step closer. I wished he would stop, wished I could gather myself to tell him not to get any nearer, but I was paralyzed, as if I knew, no matter what I said or did, this man would do whatever the heck he wanted.

“It means,” he spoke, his voice rough and wild but restrained at the same time, the kind of voice that both soothed you and choked you simultaneously, “that a little thing like you won’t last long here.”

I wanted to say I wasn’t little, but since my head made it to his chest... I felt very small, suddenly. Very small and very weak because, with the man’s nearness, I could see just how big he was beneath that suit. Strong in every way. So I said nothing.

My silence must’ve amused him, for his frown lessened. I could not imagine that mouth curling into a smile, and I didn’t even know the man. He was innately terrifying, commanding my full attention no matter what he said or did.

One of his hands left his pocket, and I saw a flash of a watch beneath his sleeve on his left wrist. His hand went for my face, and I was frozen in place as he gently took off my mask, revealing my face to him even though we’d been told masks had to stay on while we were here.

That said, somehow I couldn’t find it in me to tell this stranger no, to pull away from him. It seemed like an impossible feat.

As he held onto my mask, he gazed down at me so intently, so intensely, I blurted out, “My dad’s just inside—” My voice caught in the back of my throat when the man started to circle me like a predator would.

“I know,” his voice came out deadly, like knives in and of itself. “I was the one who invited him here, and I instructed him to bring you.”

What? That... that didn’t make any sense, did it?

I stared at the man’s dark eyes once he finished circling me, once he stood before me, clutching my mask to his side.

“What does that mean? Why? Who are you?” The questions left me one after another, and I found I could not have sounded more terrified if I’d tried. This man... I didn’t feel safe here with him. I didn’t like how I felt my heart in my throat, every nerve in my body screaming for me to get the heck away from him.

“It means, Juliet, there are things out of your control.” His dark eyes leered at me from his towering height, and never before in my life had I felt smaller, even when Daddy was mad at me. Daddy had nothing on this man, whoever he was. “I had to see for myself, to make sure I was correct in my assumption—and, unfortunately for the both of us, I was.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, or how the heck he knew my name. He knew Daddy; did Daddy tell him about me? Suddenly, I regretted wishing for a Prince Charming. That’s not what this man was. No, he was the farthest thing from it. The dark against the light. Danger molded into a man.

A monster. A devil. A man who would never be a prince.

“And as for my name,” he went on, slow to offer me my mask, which I made no moves to take, “it’s Markus Scott.” The name sent a shiver up my spine, and I fought the uneasy feeling rising in my gut.

Markus Scott. Somehow, even though I didn’t know him, I knew I would. I knew, right then, everything was about to change. Something deep within me registered it, and with the unwavering intensity he radiated, I took my mask back from him, my fingers brushing against his.

So warm. His skin was so warm.

I met his dark stare once more, unable to look away. Like an insect caught in a spider’s web, this Markus Scott had me. Come ruin or doom, it didn’t matter. I could not pull myself away from this stranger if I tried.

And I didn’t try, because I knew someone like him never let his prey go.

“I have the feeling you and I will be seeing each other again,” he whispered, and I fought the urge to swallow. “Be

safe out there. The worst monsters in the world are the ones we let close to us.” His gaze fell to my feet, slow to draw their way up my body, taking in the way I held the mask against my stomach like a small shield.

I wasn't so angry about being forced to wear the tights anymore, let's just say.

And what in the world did he mean by that? If I had a say, I would never see him again for as long as I lived. I almost told him that too, but before I got the nerve, he turned and walked away, leaving me alone out here, with nothing but the wind at my back and the moon above me.

I watched him go, memorized the figure of his retreat. A man like that, somehow I knew he hardly ever was the one to walk away. Not sure what that said about this situation, but I was as clueless as I'd ever been.

That man... Markus Scott. He was so sure we'd see each other again, but I didn't want to. I never wanted to lay eyes on that man ever again.

Daddy had been pissed at me for leaving his side during the night of the party, and when we got back to the house, he locked me in my room, told me it was for my own good. I never told him that I'd met a man named Markus Scott, nor what he said to me. Sometimes I wondered if having a secret from him was smart, but Markus... I couldn't say why, but I wanted him to be my secret.

Two years had passed since that night at the party. Two years since meeting Markus. I didn't want him to be right, of course; I didn't want to meet him again. But did that stop my mind from drifting off to him every now and then, trying to picture what his face was like beneath that mask?

Was he a handsome man, at least? He had to be much older than me—at least ten years. There was a maturity about him you just didn't have when you were younger, not to mention the absolute strength he carried, his intense demeanor and all that.

I often remembered what he'd told me that night, that the worst monsters were the ones we let close, and I wondered what in the world he'd meant by it. Had he been talking about Daddy? That was the only explanation I could come up with, even after two years.

Daddy could be cruel, but he did what was best for me. I loved him. He never hurt me. Locking me up in my room, forcing me to stay in this house—it wasn't so bad. I was all he had, really, so I couldn't blame him for not wanting me to go to college and start my own life. He had nothing, and I wouldn't leave his side, even if I was curious about what my life could be.

I rolled beneath the sheets, not wanting to get up just yet, wishing I could go back to sleep and dream of that night again. It was strange. I never wanted to see that Markus again, but it was like my mind kept coming back to him, time and time again, like the man had some sort of invisible control over me.

That was crazy, wasn't it?

I let out a soft groan when I knew it was time to get myself up. I should check to see if Daddy got home; I was a heavy sleeper, and I'd heard many stories about him coming home and telling me goodnight and me not even remembering the next morning.

Sitting up, eyes still closed, I stretched and yawned. If there was one thing that got to me, it was that mornings always seemed to come too soon. You couldn't get ready for them, even if you tried.

I flung my legs out of bed, slow to open my eyes. I was seconds from getting up when I saw that I was not alone in my room. A man stood near the window, arms folded, a smile on his face as he watched me.

And it was *not* Daddy.

I froze, meeting the guy's green eyes. Near my age, he had to be, with messy brown hair and a clean-shaven face. Definitely not the Markus of my dreams, but a stranger who

was somehow in my house and in my room. A stranger who'd been watching me sleep, apparently.

"Hey there, sleepyhead," the guy spoke, still smiling at me. He was cute, but that didn't change the fact that he was here and he shouldn't be. He had clean-pressed clothes on, along with a pair of short leather gloves. "This will go a lot smoother if you don't try to run—"

I got up, and I did just that: I ran to my bedroom door, flinging it open, seconds from throwing myself in the hall when I felt a strong arm wrap about my midsection and pull me back. I was spun, my back slammed against the door as he used my body to shut it once more. He pinned his body to mine, using his strength as an unfair advantage.

"I said if you *don't* run," he repeated, still grinning ear to ear as if I'd done the most hilarious thing ever.

I tried to hit him, sought to struggle, but within a few moments, he held both of my wrists back, and I could do nothing but stare into those pretty green eyes and wonder what nightmare I'd woken up into.

"Let me go," I whispered.

"Afraid I can't do that," he answered me. "I was sent here to get you, so get you I shall. Like I said, it'll be easier if you come along willingly, but I'm not above tying you up." He leaned his face in closer to me, and I hated the fact I felt my heart skip a beat for a reason that wasn't sane at all.

Up close, this guy was even cuter, and having his body on me like this... didn't exactly feel bad. How messed up was that?

"I could treat you like a princess," he whispered into my ear, his breath hot as it bloomed across my cheek, "or I could treat you like a prisoner. What'll it be, Juliet?"

I chose not to answer him, instead asking a shaky question, "How do you know me?" I did not at all like the fact that he somehow knew my name; I'd never met this guy in my life, not once. His was a face I would remember, a devastating kind of cute that stuck with you.

“As much as I want to tell you the answers, because I know you deserve them,” he paused, his face once again before mine, his lips no longer dangerously close to my ear. “I can’t. Someone else reserves the honor, and it isn’t me. You’ll find out soon enough I’m the lowest on the totem pole.” His green eyes sparkled in the early morning light, and I took in the fact that Daddy wasn’t busting in here to mean he was still gone.

Was this... was this related, somehow? Did Daddy know him?

“Please,” I whispered, my voice faint and fluttery. All semblance of my early morning grogginess had vanished; my rapidly beating heart having woken me right up when I realized I wasn’t alone in my bedroom. “Please, let me go. I didn’t do anything. I don’t know anything.” I had no idea who he was or why he was here, and he was tight-lipped about it, but still.

Giving a stranger the opportunity to take me to a second location seemed unwise. Second locations were where they hurt you, raped you, left you for dead—and that’s if they didn’t already kill you.

The guy gave me another smile, only this one seemed sadder. “I know,” he murmured, his grip on my wrists lessening, though his body never once let up. I could feel every part of him, every muscle in his midsection, how strong he truly was. Not overly-muscled, but lean and fit. “Trust me, we’d be doing this differently if I was in charge, but I’m not. I’m just a lowly worker bee, following the instructions of his queen—uh, his king, I mean.”

I could only stare at him, not knowing what the heck he was talking about. Bees? Why was he talking about bees? What did they have to do with this crazy situation and the fact that he was clearly trying to kidnap me?

He wanted me to go with him without a fight. If he thought I would lay down and take it, I wouldn’t. I might not be skilled in this area, but the moment he let me go, I’d find something heavy and hit him on the back of the head or something—that

always seemed to knock people out on TV, and TV was just like real life, right?

Don't answer that.

"Fine," I agreed, hoping I seemed genuine in my relenting.

The guy stared at me for a bit, those pretty eyes of his narrowing as if he didn't trust me. As if *I* was the one who'd broken into *his* bedroom and not vice versa. "Okay," he said, slow to pull off me, "but no funny business. I mean it, Juliet. I don't want to get rough with you, but I will." Those words were like a promise, I knew, and they only made my heart beat faster.

This morning was not turning out like a normal morning, that's for sure.

"Get dressed," he said. "I don't think you'll want to meet my king bee wearing that." His gaze dipped low, taking in my fuzzy pajamas. My fuzzy pajamas that had unicorns on them, because, yes, I was secretly still five years old.

I felt my cheeks flare up, heat growing inside due to how he stared at me. Embarrassment reared its ugly head, and I tried to shake it off, meandering to my closet and opening its doors.

"Tori would love those pajamas," the guy went on, and with a quick glance over my shoulder, I saw him standing near the door with his arms folded over his chest, watching me. "She's probably the only one in the house who would."

"Oh yeah?" I spoke, still sounding quite out of breath, considering his body was no longer rubbing against mine. "Who's Tori? Your girlfriend?" Oh, God. I should not have said that. I should've said something else, anything else but that.

The guy chuckled to himself, as if Tori being his girlfriend was funny. "No, she's... well, you might meet her, depending on how it goes. She's ten. Given who her parents are, it's kind of funny she has a thing for pink, really—"

I had no idea what the guy was talking about, or why he was feeling so chatty, so I tuned him out. I didn't really care what he had to say, or, you know, if he had a girlfriend. He was going to kidnap me; obviously, it didn't matter if he was taken.

I hurriedly pulled a shirt off a hanger, dropping to my knees to pretend to dig on the floor in my closet. The closet door kind of blocked him from my view. Had to find something hard, something I could whack on his head. Catch him off guard, run... although I had no idea where to go. Calling the police wouldn't do much since they'd take precious time to get here.

No, first thing was first. I had to escape from this guy.

The only thing I could find that maybe I could use was a hardcover Harry Potter book. Seriously, I had nothing else in my closet, nothing heavy, nothing sharp, nothing made of glass or anything like that. I was royally screwed.

I tucked the book under the shirt, slow to stand, holding it behind my back as I met the guy's stare. I probably acted so obvious it was silly, but I blurted out, "You're not going to watch, are you?"

This time, his grin was a dimpled one, one that sent a wave of butterflies fluttering about in my stomach. The look he gave me told me more than words ever could: he'd gladly watch me change.

I never knew whether I was attractive to the opposite sex. Daddy had a certain list of websites I could visit on the laptop, and I didn't have a phone. It wasn't like I could online date, or chat with the neighborhood boys. These... were not thoughts I should be having while staring at a stranger in my bedroom.

"I probably should," he remarked, still grinning. "But I can see you're really torn up about it. Thirty seconds should be more than you need, right?" He gave me a wink—yes, a blasted *wink*—before turning around and giving me his back. The guy was not going to leave my room, apparently.

I stared at his back for a few seconds, wasting that precious time as I wondered if I could really do this. Guess there was only one way to find out.

I dropped the shirt to the floor, creeping over to him as silently as I could, my bare feet on the carpet. My fingers clutched the hardback tightly, and I lifted it in the air, bringing it down on the back of his head like I'd seen in the movies and the television shows.

Except, you know, in the shows they used lamps and stuff, strangely-placed glass vases, which I didn't have in my room. Had to work with what I had, you know?

The book came down as hard as it possibly could, and he swayed forward a bit—but he didn't go down. He whirled on me, rubbing the back of his head and giving me a weird look. "Really?" He spoke with a shake of his head, "Is that a Harry Potter book? Did you really think you'd knock me out with a *book*?" And then he started to laugh, which only enraged me.

I'm doing my best here, thank you very much, random sir who's trying to kidnap me.

Because I found his laughter rude, I hit him again with it, this time right across his cheek, like a slap. That got him to stop laughing, all right.

"Now that," he spoke, rubbing his jaw as he slapped the book out of my hand, "hurt." The book clattered to the ground, and his expression hardened. "I told you we could do this the easy way or the hard way. You just made your choice. Don't blame me if you end up regretting it." His good-natured side completely vanished as something else took its place, something dark and impossibly fast.

In the next moment, he grabbed me, spinning me around. My back slammed against his chest, and before I could speak, he wrapped an arm around my neck, pulling tight. I fought, I struggled, but I immediately grew light-headed and weak. My vision started to blur, and even though I could breathe, it felt like I wasn't getting enough in me, like he was blocking an important vein or something.

It didn't take long. The last thing I remembered before passing out was the feeling of his arm wrapped around me, choking me, and the sound of his steady breathing in my ear.

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Chapter Two – Juliet

I woke with a start, gasping for breath as I jerked awake. My vision was slow to come back to me, and every time I blinked, things grew clearer. My hands were tied behind my back with what felt like plastic zip-ties, and as I glanced down, I saw I still wore my fuzzy unicorn pajamas.

Well, that was a good thing, at least. My clothes were intact. I hoped that meant he didn't touch me or anything while I was unconscious.

I tried to wriggle from the zip-ties, looking around. Beneath me, I felt a steady hum, and I soon realized why that was. I was in the backseat of a car. I saw the guy's brown head up front, and I scooted to the side, gazing out of the window, wondering if I should try to open the door and fling myself out.

Out of a moving car. Yeah, that couldn't be too fun, but it was better than being kidnapped, wasn't it? I did not recognize the road we were on, but at least it wasn't a highway. I might survive a fall—

"I know what you're thinking," his voice cut through my thoughts, like a freaking mind-reader. "The doors have child locks on, so you won't be able to get out. But by all means, feel free to—"

I turned around, fumbling with my tied-up hands until I grabbed the door handle and pulled on it. Locked, just as he'd said.

"—try," he finished dryly, eyeing me up in the rearview mirror. "Look, I'm sorry about what I had to do, but you were being impossible." His voice sounded genuine, but I was nothing to him, so I had no idea why he'd bother to try to apologize for kidnapping me.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, breathless. "How do you know me? Who are you?"

“You’ll see,” he said. “And I told you already, I can’t tell you why I’m doing this. Just know it’s not me, okay? I wouldn’t... I don’t get off on scaring girls and taking them from their beds.”

I pointedly ignored the *getting off* part, shooting back, “I’m not scared.” Okay, that might’ve been a lie, but at least it was a lie he chose to ignore. That, or it would just be a waste of breath to try to correct me on it. “You know my name. I think it’s only fair I know yours.” I was just trying to get something out of him. Anything.

He sighed. “Fine, I don’t see the harm in that. My name is Jaxon.” *Jaxon?* Who the heck’s name was *Jaxon*? I huffed, and my displeasure must’ve been evident, for he added, “What? Got a problem with my name?”

“I have a problem with all of you, actually,” I stated, causing him to laugh. He seemed like such a carefree guy, considering the fact he’d broken into my house and crept into my room, all to kidnap me. “How long were you in my house?”

“Hours,” he replied. “You were dreaming, I think. I didn’t want to wake you up.”

“So, you... you watched me sleep?” I sounded aghast, angrier that he’d been a creep more than the fact he’d kidnapped me. “That’s not right. You don’t watch people sleep, unless you’re a centuries-old vampire.” Oops. I probably shouldn’t have that last part out loud.

Jaxon was quiet for a few moments, and then he whispered something that made my gut harden in the worst way, “No, we’re much worse than that, I’m afraid.” His eyes once again locked on mine in the mirror. “This shit you’re in, it might not be your shit, but you were the easiest to get to. I know it’s not worth much, but I’m sorry for what we’re going to do to you.”

Oh, my God. What did that mean? What did any of that mean? I literally had no idea what to think, and I found myself saying, “Are you going to kill me?” I didn’t want to die. I never left the house, not really, not unless it was with Daddy.

This... this might be my last and only vacation from that place.

Why? Why me? Was it because of Daddy?

There was still so much in life I wanted to experience. I knew I was innocent and sheltered compared to people my age, people who'd been out in the world, going to school with their peers and having friends. Boyfriends. Sex.

No, I really shouldn't be thinking about that last thing. Not right now.

"It's not up to me," Jaxon answered me, pulling me from my thoughts. "Everything is up to him." He got quiet after that, offering me no more explanations, even though I tried to ask. He was silent during the rest of the drive, and I leaned back on the leather seat, staring down at my lap.

This sucked. This sucked something major. Wherever he was, I hoped Daddy was okay.

I sought to get my heart under control, to stop my thoughts from running wild. I didn't know where we were going, I didn't know why I'd been taken, but I hoped, at least, before I was taken from this world, I would get some answers. It was the least they could do, right? Tell me the truth before killing me. I didn't think I was asking for too much there, you know? Like, at least let me know why they were doing this.

The houses we drove past started to grow in size and the general property space they were on. Everything started to get bigger, and I found my eyebrows creasing when I saw us drive by a sign on the side of the road that said *Welcome to Midpark*.

Wait a minute. Midpark? Was our destination in Midpark?

I couldn't say why, but my heart fell at the possibility. I remembered that night, two years ago, when Daddy had brought me with him to a party here. He'd been surrounded by rich people, talking with them, laughing—and they'd claimed he'd helped them take care of their problems. I had asked him what they'd meant, but Daddy had been short with me after I'd wandered off.

All I'd wanted was one night. Just one night where I could pretend I was someone else. A different girl, a girl who would vanish the moment the clock struck twelve. Cinderella trying to find her prince. But all I'd found that night were questions—questions and a man who was the very opposite of a prince, much like Jaxon was.

I swallowed, staring at my empty lap, at my stupid pajamas. I'd been so foolish. There were no princes in Midpark. There would be no happy ending for me. This was it. This was the end for me, and I didn't even know why that was.

It took us another thirty minutes to reach our destination. The roads got busier once we got further into Midpark, the morning rush hour, and it seemed wherever we were going was on the other side of the city.

I tried not to stare, but my curiosity got the better of me when we pulled off the road before a tall, spiked gate. Jaxon hit something on the visor, and the gate was slow to open. We pulled through, and I saw cameras everywhere, watching everything. The gate closed behind us, and I saw the high stone fence that seemed to travel both ways, enveloping what had to be the entire property.

Talk about security. Even Daddy, who was super paranoid about everything, didn't have anything close to this.

And then I saw it. The house. Although, it wasn't a house, not really. It wasn't even a mansion. It was more like a frigging castle, multiple stories tall with huge windows and beautiful stonework. It was definitely the biggest place I'd ever seen, and I could not fight the unease rising up in my belly.

This would not be good. I knew it. I'd known it ever since waking up and finding Jaxon in my room, but the truth was only hammered in further as we pulled up to the front door. The other house in Midpark, the one Daddy had brought me to that night, was nothing compared to this. This house blew any other out of the water.

Jaxon parked the car, turned her off, and got out. He walked around the vehicle, stopping at my door, yanking it open. He bent down, glancing inside at me, and I was frozen, unable to move. Not a single part of me wanted to go inside that house, because I knew, deep down, once I did, I would never get out. Escaping a fortress like this, with how much security it had, would be near impossible.

“Come on,” Jaxon whispered, shooting me a pleading look. “Don’t make this harder than it has to be, Juliet.” He spoke my name so softly, almost tenderly, and I met his green eyes, wishing I could blink and make this all disappear.

When I moved not a single muscle, he reached inside the car, a gloved hand wrapping around my upper arm before lugging me out, forcing me out of the vehicle and onto my own two feet. Once I was steady, once my bare feet hit the concrete below, I gazed up at the impressive house, feeling uneasy on my own two feet.

Jaxon said nothing else, pulling me up the front steps, to the grandiose front door. Inside we went, and I was brought inside a house that looked more like a museum than anything. Seriously, everything in that other house was put to shame compared to this, even its decorations. This was not a normal house, not a normal rich person mansion.

This... whoever had the money to live here, to pay for this and all the bills that came along with it, they had to have some kind of money. More than money. More money than they could possibly know what to do with. The kind of wealth I could not even dream of or fathom.

I was taken to what must be an office, forced to sit in a leather chair that faced a wide, mahogany desk. The room had no windows, a single light hanging above. Wood paneling on the walls, but not the cheap kind you saw in older homes that hadn’t been touched in years. The whole place screamed rich and snobby, and for them to be able to kidnap me without fearing the police coming after them... it had to mean something.

Or they just didn't care. With how much money they certainly had, they could easily hire the best lawyers in the United States to defend them, and they'd get off without any jail time for killing me, I bet.

I squirmed on the seat, wishing my hands were undone, but Jaxon made no moves to cut me free. No one else was in the office yet, just me and Jaxon, and I threw a look over my shoulder, wordlessly pleading with him, begging him to take me out of here. It wasn't too late to turn around, to make all this go away. Take me back home, let me crawl back into bed, and we could pretend none of this happened.

Sounded like a good plan, didn't it? I thought so.

Jaxon and I met eyes, and I whispered, "Please..." That one word was all I could get out.

He shook his head once. "I'm sorry, Juliet. I can't." To his credit, it did sound like he didn't want to bring me here, but what good did feelings do? He still stole me away, kidnapped me, bound my wrists behind my back and brought me here.

And I didn't know why, which felt like the worst part.

Footsteps echoed behind me, and I dared not look to see whose they were. My back snapped rod straight, and I wished my wrists were not tied with zip-ties. I wished I had some way to defend myself, if someone attacked me. Something better than a stupid Harry Potter book. For the first time ever, that book had let me down. Or maybe Jaxon's skull was just super thick.

"Leave us," a strong, commanding voice spoke from behind me. A man's voice, low and deep, the kind of voice that crawled over your skin and suffocated you when you weren't looking. Vaguely familiar, and yet a stranger to me all the same.

Jaxon said nothing, and before I knew it, I was alone with the new man. I heard the door to the office close, and I gulped, my heart beating so fast in my chest it might just pop out and run away. Wouldn't that be something? I wished I could follow its lead.

Strong, warm hands grabbed my arms, and it took me a moment to realize what the man was doing. He hooked a finger around the zip-tie, and I resisted the urge to squirm away. It was a second later before the sound of metal flicking out filled my ears, and another before my wrists were finally free.

I brought my wrists to my lap, rubbing them, the skin around my wrists sore and glaringly red from being so unceremoniously tied up.

“I take this to mean you did not come peacefully,” he spoke, his words not a question but a statement of my past actions. He was tall, ridiculously tall, and he wore a black suit that was fitted to his towering figure. His mere presence made every inch of me want to crawl and hide, find someplace where I could shield myself from him.

Though I did not want to look at the man, I found my eyes gravitating toward him as he walked with a slow, measured pace to the desk, rounding its corners before sitting in the high-backed leather chair facing me.

My breath caught, all words failing me right then.

His eyes, such a dark brown they were nearly black, studied me. You could not tell where the pupil ended and the color of the iris began. His jaw was square, a thin coating of black stubble lining it. His hair was just as I remembered, though a small bit of it fell over his forehead. He leaned forward, resting his hands on the desk, flashing the watch he wore on his left wrist. He said nothing, but his silence was everything. He must've put the knife he used away.

His expression gave nothing away, but just because he did not sneer or smile did not mean he didn't radiate the same intensity I remembered. Even more so now, since I was on his turf and there were no masks to be seen.

It took everything in me to say a single word, and that was his name, as weighted and as powerful as it was: “Markus.”

He blinked slowly, holding my stare as he spoke, “Good. You remember me.” He did not sound too particularly thrilled

with my knowledge, my remembrance of him, but I dared to think this man was hardly ever happy or thrilled, like, ever.

I wanted to ask him how in the world he thought I could ever forget him, that I'd dreamed of that night so often these last two years, but I couldn't. I was rendered speechless under the power of his stare, nailed to the seat I sat on.

His dark, scrutinizing gaze took in what I wore, and I mentally cursed myself for not changing out of these silly pajamas. He said a single word, "Interesting." And he said no more, leaving me to wrestle with the heat creeping up my neck and the blush appearing on my cheeks.

This was the man Jaxon had brought me here to meet? Why? Just because I'd met him two years ago did not make me feel any better. This man... he was dangerous. I might've lived a sheltered life, but even I could recognize the unrepentant menace flowing out of every pore on that man's body.

And it was an impressive body, too—not that I was paying any attention to it.

"Well?" he spoke again, stirring me out of my inappropriate thoughts. "I imagine you are full of questions, such as why you're here." When I made no moves to speak, his lips thinned, his stare narrowing somewhat. He did not look amused. "Cat got your tongue, Juliet?" The way he said my name reminded me of that night two years ago.

Out of all of the people there I could've had a little rendezvous in the garden with, it had to be this man. The man who, at the time, had claimed he was the reason I was there, that he'd told Daddy to bring me. I'd asked Daddy why he brought me, though I'd always danced around bringing up Markus's name, but he'd been short with me for weeks after the party, never wanting to talk about it, always bringing up the fact that I'd left his side after I'd promised him I wouldn't.

"Why am I here?" I finally found my voice, though it trembled, not nearly strong enough to be underneath Markus Scott's gaze.

He hardly blinked as he stared at me, and I rubbed my feet together on the floor. My toes felt very cold all of a sudden. “So, you don’t know, then?” He cocked his head, his stare hardening. He must be the king of intense looks.

And also the king of this castle, if I had to guess. Probably the most powerful man I’d ever meet, and I’d been so clueless to it that first night.

I licked my lips, so very thirsty. “I don’t know why I was kidnapped, no.” I might’ve taken on an air of defiance, so go me, but my spirit faded when a faint ghost of a smirk crossed Markus’s face.

He leaned forward a bit. “Are you getting an attitude with me?” When I stayed silent, he said, “Let me inform you of where you are. This might look like a home to you, but to you, Juliet, it’s a prison. You are here to stay, and while you are here, you will do anything and everything I tell you to. Do you know why?”

Everything in me felt hot, my heart beating too fast. It took me entirely too long to say the word, “Why?” Mostly because I was afraid of the answer, of what it would mean. This place... I did not want to be stuck here, under Markus’s thumb. It seemed like a very unsafe place to be.

“Because, until further notice, I own you. You can thank dear Daddy for that.” He mocked me, somehow knowing that’s what I called him, and he did so with a hard glare on his face.

He *owned* me? No, no, he didn’t. I was my own person, and no one owned me... although, if that was the case, why did I not fight Daddy on things more? Why didn’t I tell him that I was eighteen years old, able to make my own decisions when it came to life? Why didn’t I tell Daddy I wanted to go to college, that I would not take no for an answer, that it was either let me go to school or I would move out?

I knew the answer. I knew why. The world was a scary place, and in it lived so many frightening people, people who would hurt you without even blinking—men like Markus. Like Jaxon. Like everyone in this house, probably.

The world was a dark place, and being locked away was the only way I could stay safe.

But this man... this man was not Daddy. This man would hurt me in more ways than I knew possible. I didn't trust him. He terrified me. His mere presence sent chills up my spine. I didn't like him at all, and I could not—would not—stay in this house like a prisoner.

I jumped to my feet, said not a single word, and darted out of the office, running as fast as my legs would allow. I knew where to turn, knew how to get back to the front door... once I got outside, don't ask me how I would make it over the fence, but if I had to climb, I would.

My heart pounded in my ears, and I raced through the front vestibule, slamming my body onto the front door as I tried to open it. My fingers curled around the knob, but before I could get a good hold of it and open it, hands appeared on my hips, and I was heaved off my feet, tossed onto a shoulder like a petulant child.

"No," I hissed, hitting the man's back. "Put me down. Let me go—" His hand found its way to my butt, keeping me steady, and I knew it was Jaxon. He'd been standing just outside the office like a bodyguard.

"Afraid I can't do that," Jaxon said. "And, just so you know, you should try your hardest not to make him mad. If Markus ain't happy, ain't nobody happy."

I rolled my eyes at that. I was brought back to the office, deposited in the same chair I'd vacated so recently, and I shot Jaxon a look, but he was too busy looking at Markus, as if Markus held his life in his hands or something.

Hey, maybe he did. Maybe he worked for him or something.

"Thank you, Jaxon," Markus said, slow to stand. He ran a hand down his front, slow to unbutton his suit jacket as he moved around his desk, toward me. "Leave us, please." Not once did he ever break eye contact with me, and I had the feeling I was in trouble.

Jaxon nodded, gave me a quick, almost sympathetic look, and then he was gone, leaving me with the monster of a man himself.

Markus circled my chair, much like he'd done that night—only that night I'd foolishly felt like we were more on the same level. Here and now? It was obvious who had the superior position all around, and it certainly wasn't me.

“Tell me,” he spoke, and the moment after he said those two words, I felt his hands grip my shoulders. Tighter than was comfortable, a warning that I was to not run off again. He stood just behind me, his frame tall, and I stared straight ahead, at his vacated chair. His hands squeezed my bony shoulders as he whispered, “Do you think this is a joke? Do you take me as someone you can run away from?” The fingers curled around my shoulders harder, and I fought the grimace that rose its way up.

I did not answer him, because I knew nothing I said would be what he wanted to hear. Of course I didn't want to stay in this place; I still had no idea what the heck was going on here or why Jaxon had dragged me from my house. Being kidnapped wasn't exactly on my list of things to ever do.

“Let me make myself abundantly clear,” Markus growled out, one of his hands leaving my shoulder... to curl around my neck. My breath caught when he held onto the front of my throat, fingers squeezing just enough to make me know he meant business. “You cannot run from me, Juliet. Try as you might, there is no escaping this labyrinth. This house is full of monsters that will make your skin crawl. They are your guardians now.”

The more he spoke, the harder he held onto my neck, to the point where I could no longer breathe. Tight, stifling, choking. I thought about reaching up to try to peel his fingers off me, but a part of me knew it would be useless, so I refrained.

Markus loosened his grip on my neck after that, thankfully, and I coughed, inhaling to refill my burning lungs. He still held onto my left shoulder as he moved to stand beside the

chair. His other hand went to my jaw, fingers below my chin, forcing me to look up at him, to meet those dark eyes and get lost in their intensity.

“Make no mistake,” he said, “they will all take great pleasure in hurting you. Whether or not they do... well, that’s up for you to decide. And your father. If you play by the rules, I will protect you. If you refuse—” Markus was slow to kneel, the fingers beneath my chin curling upward on my jaw, gripping me so hard I had to close my eyes, fingers digging into the flesh on my cheeks.

This had to be a nightmare. It had to be. This couldn’t be real. None of this was happening. I would wake up in a few moments, in my bed, safe and sound, and find that Daddy had come home in the middle of the night and not wanted to wake me.

“—I will be the thing that keeps you up at night. I will break you, bit by bit, and I won’t care enough to ever try to put you back together,” Markus finished, practically scowling. My eyelids had lifted just a bit, just enough to behold that vicious look, and I knew it had to be his permanent expression.

A devil. This man was the devil. He had to be. There was no other explanation for how terrifying he was.

“Do you understand?” he asked.

All I could do was nod. I would do or say anything for this meeting to end. I wanted to slink out of this chair and never see this man again. I could not believe he’d been in my dreams the last two years. I’d known it back then, but it was abundantly clear now: Markus Scott was no prince.

“Good,” Markus said, releasing his hold on me. He returned to his chair, eyeing me up as if I was an unknown entity. “I do not take bringing you into this house lightly. I do not often let strangers into our home and our place of business. But desperate times call for desperate measures.”

“How...” My voice broke, and I bit down, staring at my lap instead of at his dark, pitch-black eyes. “How do you know my dad?”

“He works for me, of course.”

That came as news to me, and I snapped my head up, my eyebrows coming together. Daddy never told me who he worked for, and I would never accuse the man across from me of lying, but... it still didn't make sense to me.

I asked, “What did he do?” What did Daddy do to make this man kidnap me?

Markus stared. He stared for a good long while, not saying a single word, and when he finally spoke, his answer did not make things clearer for me. “I run a tight ship here. We cater to those with more money than they know how to handle. Sometimes we make exceptions, and when that happens, I do not send my own to do those jobs. We... contract things out, occasionally. Your father is one of such men.”

That still made absolutely no sense to me. “What does that even mean?”

The corners of his lips quirked, but the man did not smile. “You do not want the truth. Take it from me. The truth would break a pathetic little girl like you.” His words were acidic and harsh, thrown at me like knives, and even though his hands were nowhere near me, I still flinched.

A pathetic little girl. I supposed that's what I was, even if I didn't want to be.

“Jaxon,” Markus called out, speaking louder so the guy who'd kidnapped me, the one standing just outside in the hall, could hear.

Jaxon pushed inside the office, glancing at me for a split second before gazing at Markus.

“Show her around a bit, take her to her room. If she escapes, I will hold you personally responsible.” There was a threat in his words, one even I recognized, and as he finished speaking, I glanced to Jaxon.

How could you willingly work for someone like that? And live in the same house? I didn't understand any of it. If I were him, I'd be running in the opposite direction. It's what I wanted to do now, but I had no choice. No choice at all.

Jaxon nodded, and before I could get up on my own, he grabbed my arm and dragged me along. Out of the office, away from Markus Scott. The last thing I saw as I was pulled along was Markus's face.

It was still a face that would haunt my dreams.

When we were out of his office, when we were alone in the hall, Jaxon released his grip on me, and I dramatically shrugged him off, shooting him a glare. Or, well, the worst glare I could, considering I wasn't very good at it. I didn't really do bad moods or anything like that.

"What is that guy's problem?" I asked, and Jaxon hushed me. He glanced over his shoulder, making sure Markus was still in his office and not coming out anytime soon. Couldn't speak ill of the scary man while he was near, clearly.

"If I were you, I would do everything he says," Jaxon warned. "Take everything he said to heart."

Considering he wasn't even in the room when Markus was going on and on, I didn't know how he could tell me that. I folded my arms over my chest, feeling bold considering how small and insignificant I'd felt when Markus had his hand wrapped around my neck.

Jaxon could tell I wasn't happy, and he let out a sigh, saying, "Come on. We can talk in your room." He turned and started walking away, and even though the last thing I wanted to do was follow him, follow him I did, because at this point, I had no other choice.

Oh, I'd try to escape, yeah. Duh. But to try it again now would be stupid. I needed to do it while not under someone's watchful eye. I'd never climbed a fence or a stone wall before, but as long as I moved fast, I should be able to beat any security.

And then... then I had no idea what I'd do or where I'd go. But one thing at a time.

The place was massive. It looked gigantic outside, but inside, it felt even bigger, if it was possible. I was not used to a house this large, not even close, and I knew I'd get lost in it

often. Who in the world needed a house this big? It sounded as if they worked here too, and if that was the case... what did they do here?

And, beyond that, what did Daddy do for them?

Jaxon brought me to a room on the second floor, and he held open the door for me, letting me walk inside, first. My mouth fell as I gazed around. The room was exactly the kind of bedroom you'd imagine when you pictured a room for a castle. Handcrafted wooden furniture, an excessive amount of space, and a bed that had to be king-sized.

My eyes were still on the bed when I heard the door close behind me, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. Staring at the bed was probably not the best idea; I didn't know any of these people, and the last thing I wanted to do was give them any ideas.

"Please tell me this isn't real," I spoke once I met Jaxon's green eyes.

"I'm afraid it is," he said, hands shoved roughly in his pockets. He eyed me up. "What exactly did Markus tell you?"

Swallowing, I thought back to the man and everything he'd said. "I'm here because of my dad. He works for you guys or something? A contractor? What does that even mean?"

Jaxon appeared like he wanted to explain, but all he ended up saying was, "There are things you're better off not knowing."

"What does that mean? Why will no one tell me what the heck is going on?" My voice rose an octave; I couldn't help but shout. I wanted to scream. These guys... they were so extremely unhelpful, and nothing they said put me at ease. I supposed nothing would, unless they miraculously decided to let me go.

And I did not see that happening.

"Markus is in charge of the family," Jaxon explained. "He does not take agents going rogue lightly. We do what we do, we do what we're told, and if we don't, there are

consequences. The same thing can be said of you, of me, of anyone in this house. He is the king here, not any of us. It might not look like it, but we're all trapped here too, Juliet."

"Then why don't you run? Why don't you leave?"

"Because, sometimes family is all you have."

And then it hit me, what he kept saying: *family*. I blinked at him, trying to find the words to say, but all that came from me was a weak, unsure, "Family? Are you related to him? Is this some kind of family business?"

A muscle in Jaxon's jaw tightened. "Yes, we're all family here. Some of us aren't by blood, but that doesn't change anything. This family, the Scotts—" He took a step toward me, and I was motionless, frozen in place. "—they're not like any other family out there. What they do, what they're capable of... you couldn't even dream of it."

Well, that sounded ominous, didn't it? Ominous and hopeless and just great for my overall plan to somehow escape. Yeah, let's just say I wasn't feeling too gung-ho about it currently, not as I listened to Jaxon.

A breath left me, and I closed my eyes. "I didn't do anything. I didn't do anything to deserve this. I don't even know what my dad does." When I opened my eyes again, I found Jaxon had taken yet another step closer, and the way he gazed at me... it wasn't how he looked at Markus. The expression was different, softer, and it almost looked as if he felt bad for kidnapping me.

"Look," Jaxon whispered, "this doesn't have to be a death sentence. Even if your father doesn't come around, if you can prove to him you can make yourself useful, he'll keep you around. Markus is not the type of person who hurts someone just because he can. Everything he does, everything he says—it's all to make a point."

If that was supposed to make me feel better, it totally didn't. I didn't want to make myself useful to Markus, because I didn't want to be here.

My eyes fell to the carpet, my bare feet on its softness. My head bent, and I whispered out the truth, the only truth there was: “I just want to go home.”

“I know,” Jaxon spoke, “but you can’t.”

I wanted to throw myself on that bed, bury my face in the pillow, and let the emotions welling inside of me out. I wasn’t one to cry just to cry, but this situation certainly felt like it merited some tears, at least.

Warm, strong hands gripped my upper arms, not roughly as they had before, but gingerly, softly, and the sudden touch caused my gaze to rise to meet his. His face was less than a foot away from mine, and I felt my heart speed up of its own accord. His green eyes bore into me, sympathy written across every feature, and in that moment, Jaxon didn’t seem bad.

On the contrary, it struck me just then how cute and attractive he really was.

Or maybe that was just because I’d never really been around a cute guy my age before. I didn’t have good people skills, obviously. I could thank Daddy for that, just like I could thank him for all of this, too.

Oh, Daddy. What have you done?

“I know it sucks, and I’m not saying it’s going to be easy,” he whispered. “It’s not. It’s going to be hard. But if you keep your head down and listen to what Markus says, you’ll be okay.” Dimples appeared on his cheeks as he added, “And I’ll be okay, since your good behavior will reflect on me.” His hands dropped off my arms, and I felt a ghostly sensation where they’d been, my skin missing the comforting contact.

I had the feeling comfort here would be in short supply.

“If I’m a prisoner here, why aren’t you keeping me locked up?” I didn’t know why I blurted that out, and my question caused him to grin harder.

“Would you like to be locked up? That could be arranged, if you’re into it—”

When I realized what he was going on about, heat flooded my cheeks, and I turned away from him to hide it. That was... that was so *not* what I meant. Oh, God.

“Are you blushing? That’s cute.” I glared at him at that, but all he did was shrug and say, “Look, I’m going to level with you, it’s not every day I get to guard a pretty girl. It might surprise you, but I don’t spend much time around the opposite sex, at least, none who aren’t in the family, anyway. Having you here might not be so bad.” Jaxon flashed me a smile, and if he thought that smile would make me feel better, he was wrong. Dead wrong.

Did he just... did he just call me pretty? Was he flirting or something? I couldn’t tell. I’d watched a lot of shows and a lot of movies, but being on the receiving end of such a smile and words like that made me unsure.

“Now, let me go find you something else to wear,” Jaxon added, eyeing me up again... and once again causing heat to flare behind my cheeks. “Walking around here dressed in that, you’ll definitely attract the wrong kind of attention.” He took a step away from me, giving me another smile as he said, “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

He turned and headed to the door, and I watched him freeze the moment he had one foot out. Jaxon tossed a look back to me, repeating, “I mean it. Stay here, okay?”

I gave him a nod, which seemed to satisfy him, and he left.

But of course I wasn’t going to stay here. If they really wanted me to act like a prisoner, they’d have to lock me up, because as long as I had my freewill, I would fight. This place and its devils would not break me.

Chapter Three – Juliet

I didn't know where I was going. I severely underestimated my ability to get lost in this house, and I had no idea how the heck I'd find my way back to the room. Half of me wanted to find the front door again and try to get out, but the other half of me wanted to know this place's secrets.

And, therefore, Daddy's.

Because, let's be honest here: I wouldn't be here if things weren't serious, if Daddy hadn't done something to piss Markus off. He'd always been tight-lipped about his job, why he would be gone for days or even weeks at a time, and I'd accepted his lack of explanation because I tried to be a good daughter. I was his only family, and he was mine. I loved him and I trusted him.

And now... well, I still loved him, of course, but did I trust him? Working for someone like Markus led me to believe Daddy was hiding things from me, and I didn't like that possibility. Not at all.

I found a stairwell—it wasn't the same stairwell I'd taken with Jaxon up here, but I decided to go down it. I passed so many rooms with their doors closed, and I had no idea if they were more bedrooms or if those rooms held secrets of their own. Even though I wanted to hightail it out of here, I found myself curious.

I shouldn't be, but I was. It sucked because I knew the best thing for me would be to leave, but then what would I do? I had no idea how to get back home, and I had no money. Trusting a stranger to give me a ride, to hitchhike... I didn't think I could do that. No, I'd leave this house when I was ready to, when I felt more comfortable trying to run.

Right now? Right now I was still in that wide-eyed, *oh my God, I'm out of the house* phase. Scared but curious. A terrible combination, really. I could blame Daddy for it all—for me

not having the self-preservation to run immediately, and for me being here in general.

Thanks, Daddy.

I made it to the first floor, and I wandered. I walked past a row of windows, and I gazed outside to what must be a patio of some sort... and a pool. I passed a door as well, but I didn't go out, because I saw someone sitting in one of the wicker chairs near the pool. Another man. This one shirtless, tattooed, and soaking up the sun. I didn't think it was Markus, but the man had black hair just like him.

I pushed forward, aimlessly walking, knowing I had only a short time before Jaxon came back to the room upstairs and found I didn't sit still. Oops.

My nose picked up a scent, and though I did not recognize what it was, my stomach gurgled in hunger. What time was it? I hadn't eaten since dinner last night. I could go for some food. After a few more minutes of walking, I came upon a dining room area, and then, attached to it, the kitchen.

I crept into the kitchen, finding a blonde man mixing some stuff. He wore an apron over his clothes, and even though he was cooking, he still looked like he could kill you with his pinky. I froze the minute I saw him, and he glanced up, his eyes a sparkling blue. He had to be in his late thirties, older than Markus by a few years, probably double my age, at least.

I was about to apologize for bursting into his kitchen, but someone else in the room spoke, "Well, well. Look at what we have here." A low, smooth voice, the kind of voice that both drew my attention and made me want to turn around and walk out.

I turned my head, finding another man sitting on the counter near the pantries, one of his legs hanging off the edge, his other propped up, an arm leaning against it. An arm that currently held onto a knife, while his other hand clutched an apple.

His eyes were a hazel hue, and they immediately took me in—including my fuzzy unicorn pajamas. His brown hair was

a few inches long, halfway between shaggy and ruggedly messy. He had a square jaw, a stare that could kill, and a smile that disarmed you. Older than me by at least a decade.

Cute, too, but again, I didn't think I really trusted myself or my decisions when it came to labeling guys as cute.

“Are you lost, little rabbit?” He chuckled to himself. “You don't look like you belong here. Don't tell me you're Bennet's newest plaything?”

I had no idea who Bennet was, or who this guy was—or why he currently stared at me like he could literally eat me up like he was doing with that apple. Something about seeing him with the knife made my skin clammy and cold, and I didn't know what to say to him.

The blonde man mixing things on the gigantic island set his bowl down and wiped his hands on his apron, shooting the other man a look. “Don't be stupid, Will. You know Markus sent Jax off to fetch the Osborne girl.”

The brown-haired man, Will, smirked. “Oh, yeah. That's right. I did forget.” He set the apple aside—though I noticed he still clutched the knife—and he hopped down, his feet landing with a thud on the tiled floor. He stalked over to me, still wearing that blasted smirk.

I backed up, backed myself all the way up against the nearest wall. Yeah, let's just say I was caught between a rock and a hard place, mostly of my own making. My poor, stupid decisions.

“Will,” the chef spoke.

“I'm not hurting her,” Will shot back, glaring at the blonde. “I'm just making sure she's getting along all right.” He turned those hazel eyes back to me, and my stomach twisted into dozens of knots. He was taller than Jaxon, taller than me—but not quite as towering as Markus. He set an arm on the wall above my head, the one holding onto the knife.

I bit my lower lip, wishing I could blink and make all of this disappear. It seemed every single person in this house was

terrifying in their own way. Not a good place to be, especially near one that seemed so at ease clutching that serrated steel.

“What’s your name?” Will asked, and it was like the chef himself didn’t exist at all, not anymore. There was only him and me, and my innate urge to flee. “Oh, come on. I could always ask the others, but it’s much more fun if you go along with it.”

I could not look away from his stare, even if I tried. It took me a few seconds to say, “Juliet.”

The smirk Will wore broke out into a full-out smile. “Juliet,” he whispered my name as if it was a prayer, a name he’d never tasted on his lips before. I wasn’t sure whether I hated the way he said it or if I liked it and wanted to hear him say it again.

These stupid conflicted emotions of mine. If there was one thing that was obvious, being in this house would not be good for my sanity.

Will’s gaze dropped again, and he took in my pajamas. “Aren’t you just a breath of fresh air in this dank hell?” He lifted a hand, the one not currently resting above me, holding onto that knife like a lifeline, and brought his fingers to my jaw, trailing along it.

“Will—” The other man spoke again.

He turned from me, glaring at the chef. “Don’t get your fucking panties in a twist, Ed. I’m not hurting her. I’m just being nice.”

I wanted to point out that his being nice was very creepy and I did not really like it, but I was still very much speechless.

“Come on,” Will said to me, taking my hand and starting to tug me along. “Let’s go somewhere where we won’t have an audience.” The man in the kitchen, Ed, was about to say something, but Will tossed the knife at him, which the chef actually caught.

Lightning-fast reflexes. It almost made me do a double take—and I would’ve, if I wasn’t currently being dragged

away from the kitchen by a handsome stranger named Will.

He was strong. Will had such a good grip on my hand that I could not pull away. All I could do was let him lead me wherever his heart desired, and inside my own chest, my heart thumped away wildly. The way Will had looked at me... it'd been too intense, too intimate, almost. Like I'd known, instinctively, the moment I'd been locked under his gaze, that he was a predator, not a man but a beast instead.

Was anyone in this house normal?

We found ourselves in what must be a lounge of some sort, and Will forced me to sit on a leather couch with him, situating himself right next to me, still holding onto me—though his grip no longer clutched my hand and instead held onto my wrist.

“Now, if I let you go,” he spoke, “I don’t want you to run away. Stay and talk with me, Juliet.” The smile he gave me then was disarming, and I was put more at ease, a little. But I guess that was the power of predators; they knew what to say, what to do, how to act to get what they wanted, and right now, Will wanted to talk to me.

“I’ll stay,” I whispered, and my words earned a wide, toothy grin from him.

“Good girl,” he murmured, letting me go. I resisted my urge to rub my wrist where he’d touched me, just like I resisted my urge to run away from him. If I did, he’d catch me. “So, tell me, do you think you’ll survive a house like this?”

My heart nearly stopped at his blunt question, and I gazed into his hazel eyes, feeling the *thump, thump* of it in my chest. “I... I plan to.” God, I sounded like an idiot. Like someone who was, like Markus had said, pathetic. Nothing but a pathetic, weak little girl.

He set an arm on the couch behind me, his hand close to my shoulder. His whole body practically faced mine, every little move I made under his watchful eyes. “I’m going to be honest with you,” he said. “When I first came here, I thought I was going to die. I wanted to, you know. I was tossed aside,

like trash, from the one girl I thought was my forever. I was disowned by my own brother—the brother I did everything to protect.”

Somehow, I had the feeling Will had a lot of baggage, and I was not in the mood to listen to him go on and on, but I also couldn't muster up the strength to tell him I didn't really care. He seemed like he was missing a few screws somewhere, and the last thing I wanted to do was get him angry.

“Now, I'm sane enough to admit today that how I went about it was all wrong, but at the time, I did what I thought was best,” Will went on. “I did what I had to, just like anyone here would. But none of that mattered, and I wound up here.” His lips curled into a smile, and he leaned in closer to me to whisper, “Do you know what they did to me?”

I shook my head, afraid to speak.

“They broke me. They broke everything I was and built me up in their image. I don't know whether I'd still be here today if it wasn't for them. Now, I'd never give that asshole Travis any credit whatsoever for it, but I do owe them. They made me stronger, gave me meds, got me on the straight and narrow.” He laughed at that. “If you can call what we do here the straight and narrow. Still, it's better than being dead. A lot less drama than the world out there, too.”

I wasn't aware whether I was supposed to know who Travis was or not. I didn't, and I didn't ask. Finding my voice, I managed to say, “And what is it you do here?”

“Oh, Juliet. You'll regret asking that question. Mark my words. Someone like you... you're too innocent for a place like this. I can tell. Do you want to know what I think?” He reached for me with his other hand, leaning in as he ran a finger along my collarbone. The gesture forced me to lean back into the arm that rested on the back of the couch.

His touch felt like a spider on my skin, and my breath caught.

“I think this place will destroy you, and if it doesn't,” Will paused, the finger on my collarbone moving up to my neck,

tracing a vein just below my ear, “the men here will. The only women who last are the strong ones, the ones who like getting down and dirty with us. You’ll never walk out of here alive.”

He sounded so sure of that fact, beyond positive that this place would devour me whole and never spit me out. And, who knew? Maybe he was right. Maybe everything I tried to do would be pointless, so I should just live every moment as if it was my last.

But I couldn’t. If I lost hope, what was there to live for?

His face was inches from mine. Handsome, attractive, but beneath his flawless features lay something dark and monstrous. I itched to get away from him, to put more distance between us, to turn my face away from his so I would not feel his breath on my skin, and yet I was motionless, caught in his web, wondering if he was right about everything.

Call me selfish, call me naive and stupid, but I didn’t want to die here. I did not want this family, as twisted as they appeared, to annihilate me.

“What’s wrong?” Will asked. “Nothing to say to that?” He chuckled lowly at himself, as if he’d made a joke. I, personally, didn’t see what was so funny about it, and before I could say anything in response, someone stood at the doorway.

Thank goodness—but just as I had that thought, I looked to see who it was. Markus and Jaxon.

Jaxon was behind the behemoth that was Markus, eyes on me. He did not appear too thrilled that I’d left my room on my own, and I couldn’t even give him a sheepish smile. I was too uncomfortable with this whole situation.

Markus, meanwhile, only had eyes for Will, it would seem, for he coughed and glared, catching Will’s attention. Will stopped touching me as a result, though he didn’t get up. He met Markus’s glare with one of his own, and for the next minute, I was caught between two warring men.

Not a place I wanted to be, so I slowly got to my feet, slipping off the couch. I moved toward the door, where

Markus stood, and, silly me, I thought Markus would step aside and let me pass, but he didn't. The man practically was wide enough to take up the entire doorway, and I had to shimmy past him to get out, all so he could continue his staring contest with Will.

Was anyone in this house normal? I wondered. Probably not.

Jaxon sent me a frown, and I ran a hand through my hair. "Sorry," I said. "I was hungry. I didn't—"

"You should've stayed in your room" was all he ended up saying, and I gulped. Behind us, the door to the lounge closed, and I heard muffled voices coming from inside. We both stared at the door for a while, although my gaze was stuck on it longer.

It didn't sound like Markus was yelling at him, but then again, Markus didn't strike me as the kind of man who ever raised his voice. He carried a certain type of demeanor, a calm, unsettling quietness, an intensity that was unmatched. I doubted the man ever smiled, either.

Refocusing on Jaxon, I whispered, "You kidnapped me, remember? It isn't like I volunteered to come here. I don't know you. I don't know him. I don't know anyone in this house—"

Jaxon took a tiny step closer to me, his voice almost inaudible as he said, "If you want to survive this, you won't. Stick to yourself, and don't get into trouble. Don't run, because no matter what you do, one of us will find you... and God help you if that someone isn't me." His lips curled into a smile, and he shook his head. "I know things are crazy right now, but trust me when I say I'm the sanest guy you'll meet in this house. You don't want to meet the others."

Oh, right. That was so very comforting, wasn't it?

I was about to fold my arms over my chest, seconds from having what I thought was a smart comeback, when the door to the room opened and Markus appeared, his dark gaze fixated on me. Lucky me. Within the next moment, he moved

to my side, brought a hand to the back of my neck, and held onto me with such a strength he all but forced me to walk away from Jaxon with him.

Just fifteen feet down the hall, not too far, but it felt like miles. Miles with the devil himself on my back.

When we stopped, I felt like wriggling out of his grasp, but one glance into those dark, pitch-black eyes had me frozen. I could not believe I'd dreamed of this man and that night for the last two years. What foolish ignorance I'd drowned myself in; it was stupid. I was stupid. I should've known that my life wasn't normal, which meant I'd never be lucky enough to ever find my handsome white knight, like the girls on the TV always did.

His hand was large; it wrapped around the back of my neck easily, and the way he held onto it was almost possessive. The ends of his lips were quirked downward in a frown, and Markus spoke, "If I were you, I would be careful, Juliet. When you surround yourself with animals, sooner or later they're bound to take a bite."

He said nothing else, his hand loosening on my neck seconds before he walked away, and I would be lying if I said I did not turn my head and watch him go. Was he trying to be cryptic, talking like that? Or was he just weird? It was clear no one in this house was of the normal variety, but that one especially... he made my skin crawl.

And, what was worse, even though I knew he was dangerous and it was not at all appropriate for me to entertain any ideas... I couldn't say I didn't like it.

Jaxon had gotten me clothes from some other woman who lived in the house. They were a bit snug on me, but I was able to get into them. He told me he'd get me my own clothes soon; he just had to wait for approval from Markus. If I was supposed to get a whole wardrobe here, I knew that meant I'd be here for the long haul.

And I still didn't quite know why.

Jaxon didn't leave my side the rest of the day, not until I had an appointment with the family doctor. I didn't know why I had to meet with a doctor, didn't understand why it mattered or what this family planned on doing with me, but I had no choice. I couldn't run. Not yet. Not with Jaxon ever-watchful.

No, to have even the slightest chance of escaping, I'd have to make sure that one was properly distracted, only... I didn't know how to do it. How to make sure he would be distracted enough to not chase after me immediately.

What about at night? Surely he needed sleep. Surely I would be free of him at night. Hmm.

Jaxon and I stood just outside the doctor's office. It was on the first floor of the giant mansion, and I rubbed my arms, feeling both uneasy about meeting with yet another stranger and awkward wearing someone else's clothes. Someone who was rather child-sized, really. My torso wore a tan blouse while my legs wore black leggings. At least the leggings fit, since the fabric stretched.

"You'll be fine in there," Jaxon was busy saying, as if I needed him to reassure me.

Actually... it was kind of nice.

"I'm not sure what he'll have you do or what he'll ask you, but just be honest. Doc's not part of the family, but he might as well be. He's a good guy." Jaxon breathed deeply, giving me a dimpled smile. "Now, you best get in there before Markus pops around the corner. You never know when he might show up." Though he sounded like he was being facetious, I knew he was also quite serious.

Markus was the king of this castle, and everyone inside knew it and treated him as such: someone to be feared.

Gathering myself, I turned away from Jaxon and pushed into the office. I didn't know what I was expecting, not really. I'd never been to a doctor's office before; Daddy never took me. He liked to keep me safe. I didn't think he trusted doctors.

The room was oblong, with equipment on one side of the room while the other held bookcases containing huge textbooks and a small desk, where a man sat, scribbling something down in what looked like a journal. Two chairs faced his desk, and I was unhurried in taking one. As I did so, the doctor looked up, meeting my eyes.

He was... not at all what I was expecting. Honestly, at this point, after everything, I didn't know what to expect, but I knew it wasn't him.

Glasses sat on his face, his shoulders wide beneath his white, button-up shirt. He didn't wear a lab coat or smocks like the doctors and nurses did on TV. He had short brown hair and eyes that were nearly the same color, a light amber, as warm as the dark wood of his desk. His cheeks were clean-shaven, every part of him well put-together.

And he wasn't old. Walking in, I'd expected an older gentleman or an older woman, someone who'd been around for years, but this guy... I doubted he was above thirty.

What was even stranger was the fact he did not radiate the same unkindness, the darkness the other men in this house did. His amber gaze did not peer into me and see my very soul, and when he smiled at me, it felt genuine. He did not make me uncomfortable in the slightest.

He set down his pen and shut his notebook, standing as he offered me his hand over the desk. "You must be Juliet Osborne," he said, greeting me with a smile. He was tall. Six foot, at least, though it was hard to tell since I was sitting down.

I had to get up, though, to shake his hand, and when I felt his fingers curl around my palm, I felt my body do something weird. He was cute. But maybe he wasn't. Maybe none of these guys were, and I was just going crazy after being tucked away for so long.

Still, I watched TV. I liked to think I was able to differentiate between those who were attractive and those who were not. This guy was definitely the former, not that I would ever admit that out loud.

“Yes,” I spoke, my voice coming out quiet.

He let go of my hand, which allowed me to sit. He was slow to lower himself back to his chair, folding his hands together on top of the desk as he grinned at me. “I’m Theo Ward, but you can call me Doc, if you want. Everyone else here does. It’s up to you—but please, no Mr. Ward. That’s my father, and he retired from this office a while back.”

“Your father worked here?” I didn’t know why I asked. It wasn’t really any of my business, but I couldn’t imagine taking over what Daddy did and walking in his footsteps. You know, whatever the heck he did, since no one would tell me.

Theo still grinned at me, like I’d said the funniest thing he’d ever heard. “He did. My family has a history of working for the Scotts. There are worse places to be. Plus, they paid for medical school, so I can’t really complain.” He quieted, and for a while, we simply stared at each other.

I shifted in my seat, dropping my gaze to my lap. I was probably the most awkward person ever. It wasn’t like I had experience being around guys, especially guys who were so physically appealing to me. My heart acted up, my palms got all sweaty, and I could not stop the faint blush from creeping up my cheeks.

“So, shall we begin?” Theo asked, breaking into my racing thoughts. “I have a list of questions I need to ask, and then I’m going to give you a quick physical, just to see where you’re at.”

“Why?” I probably shouldn’t have asked, but I couldn’t keep my curiosity sated. I mean, Jaxon had kidnapped me. Markus had threatened me. Will had told me that he didn’t believe I’d survive this house or its inhabitants. Why would Theo give me a physical, as if someone here actually cared about my well-being?

It didn’t make sense.

“It’s my job,” he answered me with a smile before reaching for a stack of papers. They were held together by a clip, and he adjusted his glasses before undoing the clip and

grabbing the pen again. “Now, I know some of these questions are going to be intrusive, but I need you to tell me the truth. There is no shame here, for anything.”

I was momentarily struck by how sincere he sounded—and how kind. I wasn’t used to it, not here. I bit the inside of my cheek and nodded, which Theo took as my answer. Let’s get this show on the road already.

“Okay, please state your full name and birthday for me.”

Well, that was an easy one, but when I rattled it off, I noticed he didn’t write any of it down, so I couldn’t help but wonder if it was supposed to be an easy question to get us going. I mean, what else could he be asking about?

“Do you have a history of smoking or drinking?” This one must be a real question, for the pen sat on the paper, ready to jot down whatever it was I’d say.

“No,” I spoke quickly. “No for both of them.” Daddy would never let me smoke or drink. As if. Although, it wasn’t like I ever asked him to, but none of that stuff was ever in the house. I didn’t think I’d ever seen Daddy drink or light one up.

“How much physical activity would you say you get each week?”

I shook my head as I thought. A typical week... it didn’t really consist of much, really. I was always stuck in the house. When I was younger, I might’ve tried to sneak out but I hated disappointing Daddy, and I did not really like being locked away in my room as a punishment, so I tried to be good.

“I... I don’t really know,” I answered. “I never keep track of that.” My voice came out sounding a little sheepish and lame, but Theo didn’t seem to mind. Or maybe he was just doing me a favor and ignoring it.

“That’s okay,” Theo said. “Just answer them as best you can.” He paused to write something down at the bottom of the paper, something that looked like a few short sentences. He flipped to the second page, and the lighthearted expression he wore wavered a bit. “Are you on any medication currently?”

That question was an easy one, so I didn't quite understand why he was giving that page the look he currently was. "No," I answered him. "Nothing."

"Have you ever been put on medication, that you're aware of? Any history of any medical conditions—blood clots, strokes, that sort of thing?"

Shaking my head, I said, "No, I'm healthy, I think."

His next question came out of the blue: "Are you sexually active?"

Instantly, I felt the heat flaring in my cheeks. My neck felt hot. I opened my mouth to give him an answer, but no words came out of me. I mean, why the heck was it his business whether or not I was sexually active? I mean, I wasn't, but that was kind of personal, you know?

When I said nothing, Theo looked at me. "I'm afraid I need an honest answer to that question, Juliet." He almost sounded apologetic about it, but being sorry for digging into my personal life like this wasn't enough to make it better.

"I don't see why it's any of your business—"

"I'm trying to help you," Theo cut in.

"No," I threw out the word, feeling mortified, for whatever reason. I mean, I might've felt like this because I watched so many shows on TV where the teenage characters hooked up all the time or because I knew I didn't have a normal life, being locked away in that house.

It wasn't like sex didn't interest me—it did. Of course it did. Of course I wanted to know what it was like, but it wasn't as if I ever had the chance.

Never liked a boy. Never went out on a date. Never been kissed. So, yeah, no sex. Shocker there. And it wasn't something I could ever bring up to Daddy; that would just make things awkward.

Theo did not write anything down; instead, he asked, "So you've never had sex before?"

My cheeks burned. “No.” Okay, that time, I might’ve sounded a little ticked off, but that’s because I’d already answered his stupid question.

He wrote something down, and I turned my head away, wishing this little meeting would be over with already. But, don’t you worry, he was back with another terrible question soon enough: “Has anyone ever hurt you? Done things to you against your wishes?”

I blinked. “What kind of questions are these?” I got up, like I was going to storm away, walk off, leave this stupid appointment and Theo Ward far behind me, but once I got to my feet, I met his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he spoke quickly. “I know these are unpleasant questions, but once we get through this, we can be done. I’ll never have to ask you these questions again.” He sounded so kind, so warm and gentle, sorrowful for even having to ask in the first place.

My shoulders rose and fell with a sigh as I slowly sat back down. Running wouldn’t accomplish anything, I knew. I’d just get dragged back in here, my life prodded some more. It was ridiculous.

He started to repeat his last question, but I cut in, saying, “No. No one’s ever hurt me. No one’s touched me. I’ve never had sex. I’ve never even been kissed, okay? So can we move on to other questions now, or do you need to know what I dream about, too?” I shouldn’t have been so snippy, but I couldn’t help it.

And... oops. I just told him I’d never been kissed. Now *that* was embarrassing.

Theo gave me a smile at that, but whether the smile was meant to be comforting to me or not, I couldn’t tell. “Okay then,” he said. “Moving on.”

We went through the list of questions, and thankfully none were as intrusive as the ones he’d asked before. After the questions were done, it was time for the physical, and I let my

mind drift off while he was testing my reflexes and measuring my blood pressure and all that.

If I didn't let my mind drift off, you see, I would've been too in my head. Too focused on the feeling of his soft hands on my skin, the way his eyes seemed to apologize behind his glasses. No, couldn't have that. Had to shut myself away just to speed this process along.

No offense to Theo—he was nice and everything—but I could not wait to get out of his office.

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Chapter Four – Markus

I was sitting in my chair, leaning back, my mind elsewhere when Doc came in. He carried a clipboard, where I assumed everything was. He gave me a short nod of his head as he closed the door behind him, slow to walk to my desk.

Nothing I did I did lightly. Everything was for the job. That's how it'd always been with me, and that's how it would always be. Nothing could change, because the system we had was a perfect one, and after our father stepped down, everything was up to me. Everything had fallen onto my shoulders, though no one had been surprised when it did.

“How did it go?” I asked, my voice low. There was a part of me that was almost apprehensive about the results. I feared... well, I supposed I didn't really fear anything, but sometimes I caught myself worrying.

So unlike me, I know.

Doc did not sit; he instead stood behind one of the chairs facing my desk, silent for too long. I did not particularly like his silence, and I shot him a glare to let him know it. My glare must've kicked him into high gear, for he started to ramble off, “She's healthy, if a bit thin. Her cycles are regular, her eyesight is good. Her hearing... she did well.”

“And what about...” I trailed off, picturing her face. I'd thought, after two years, she might've lost some of that wide-eyed innocence, but she hadn't. I didn't know yet whether that was a good thing or not.

“She claims to never have been intimate with anyone,” Doc said. “She seemed honest with me, if a little embarrassed. I don't think she was lying. I think he's kept her safe for the last eighteen years.”

Yes, that was the question, wasn't it? I leaned on the armrest of my chair, running a finger along my lower lip as I thought. Such a tight leash he had her on this whole time. You

never kept someone on a leash like that unless you had plans. I was not stupid.

Doc then surprised me by asking a question he did not deserve the answer to, “How long will she be here?” I only looked at him, feeling the urge to strangle him for asking something that was not his business in the least. “What are you doing to keep her safe? There are too many psychopaths in this house—if you plan on ever returning her to her father—”

A thunderous sound left my chest, and I slammed my hands on my desk, startling Doc into silence. I was measured in getting up, my shoulders hunched as I leaned forward on my desk. “She will be here however long I say she will be, and as for your second question...”

I didn’t say the truth. I couldn’t, lest I risk revealing a slight weakness to her. A man like me, someone who did what I did, someone who had to keep this house and its monsters in line—I could not have a weakness, otherwise one of them might try to use it.

“I don’t care whether she’s safe here. Mr. Osborne has gone against the family’s best interest as of late, and if I have to hurt her to teach him a lesson, I will gladly do so. I trust you will be there to patch her up when the time comes?”

Doc appeared unrattled by my sudden change in demeanor. He gave me a nod. “Of course I will.”

“Good,” I hissed, “now go.” I said nothing else, watching as he turned and left... but not before leaving the results on my desk, which I snatched up and glanced over once I was alone.

Juliet seemed healthy. She seemed... not exactly happy, but unharmed. It was more than I’d thought, at first, considering everything else. Still, she was a sheltered little girl, unaware of the darkness of the world. This house was built in the shadow of that darkness, its mortar blood. My family was born to that same darkness, to the evil and the ruthless and the corrupt. We were not the kind of people you would ever want to cross, but we were exactly the kind of people you always crawled to for help.

This world was full of demons, and if you were not one of them, you were one of the weak or the ignorant. If you were not the monster, someone else would be, and then you would be up shit creek, drowning in blood.

I knew Juliet had no idea why she was here, and I did not plan on telling her. Some truths were best left to the shadows. Let the monsters feast on their crimes and their prey while everyone else looked on.

The girl was far too innocent to ever last here; I knew Doc was right. This house was full of men who would gladly rip her apart, quite literally. I didn't want to see her hurt, not after all this time, but sometimes, you had to do the exact thing you didn't want to in order to get the job done.

And me? I was always getting the job done, even when I was younger.

I stood with my father, Jonathan Scott, in the basement. Our house looked like a castle from the outside, and once you were inside, you discovered just how many secrets it held. Such as its basement of terrors, a place where blood and screams comingled more often than not, a place where you either killed or were killed.

My father was an older man; he'd had me when he was almost forty. Now, he was over fifty, his black hair streaked with grey. He wore a suit, as he always did, a neatly-trimmed beard on his jaw. He had the same eyes as me. Most of my brothers did, though a few of them somehow took after their mothers.

We didn't all share the same mother, you see. A man like my father, Jonathan Scott, was powerful enough to have his own harem of women, though none of them particularly cared for the family business.

I was eighteen, not yet graduated high school. I wore all black, as I usually did, and as I stood there beside my father, I didn't say a word. I did not ask why we were down here, nor did I ask why there was a man tied to a chair inside the

chamber we gazed into. A rectangular window which looked into the room; something similar sat on every cubicle down here.

Each room was a torture room. A death room. A room where our family did what it was paid to.

Sometimes we were hired to make things look like an accident out in the world, and sometimes our clients wanted us to bring in the marks, render them helpless, and dispatch them exactly how they wanted.

My family was full of killers, you see. We all were. And, maybe it's because of the blood, but none of us were of the sane variety.

No one else was around us. In fact, I found it odd that we were down here, alone. I didn't think it was time for a new round just yet. Our basement was not always full of corpses, you know. Everyone needed a break now and then.

My father set a hand on my shoulder, squeezing it as we gazed into the room, at the man who was currently restrained to the chair inside. His arms were held down by leather straps, and his legs were much the same. The only thing the man inside could do was scream, but he was currently too out of it to do much of that.

"You're eighteen now," my father spoke, breaking the silence of the hall. "It's time you became a part of this family." He did not speak it as though this would be my first kill; it wasn't. I'd killed before. I'd watched dozens of men die already, and I knew I'd watch countless more before I drew my last breath.

He pointed into the room, his finger hovering inches away from the glass. "That man in there," he said, "someone wants him dead. Whatever his crime was doesn't matter. Whether he's guilty or not doesn't matter." My father glanced at me, though I could not tear my eyes off the man inside the room. "We are not the jury. We do not decide who is innocent and who is guilty. We are merely the executioner."

It was a talk I'd heard before, and I wasn't sure why he was so keen on telling me this again. I knew what we were. I was under no impression that I would get to leave this family and start something of my own. When you were born a Scott, you died a Scott. Plain and simple.

"He's a bit of an odd case in that the client does not care how it's done. He just wants him dead," my father went on. "I had tools brought in. Pick out what you like and do whatever you want with him."

A gift of a body. It was a gift I knew many of my brothers would like—most of them did not hide their penchant for death and destruction. They loved the kill, the chase, and they took pleasure in it. They liked to hear the screams, to watch the blood roll... we were a family of psychos, truly.

But I never thought of myself quite like that.

I said nothing, moving away from my father and stepping into the room. The door slid closed behind me, and as I walked to the table off to the side, where the tools of death lay, I glanced to the man. He was starting to stir, blinking and coming to, fighting with the restraints holding him back.

He would not break free. Today would be his end. Whatever he'd done—or whatever he didn't do—to deserve this fate was none of my concern.

My eyes raked over the tools, their silver hue shiny and unblemished. The walls of the room were tiled; easier to clean that way. Sometimes things got messy. We'd had cameras installed a few years back, but I could tell the one in the corner was not recording; no red lights blinked down at me.

This would be a private show, and I did wonder why he'd brought me down here instead of one of my older brothers, like Lincoln.

But then, deep down, I supposed I did know why after all. I'd known for a long time that I wasn't quite like my brothers.

I gravitated towards a single instrument of pain and vengeance, and that was a sharp blade whose jagged edge glinted in the fluorescent lighting. I picked it up, feeling its

weight in my hand. I had gloves on; anytime you came down to the basement, you were supposed to wear gloves, just in case. You could never be too careful when you did what we did.

Our house's expansive basement ended with a furnace, which made clean-up easier. It burned so hot, everything was incinerated. Clothes, flesh, blood... all of it. Bones were crushed into dust, and then there was nothing left of the pitiful fools who'd found themselves in our care.

My feet drew me towards the man in the chair, and I saw he'd awoken completely, his eyes darting around the room, alert and freaked out, to say the least. When he saw me, when he saw what I held onto, he started to sweat.

I did not know who this man was, but that didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that he would take his last living breath here, and I would watch him die. I would kill him. That's what we did. That's why the Scotts were so different from everyone else.

We were natural born killers. We cradled our baser instincts, nourished our inner beasts, let the monsters loose that society would have you forever chain. Our family was an old one; we'd been doing this for a while. Our money would be eternal, as long as we continued to be smart about things. There was always someone in power, someone with money overflowing out of their pockets, who wanted someone else dead. It was the way of things.

"Hey, man," the man tied to the chair before me sputtered out, his lower lip trembling somewhat, "I don't know what this is, but I think you should let me go. If my dad finds out about this, he'll ruin you—"

I said nothing, only stared at him, slowly cocking my head as I moved the blade I held onto between us. The slight motion caused the man to fumble.

"I can pay you!" He was not the first to try to pay his way out of this, nor would he be the last. But once a job was accepted, the job got done, one way or another. "Please, man, don't do this. You can let me go, you can—"

I knew the man would keep talking, forever if I let him, so I wouldn't. I couldn't. There was no point in prolonging this. My eyes dropped to the blade, and I saw my reflection mirrored back at me on the two-inch wide steel. I stared into my own eyes for only a second, only a split second before lifting it and cutting it through the air.

It happened fast. It happened almost too fast, too fast for the man to register. My movement was unmatched, and after it was done, I raised my eyes back to his, watching as it slowly dawned on him. The blade in my hand dripped with blood, but it was such a clean, quick cut that it had yet to show on him.

"You can... you can," the man fumbled, blinking over and over as he tried to speak. His voice came out haggard and broken, and in a few moments, it became evident why. A thin line of red appeared on his neck, blood oozing out of a deep cut. He coughed, maroon pooling at the corners of his mouth.

I did not take my eyes off him, not until he was dead. I could've been messier, yes. I could've dragged it out. It was what my brothers would've done, I knew that in my heart. But I was not them. I was me, and because I was me, I saw no point in prolonging this... even if my father had told me I could do whatever I wanted to this man.

Blood bloomed out of the wound, falling onto his chest, seeping into his clothes. Such a gory display of death, a dark maroon hue that made me anything but uncomfortable. Blood wasn't so bad.

But then again, neither was pain. I never understood why people feared pain so much.

I moved back to the table with all of the instruments, and I set the bloodied blade back in its rightful place. I did not linger in the room longer than I had to, and soon enough I was back in the hall, standing beside my father, who currently stared at me as if he was proud.

"Good," he said, setting his hand on my shoulder and squeezing tightly. "I knew there was something different about you, Markus. I'd known it ever since you were a child. You're not like your brothers. You're more. You're better..." His

voice trailed off, his hand dropping off my shoulder as a tiny, almost imperceptible smile crossed his face. “And because you’re better, you’ll be above them. When I am gone, you will rule this house with an iron fist. You will do whatever you have to to keep this family going, to protect them, to guide them. Every animal needs a keeper.”

I listened to him, a part of me already knowing what he would say. Every animal needed a keeper, and in this case, he meant my brothers, my sisters. The ones with a few screws loose, the ones who would wreak havoc on the world if they could, the ones who would kill anyone who looked at them wrong.

I was not like them. I did not enjoy killing, didn’t get off on it. I didn’t jerk off to thoughts of making girls bleed and scream. My fantasies didn’t involve violence and blood; those things were simply all in a day’s work. A job. A duty. There was no rule that said you could not enjoy what you did here, but to me, killing was just that.

A chore.

I did not stay in my office for long after Doc left. I took her file and brought it to my room. My room was dark, the lights off, the curtains drawn on the windows. I set the papers on the desk in the corner of the room before heading into the attached bathroom. I’d already looked at the papers too much, honestly.

The bathroom was a large thing, wide, open space with a free-standing shower along the wall, a tub with jets nestled on the wall opposite the two-person vanity. The tile on the floor was a white and grey marble, its grout dark. It was probably one of the lightest rooms in the whole house, all fancy and ridiculous.

Don’t get me wrong: it was good to have money. I would much rather be among the haves than the have-nots. When you had money, when you had our kind of money, no one was on your level. No one could dare hope to match you. It earned you an automatic respect among certain crowds.

I never really caught myself wondering what life would be like if everything was different. Not really. I didn't dream of things, didn't have my own wishes or desires. I didn't let myself, and after years of it, I'd grown used to it.

But then... but then something changed. We employed a man named Fred Osborne, and I learned he had a daughter. And a wife, once upon a time. But the wife didn't matter to me. It had always been the daughter.

The Scotts were not a stranger to taking people in. Some of the people in our family were not related by blood at all, but by circumstance. Take Ed, for example. Or Jaxon. Or even Will. We took in those who we could use, those who could prove themselves to us. The ones who could play by our rules.

Or the ones we could break and reform.

I caught my reflection in the mirror, and I met my own eyes. Dark things, pitch-black, the kind of eyes that saw right through you, no matter what your defenses were. I was able to read people well, able to play them even better. I'd been molded by my father for years before he'd officially retired and handed me the baton of running this family and this house. I was not one to pat myself on the back, but truly, out of us all, who else could he have chosen?

My brothers were too bloodthirsty, too psychotic. They would never be able to do what I did, to run this whole show and keep it going for eternity. My father had chosen correctly when he'd picked me as his successor, and not once did I ever doubt him, because not once did I ever doubt myself.

Not until her, that was.

Juliet Osborne. A kitten. A dove. Something pure and white and naive as hell. Something that had been carefully tucked away from the world, someone who had no idea of the world's darkest nights. Her innocence was infuriating, but it also a curiously tempting.

I tore my eyes away from the mirror, starting to shed my clothes. My watch came off, first. My fingers worked to undo the buttons on my shirt, and once my shirt was off, I let it fall

to the floor. Bit by bit, I dropped every piece of clothing on my body to the floor, and once my feet were bare, I walked to the shower.

My hand turned the water on, and it immediately pelted my head. Cold, at first, but I hardly felt it. Within moments, the water had turned warm, and then hot, steam quick to form in the room. I leaned against the wall, my arms outstretched, my hands flat on the tile before me, my eyes closed.

Juliet was only here because of her father. It was not the first time I'd had to remind myself of this fact, and it probably would not be the last. I'd always been so focused on the job, on getting shit done and getting it done right, that I never let myself wonder... never let myself drift off.

The job was the most important thing. The job, nothing else. Not Juliet. Not the hypnotizing way her blue eyes looked at you. Not the way her innate innocence called out to any monster nearby.

A job. It was just another job, and it would be done soon enough.

As the hot water pelted my head, dripping down my face and my body, I found my mind thinking of her father, the entire reason she was here. My right hand tensed, fingers curling. Before I knew what was happening, I felt a jolt of shock course through my arm, and I opened my eyes to see I'd punched the tiled wall.

Hmm. Did not mean to do that.

I brought my fist away from the wall, finding that the tile had cracked beneath the blow. The skin on my knuckles had broken, blood oozing out of the small wounds. I moved my fingers, moved my hand, but I could not feel the pain that should've radiated up my arm as a result of the punch.

I felt nothing at all.

That was my curse, I think. To oversee this family, you could not feel. To feel anything would be a weakness, and inviting any weakness here, with what we did, would be a

mistake. And when you did what we did, a mistake like that might kill you.

Death would not come knocking on my door anytime soon. I had a job to do, a life to live, a family to guide. I was Markus Scott, and I was just getting started.

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Chapter Five – Juliet

I thought about running that night. As I lay there, wide awake in my bed—a bed that was not my bed, in a room that was not my room—I wondered whether someone was always watching the security cameras, or if they were there more for protection against people trying to sneak into the property.

This place... it was unlike any other place I'd been. I didn't know what to do with myself.

Because I couldn't just lay there and wonder, I found myself getting up and sneaking over to the door, silently opening it and peeking out into the hall to see if someone was standing nearby on watch. Jaxon wasn't around, thankfully, and neither was anyone else.

Now might be my only chance.

With my breath caught in my throat, I stepped out. I was barefoot, and I'd changed back into my own pajamas—I felt too uncomfortable wearing clothes that weren't mine. Fuzzy unicorn pajamas for the win.

I ran a hand through my hair, its blonde length untamed due to a lack of brushing. I didn't even shower, even though Jaxon had brought me to a bathroom near my room and told me to go ahead. Like heck was I going to strip and shower in this house. No way, just like there was no way I was actually going to stay here.

Markus might scare me, every single man in this house might give me the heebie-jeebies and be simultaneously cuter than anyone I'd ever seen on TV, but that didn't mean I would become a deer in headlights and freeze up. No, I would try my best to get out of here, and then, when I got out, when I managed to get home, I'd demand answers from Daddy.

The only problem was I had no idea where I was going. None at all. This house... I was not used to walking around in a place this big. I didn't know where the halls led, what all the

rooms I passed were. I didn't even know how many people lived in this house. A lot, I guessed.

The world was one of night, and through the windows I passed, I saw a full moon hanging low in the sky. I didn't know what time it was, but it didn't matter. I was on no one's schedule but my own. Maybe it was a mistake, maybe someone would find me and drag me back to my room, but I didn't care.

Call me stupid. Say I have a death wish. Whatever. I could not sit and wait for Markus to decide what to do with me.

I found a stairwell and I headed down it, trying to take two steps at a time but failing miserably since my legs weren't long enough. I was rather short, and I felt even tinier surrounded by all these terrifyingly tall men who could snap me in half with a single look.

Was that normal for guys? Or did I feel like that only because Daddy had kept me so sheltered? Would I ever find my Prince Charming, or did a man like that just not exist in this world?

A fairy tale. They probably only existed in fairy tales, and this life wasn't it.

I made it to the first floor, and now that I was here, I knew where to go to get to the front door. Could it really be this easy? Could I make it out on my first attempt? My heart nearly skipped a beat at the possibility of getting out of here, at besting Markus Scott at his own game and never once looking back.

Because I wouldn't. I wouldn't look back. I might want to, I might strangely want to glance back and see Markus again, but I wouldn't let myself. He was inherently intimidating, but I'd be lying if I said he wasn't also the most handsome man I'd ever seen. Not cute, but hot. He wore his suit well, so well I almost caught myself wondering what he looked like underneath it—but that thought was not a thought I should have, especially with how mean and cruel he was.

Plus, the whole kidnapping thing.

All the more reason for me to leave this house and never come back.

I was seconds from passing the door that led to Markus's office, and I found myself stopping in front of it, wondering if he had something in there about Daddy. Could I snoop and find out why I was here? I hated the thought that I'd run home and Daddy might still refuse to tell me the truth.

I hated it. It was like Daddy thought I was too fragile, too breakable, but I liked to think I was stronger than he gave me credit for. I just wanted the truth. That wasn't too much to ask, especially of the only family I had left, after Mom died.

It might be a mistake, but I decided to go for it anyway. This might be my only chance to discover the truth on my own, besides begging for it from other people. Those other people seemed content to keep me in the dark, and I was not okay with it. Tell me the truth, open up my eyes, let me see it all for myself and judge the situation for what it was.

My kidnapping. Daddy must've done something terrible for this family to kidnap me, to steal me away from him, but what?

Markus's office looked different in the darkness. The room had no windows, so there was not an ounce of silver light anywhere. I had to fumble my way to his desk, where I knew a small table lamp was, and I knocked myself into every piece of furniture on the way. Once I found it, I flicked it on, knowing I should get in and out of here as quickly as I could.

The man himself would be pissed to find out I'd snooped.

I had to squint for a few moments, once light illuminated the room, and I moved around his desk, yanking out the top drawer. It was full of papers, and I tried to go through them, tried to see if I could recognize anything on them, but I didn't get very far.

Why, you ask?

Oh, because the door creaked open and someone stood hugging the shadows on the wall, giving me a hollow smile.

I froze—talk about a deer in headlights, stupid me—and I met the eyes of the man who'd just walked in. It was a man I'd met earlier, a man who was cute but thoroughly creeped me out, probably because he had an almost unhinged glint in his hazel eyes.

Although, right now, his hazel eyes appeared nearly black.

Will.

“I thought I heard someone sneaking around,” he said, slow to meander to the desk, where I was. “Imagine my surprise when I stumble across you in Markus’s office.” He grinned, and I had to look away. He was beside me then, glancing down into the drawer I'd been searching through. His body was tall, and it leaned into mine. “What are you looking for, little rabbit? Whatever it is, I can tell you that Markus doesn't keep anything important in here, where anyone might snoop and find it... like you.”

As he whispered those words to me, his hand went to shut the desk drawer. He was anything but quiet about it, and I nearly jumped out of my skin when he made so much noise. I... I only ended up bumping my back into his chest. That's how close he stood to me.

I said nothing, and when I said nothing, he moved to stand directly behind me, his arms circling me and pinning my front to the desk. “I said,” he murmured, voice so low it caused a shiver to rise up my spine, “what are you looking for, Juliet?”

“Please,” I whispered back, closing my eyes, “I just want to know the truth.”

His chest chuckled. “The truth about what? About why you're here? That's something only Markus knows, and if I were you, I'd give up the chase. If he wanted you to know, he would've told you already.” I felt him lean closer, one of his hands moving to sweep my hair to a single shoulder, his lips lightly brushing against the crook of my neck. “I admit, I am curious about you.”

If my eyes were not already closed, they would've snapped shut right then, at the feeling of his lips on my neck. Such a

tender, sensitive spot on my body... I had no idea. I also didn't know why I found the low timbre of Will's voice so entrancing. It was almost like he was a spider and I was the foolish insect, caught on his web, unable to pull myself free.

Or maybe it was just because I'd never felt a guy's touch, not like this.

"He's kept you so close to his chest, hardly telling us anything," Will went on. The hand that had swept aside my hair now moved to my hip, holding onto me gently, his warmth immediately flooding every single part of me. "He doesn't want me to be alone with you, can you imagine that? Doesn't trust me, I guess."

At this point, I didn't trust him either, and I also kind of didn't trust myself. I was pretty sure my body shouldn't feel like this.

The hand on my side slipped beneath my pajama top, fingers grazing the bare skin on my hip. Anywhere those fingers touched, a fire lit just beneath the surface. I should push him off, should tell him off, should do anything but nothing—which was what I was doing. A whole lot of nothing, standing there and taking it.

He was almost impossible to resist, really, and I didn't know why, because he still creeped me out. The way he looked at me, how he acted, how he spoke... the things he'd told me earlier. Will wasn't sane, I didn't think—but then, with how my body reacted to him, could I say the same about myself?

"Although, I can't blame him for that," Will went on, and I felt his body press harder upon my backside, pinning my lower half upon the desk more firmly. "I mean, I can't be the only one in this house that's curious about you. The wide-eyed Juliet, so lost, so innocent... so pretty." Those lips still danced along my neck, and I could not move. I was frozen in place, cursing myself for not running right to the door and flinging myself out in the night when I'd had the chance.

Stupid, stupid.

“I should let you go,” he whispered. “I know that. My track record with pretty girls isn’t that good, you know. They usually try to kill me, but somehow I don’t think you have that in you, do you?” The hand on my hip moved around to caress the soft skin on my stomach, slow to inch its way up. “Do you have it in you, Juliet? Or are you as lost and as helpless as you look?”

I didn’t know how to answer that question, didn’t know what to say to him. I was at a genuine loss for words, mostly at myself and how I didn’t exactly hate his touch.

It took everything in me, but my eyes were slow to open, and I pushed myself away from the desk, turning around to face him. The hand that had traveled up my stomach and stopped just an inch or so below my bra now rested once again on my side, while the other hand of his still held onto the desk.

I met his hazel stare, unflinching, unblinking, my heart acting up in my chest, which I did my best to ignore. “Why does everyone think I’m helpless? I’m not as helpless as I look.” I spoke the words seriously, hoping they were true. So what if I’d been sheltered my whole life? That didn’t mean I wasn’t capable. I might be awkward, I might not know how to handle myself around cute, dangerous strangers, but that did not mean I was weak and helpless.

I was strong, and before I got out of here, I’d make sure these guys knew it.

The corners of Will’s mouth wore a smirk, and his face inched closer to mine. He was taller than me by just less than a foot, but that didn’t seem to hinder him at all. “You have no idea you’ve been taken to the monster’s den. Out there, in the world, maybe you’re not helpless—maybe—but here? Here it’s a different story. The only way you’re not helpless here is if you’re willing to spill some blood.” There was a pause as his smirk grew into a full-blown smile. “Tell me, Juliet, are you willing to stain those hands in red?”

Was he talking about killing? I didn’t know how to answer him or what to say, nor did I know what he currently thought

as he stared down at me, his face so close to mine I could almost feel his lips on me.

One thing was for sure: Will was no Prince Charming, either.

When I didn't answer him, he chuckled, and since his body was pressed hard against mine, I felt the movement in my very soul. "That's all right, that's probably why you're here, anyway," he whispered. "Sometimes the only things that can protect you are the monsters underneath your bed."

"Is that what you are?" I asked, my voice barely able to come out at all. "A monster?"

Will chuckled again, this time moving the hand that held onto the desk, bringing it to my neck. He did not hold onto me tightly, but I knew I could not get out of his grip even if I wanted to.

And... and I didn't, which was very odd.

"We're all monsters here, Juliet. Every single one of us. Remember that." The hand on my neck moved up, cupping my jaw, forcing my lips to part. I could hardly breathe, feeling his callous, warm hand on me, so possessive and overwhelming. "Such a pretty mouth," he murmured. "I hope I'll get to put it to good use." As he said that, I felt him press harder upon my midsection, and I could feel something there that wasn't there before.

Heat crept up me, and as I fought to respond, tried to figure out something to say to him that would simultaneously get me out of this situation and tell him to screw off, he pulled himself off me, letting me go. I panted like I'd been drowning.

"Come on," Will said. "Let's get you back to bed before my imagination goes wild."

I wanted to argue with him, wanted to refute the fact that he would never get to put my mouth to good use, but no words formed. I could say nothing, it seemed, because this man had rendered me speechless in the worst way.

And, what was even worse about the whole thing was, I was pretty sure I'd become even more attracted to him after that whole encounter. How messed up was that?

I should've said something. I should've argued with him, told him off, but instead I ducked my head and followed him out of the office like a good girl, like someone who naturally took the submissive role. I supposed I was used to it, after everything with Daddy, but this was different. So different. I couldn't even explain it.

Will brought me back to my room, but before I could walk inside, he grabbed me by the arm and pulled me against him. "I hope," he told me, "this will be our little secret." He stared down at me, and I swallowed.

He wasn't going to tell Markus I was snooping in his office? Right, probably because Markus didn't want Will alone with me or something like that. I didn't know how I should respond, which was the right thing to do, if I should tell Markus about it or not, but I found myself nodding.

Nodding and repeating, "Our little secret."

I didn't do secrets. I didn't like them, nor did I want them, but, for some reason, when I stared up at Will, I felt a pull, an invisible string between us. Maybe secrets didn't have to be bad. Maybe secrets could be a good thing.

That's what I kept telling myself, even when Will released me, even when I crawled back into bed and closed my eyes. That's what I told myself when sleep finally came to me, even in my dreams.

Our little secret.

Morning came, and I was awoken by a giggle. A giggle, yes, like something was funny. Also a feminine giggle, a giggle that did not sound as if it came from one of the many men I'd met so far in this house.

Of course there had to be girls here. I couldn't be the only one.

I moaned, feeling tired, and as I sat up and rubbed my face, I heard a girl's voice say, "You sleep funny."

"What?" My voice came out groggy. I sounded like I wanted to go back to bed, which I kind of did. After my late-night rendezvous with Will, I actually got some sleep. Not enough, from what it felt like.

"I kept calling your name, but you wouldn't wake up. It was kind of like you were dead," the girl's voice carried on. "But you weren't. I checked your breathing."

And then I realized someone was in my room, talking to me, and I nearly fell out of the bed when I saw the wide-eyed look of a girl grinning ear to ear beside me. She couldn't have been more than ten years old, her hair a sleek black color and her eyes a vibrant blue. A pretty girl, a child, someone who I immediately had a hard time believing lived in this house.

"Uh," I started, "who are you?"

"Tori," she said, giggling again. I recognized the name; Jaxon had brought her up before. "I brought you some of my mom's clothes." She pointed to the foot of the bed, where she'd stacked some clothes with no rhyme or reason, a small mountain of them.

She'd come in and set all that down and checked on me, and I hadn't woken up. Great. Good to know I could still zonk out from the world, with everything going on.

"Do you live here, Tori?"

She nodded, almost proud. "Yep! I go to school too, but it's Saturday, so I'm home all day. I wanted to finally meet you. My dads told me to leave you be, but I didn't want to."

I blinked. Her... her *dads*, as in plural? "You have more than one dad?"

"Yeah. You met one, I think. He likes to cook, so he's always in the kitchen. My other dads are usually downstairs or off doing something for Uncle Markus." She spoke so happily, still smiling, her joy almost infectious.

Almost.

And then it hit me, what she'd said, beyond her multiple dads thing: Uncle Markus. Markus was her *uncle*. I found that fact so incredibly hard to believe, and it took me a long time to mentally process it. Like, a long time.

"Mom's downstairs a lot, too," she said, sounding almost like she was whining. "I want to go down there with her, but she says I'm not old enough yet. It's not fair. With Uncle Vaughn gone, I've been so bored. But now you're here—you can be my new friend!"

I wasn't sure who Vaughn was or why this girl wanted me to be her friend, but I found I was speechless. Yes, a little, ten-year-old girl had rendered me speechless. Shouldn't be surprising, since this house was big enough to hide an army.

"Um, I don't think I'm here to be your friend," I started, not sure how to talk to this girl. Did she know I was kidnapped to be here, that I wasn't here of my own freewill? If her parents, however many of them she had, lived here, that meant they were probably just as crazy as Markus and Will, which meant this girl was on the fast-track to becoming another one.

"Fuck Uncle Markus," she declared proudly—and then she giggled again when she saw my shocked face. "He's the one who said we can't be friends, right? Fuck him!"

"Do you even know what that word means?" It was quite shocking to hear a ten-year-old girl more comfortable swearing than I was. I tried my hardest not to swear, mostly because Daddy didn't like it. Said it was too vulgar and uncouth, that we were above such words.

Tori shrugged her small shoulders. "My dad says it all the time. I'm allowed."

"Okay, well—" I was about to tell her that I needed to change, apparently into her mom's clothes again, but my bedroom door opened. My heart did something funny in my chest, and I assumed it was Will, but it wasn't. It was Jaxon, and he shot me a dimpled grin when he saw me and Tori on the bed.

God, I'd almost forgotten how cute he was, and not in the creepy, unsettling way Will was. No, Jaxon had that boy next door thing going for him, or at least, that's what I assumed the boy next door thing was. The dimples, the easygoing grin, the clean-shaven face and the lean body that wore any clothing well.

Yeah, okay, Jaxon was an overwhelming kind of cute.

"Tori," he spoke, walking into the room, "you're not supposed to be here, are you?"

"Mom said Juliet needed more clothes, so I brought her some," Tori declared proudly, puffing up her chest as she walked to meet Jaxon. Though she was quite small compared to him, she did not act afraid in the slightest. "She's my new friend."

"Oh, she is?" Jaxon grinned, glancing at me. "But how? She's supposed to be *my* new friend."

Tori let out a thoughtful hum. "Well, maybe we can share. *Maybe.*"

Jaxon folded his arms across his chest, giving the girl a playful look. "What if I don't want to share?" He posed the question with a twinkle in his eye, and he shot me a wink. Yes, a wink—and that darned wink made my stomach twist and my palms get a little sweaty.

He seemed so normal interacting with Tori. So normal, considering the fact he was the one who appeared in my room at home and kidnapped me, wrapped that strong arm around my neck and knocked me out. I couldn't help but wonder what else he was capable of. That cute, boy next door thing he had going on was nothing but a mask, a mask that hid his true nature.

Because a normal person knew kidnapping was wrong.

Tori stomped her foot, refusing to back down. "Learn. Sharing isn't that hard. My dads do it with Mom—"

When I realized what she meant by that, I instantly felt my cheeks flare up. How in the world could this girl be so at ease talking about all this stuff? I mean, really, was I *that* sheltered?

“Fine,” Jaxon cut in, before Tori could say anything else, “we can share her, but I need to steal her this morning. Markus wants to see her after breakfast.” At the mere sound of Markus’s name, my gaze dropped to the downy comforter on my lap.

Great. Couldn’t wait for that.

She let out a groan. “Fine, but I get her after!” It was after that particular declaration Tori rushed out of my room, not so much as telling either of us goodbye. We both watched her go, and then Jaxon brought his twinkling gaze to me.

“So, you’ve met Tori,” he said, slow to take a few steps closer to my bed.

I was even slower in getting out of it, tossing the covers off me and standing in my fuzzy pajamas. “She’s... not like any kid I’ve met, although I guess I haven’t met too many,” I hurriedly said. “Or any kid, really.”

Jaxon eyed me up, and I couldn’t tell if he thought my pajamas were ridiculous or if he was instead focusing on what I’d just said. Probably the latter, since he whispered, “You never got out much, did you?”

“No, my dad kept me close to home.” That sounded better than *Daddy kept me locked up in the house, occasionally in my own room*. For some reason, I didn’t want Jaxon thinking less of me. Totally stupid, I knew, since he was my kidnapper and all.

“I know things are a little crazy right now, but there’s no one saying you can’t enjoy it. I mean, you’re out of the house. You might not have freedom here to do whatever you want, but maybe if you prove to Markus you can follow directions, he’ll let me take you out to Midpark sometime.”

It struck me just then what he’d said, or, rather, what he neglected to say. “How long do you think I’ll be here?”

“My guess? A while. I’d get comfortable if I were you,” Jaxon said, a smile returning to his lips. “Now, get dressed. I wasn’t lying when I said Markus wants to see you after breakfast.” As I went to go through the clothes Tori had

deposited at the foot of the bed, he added, “I’ll admit, I’m surprised you didn’t try to run. All day yesterday you looked like you wanted to bolt—not that I blame you, of course.”

I shot him a look, and I hoped it was a look that told him I wasn’t even going to bother trying to run away. “I don’t think I’d know the first thing about getting back home.” That much, at least, wasn’t a lie. It wasn’t like I had street smarts thanks to Daddy.

“This place... I know it can be frightening, but it doesn’t have to be another prison for you.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, mostly because it felt exactly as he’d described: another prison. But then, if that was the case, Daddy had kept me locked up my whole life. I should be angry, I should hate him... but I didn’t. I found I only missed him, and though I was beyond curious to know what he did for this family, I was dying to see him again.

When I’d found the clothes I would wear today, I glanced back over to him. “Are you... are you going to watch me change or something?”

He laughed quietly. “As much as I’d like to, I don’t think the big man would be too happy if I did.” His head gestured to the door, and then he started walking towards it. “I’ll be in the hall, when you’re done.”

I watched him go, waited until he closed the door before I started to change. The big man... did he mean Markus? I wondered. Why the heck would Markus care if Jaxon watched me change? It didn’t make sense.

Jaxon took me to the dining hall after I was ready. He sat me down and told me he’d be back with something to eat. I glanced at my lap, and then I looked around. The big, spacious room was empty, save for me. The fancy blouse I wore on my torso made my skin itch; the fabric too soft for me or something.

As I squirmed in my seat, I heard footsteps. The footsteps headed toward the long table, and someone took a seat a ways

down, practically throwing his plate down, along with a glass of orange juice. I'd never seen him before now, that I knew.

Near my age, he seemed to be lost in his own world, fuming at something I would never understand. His hair was black, his body wide, but his face did not hold the maturity Markus's did, and I instantly wondered if he was a relative, a brother. He wore all black, which most men here liked to do. I could almost feel his unhappiness as he poked at his eggs and tore at his toast, munching away with a huge frown on his face. Since he wore a dark t-shirt, I was able to see the tattoos lining his biceps.

He seemed young to have sleeves of tattoos, but what did I know? I clearly didn't know much about the world.

I must've been staring too hard, for he suddenly looked up, turning his blue-eyed gaze at me, a fire burning behind those eyes I didn't recognize. "What?" he hissed, not even bothering to ask who I was. Maybe everyone in this house knew, while I was the only clueless one. "You got something you want to say to me?"

I shouldn't say anything, that much I knew, but my mouth went on to ramble a bit, unfortunately, "Did those eggs do something to you?"

His dark brows came together, and he hissed, "What?"

"Your eggs," I clarified. "Did they hurt you? With the way you're attacking them, that's the only explanation I can think of." I saw a muscle in his jaw tick, and I looked away, gazing down at my lap, mentally scolding myself for saying anything to him to begin with. *Come on, Juliet. You know better than that.*

"And why the fuck do you care how I eat my fucking breakfast?" He sounded absolutely ticked off, like I'd royally gotten under his skin somehow, saying so few words. That, or he was just not the kind of person you could ever get along with. Grumpy, mean, rude. "You the fucking breakfast police or something?" He rolled his eyes, which were a few shades darker than my own. A pretty color—or they would be, if they weren't set on a face that looked murderous. "Everything's

always gotta be policed around here. Like, fuck! I just want to eat my food in peace, is that too much to ask?”

He paused his ranting and raving to glare at me, and I fidgeted in my seat. “I’m sorry,” I said. “Just forget it. I didn’t mean to...”

“Wait a fucking minute. You—” He pointed his fork at me, doing it so fast some of the egg currently on it flung in my direction. “—I don’t know you. Who the fuck are you, and why are you in my house?”

I didn’t want to talk to this guy, didn’t want to be around him. I looked around for Jaxon, wishing he would miraculously appear and save me from this horribly awkward and angry conversation. He was nowhere to be seen, sadly.

A chair scraped against the floor, and before I knew it, the blue-eyed one was beside me, one hand weaving in my hair and pulling my neck back, exposing my neck as the other brought a fork to the side of my throat, just below my ear. It all happened so fast I couldn’t even blink to register it.

“I said,” he started, “who the fuck are you?”

“Juliet,” I croaked out, wishing at least one person under this roof was normal.

He flashed me a set of perfect teeth, straight and white, the kind that would make a handsome smile, but I had the feeling this one hardly ever smiled. “Who are you here with, Juliet?” He growled out my name, and thankfully, before he could press that food-stained fork against my neck and remind me that he could kill me with it, a stern voice called out through the room.

“Bennet! Get your hands off her, and do it now.” Jaxon was twenty feet away, but it sounded like he was right next to us, ready to brawl.

“I don’t owe this bitch anything,” Bennet growled out, staring daggers at me. I didn’t move, because I knew if I did, he wouldn’t hesitate to stick me with that fork, and with the muscles I saw on his arms, I knew he was more than capable of it.

Death by fork. Who knew that could be a thing?

Jaxon came closer, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw he carried a plate of what looked like chocolate chip pancakes. If I wasn't in such a precarious position, I'd be thankful. I hadn't had chocolate chip pancakes in forever.

"She's here because Markus wants her here," Jaxon said, slow to set down the plate near me, but still Bennet did not give up.

"Markus, Markus, Markus—I'm so fucking tired of listening to him," he said. "Why should I care if he wants her here? Why should I give a shit?"

"If you want to remain a part of this family, you will pull yourself off her, because if I have to do it, I won't be so nice about it." Jaxon's voice, normally good-natured and easy-going, came off harsh and acidic, and I would've flinched at hearing the change in his tone, if I wasn't already flinching due to Bennet's strong hold on my hair. Felt like he was pulling some strands out. "*Now, Bennet.*"

Finally, Bennet's fingers released their hold, and he lowered the fork, pulling himself away from me as he took up his chair a little ways down. He tossed me an irate, annoyed look, like I was the one who'd started all this, and then he went back to his eggs, stabbing away at them, as if nothing at all had happened. As if he hadn't nearly just killed me with a freaking fork.

"Come on," Jaxon growled out, "let's eat somewhere else. Company's a little lacking here." Bennet paused as he was insulted, but he said nothing as Jaxon grabbed the plate of chocolate chip pancakes and walked away. I followed him, though I did toss a look over my shoulder at Bennet, wondering why he'd snapped at me.

Served me right for teasing him about the way he was eating, I guess. I needed to keep to myself while I was here.

Jaxon led us outside, near the pool. The stamped concrete was cool since it was so early in the day, and we sat down near the water. I smelled just the barest hint of what must be

chlorine, the chemical you had to put in a pool to keep it sanitized or whatever, but it didn't bother me. I'd never smelled it before. I... I had a lot of nevers, more than I ever wanted to admit to anyone.

He only had one plate, mine, and he set it down, along with a water bottle, saying, "Sorry, I didn't know if you liked milk."

"I like milk," I told him, but I took the water bottle, anyway. It wasn't like I'd send him back inside to fetch me my morning milk or anything. Out here, alone with Jaxon, the gentle morning breeze blowing between us... it was nice.

Much better than being inside, where anyone could show up and try to kill me.

"Sorry about Bennet," Jaxon muttered as I started to cut my pancakes with the fork. He didn't bring me a knife, probably because he didn't trust me. Might try to use it to threaten him or something? I didn't know. Kind of stupid, because I didn't think I looked like a girl who could do a lot of damage with a butter knife.

I shrugged, mostly because that was all I could do. "He seems... like a piece of work." And that was putting it lightly. Bennet had been rude and mean and aggressive beyond all belief. He'd tried to stab me in the neck with a fork. Somehow, I didn't think I'd be getting over that so soon.

He chuckled. "I know. He's... not one of the saner Scotts. He's been ticked off at Markus ever since Markus told him he needed to cool it, or else." Jaxon sat across from me, his legs spread toward the pool, just a few feet between us and the bluish water.

I sat with my legs folded beneath my butt, the plate of pancakes on my lap. "Or else what?" Did I even care? I couldn't say that I did, but it was nice to pretend, just for a few moments, that I was not being held against my will in a strange house with equally strange people.

"Or else he won't get to stay."

I brought a piece of pancake to my mouth, slow to chew it before asking, “What do you mean?” The fluffy, chocolate-filled pancake tasted like heaven—or maybe that was just because this place had been the opposite of that until now.

“Not everyone in the family stays,” Jaxon explained, tracing shapes in the concrete beneath us absentmindedly. “Some aren’t stable enough to... do what we do. Some don’t listen well enough. So, they’re cast out. Some leave because they think they found happiness with someone outside of the family, but most who leave don’t do it by choice.”

I waited, letting his words sink in. I took another bite of the pancakes and then reached for my water, sipping it. “Doesn’t sound like a nice family.” In fact, it hardly sounded like a family at all. It sounded more like a business.

“Maybe not to you, but to me...” He sighed. “I’m not a blood brother. I’m not a real Scott, but I might as well be one. They took me in when I was young, adopted me, pretty much. They fed me, clothed me, sent me to school, helped me understand that sometimes karma needs a little help.”

I set the plate down, staring squarely at him. “Karma?” I knew what it was, but I didn’t believe in it. I didn’t think people ended up getting what they deserved, didn’t believe in a sort of cosmic comeuppance list. I thought the world was random, and it was huge, and it was full of people who did bad things and good. This family... they did a lot of the bad, that much I knew.

“You need discipline to be a Scott. You need to be loyal. Bennet is... he likes to go off the hook a lot, likes to go on benders, party at Hillcrest. He’s completely psychotic, but he doesn’t want to listen to reason. He wants to do whatever the hell he wants to do whenever he wants to do it.” Jaxon quieted, meeting my eyes. “I’m sorry you had to deal with him. He’s not in the house that often—that’s the only good thing about Bennet.”

I supposed that was a good thing, but still. He lived here, technically, even if he wasn’t around all the time. For however

long I was here, I had to be on the lookout and avoid being alone in any dark halls with that one.

My mind flashed back to Will and the things he'd whispered to me in Markus's office last night. Our little secret. I knew I should probably tell, but then if I told, I'd also have to tell them why I was in Markus's office to begin with, and I didn't think snooping or running away would go over too well.

"Earlier, you said Markus wants to see me," I spoke, hating that my heart sped up at the mere sound of the man's name. All those years I'd dreamed of him... years wasted. Just a silly girl having silly dreams of a life she'd never have.

Was I bitter? Only a little, but I didn't blame Daddy for that. I never should've gone to that party two years ago.

"I don't know why," he told me. "But to be fair, I didn't ask."

I nodded along with him, figuring that was the case. With how much he went on and on about loyalty and all that—and knowing he wasn't a Scott by blood, but by circumstance—I knew he would never go against Markus, and I couldn't blame him for it. I mean, look at this place. Psychos aside, it wasn't a bad place to be. You had money, you clearly had power and prestige.

Who would ever trade that away?

If the tables were turned and I was the one holding the power, I couldn't say I would.

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Chapter Six – Markus

My eyes and ears on Fred Osborne had notified me that he'd finally gotten home late last night. He'd come home to an empty house, to a home without his precious daughter. The little girl he'd spent years hiding, the girl he'd kept away from the world, from its horrors... from its men. Keeping her sheltered, keeping her safe, keeping her virtue intact.

This world did not lend to innocence, but it did lend to its dissolution, to its desecration, to its utter and complete annihilation.

Juliet was a butterfly, beautiful and caged. Precious and weak. It was only a matter of time before those wings of hers were plucked, before a needle punctured her and pinned her to the wall of this madhouse. Whether it was me or someone else who destroyed her did not matter. All that mattered was that Fred Osborne fell back in line. That he realized how serious this situation was and I did not take his actions lightly—nor did I take mine.

I did not get off on the destruction of innocence, but I'd be lying if I said I was not lured to it. Juliet was... so fragile, so breakable, she truly had no idea. She inherently called out to the thing caged inside, to that beast I never let out.

I did not lose control. I was always in control. I controlled everyone around me. If there was one thing I did not like, it was the mere notion of not being the one in control. Frankly, I didn't know what I would've done or where I would be if my father had not chosen me to take his place as the head of the family.

If he'd chosen someone else, someone like Lincoln... the family would've crumbled. When you ran a place like this, when you had countless of sociopaths on leashes below you, you had to be aware of each and every leash and just how tightly you had to pull on them to remind them they would regret not being well-behaved.

I waited for Jaxon and Juliet to show up, sitting alone in my office. I'd had an early breakfast, up before dawn, as I usually was. I was... surprised, to say the least, that I had not been woken up in the middle of the night with a report that Juliet had tried to escape. Not that I slept much, that was—and not that I didn't anticipate her trying to run.

Oh, I knew she would. I could see the fire in her eyes. It was only a matter of time before she tried to run from me, and the moment she did, I would make her regret it. I would show her just how dark I could be.

Truly, she'd gone from one prison to another, and though I was not her father, I would not hesitate to punish her for her disobedience and insolence. Just a part of the job.

Even if I happened to take pleasure in it.

I sat there, waiting, leaning on the arm of my chair, elbow propped up. I ran a finger along my bottom lip, letting my mind wander a bit. I did not let myself daydream often; I found it useless in every way, but that girl had found her way into my head more often than not these last two years.

Maybe that's why I'd gone to such extreme lengths to get her here. To have her here under the guise of teaching her father a lesson. I claimed it was part of the job, but was it really? Would it always be so? I liked to think I was more self-aware than most of my brothers when it came to reality.

And the reality was I was not sure.

For now, it was just the job. But the more I repeated that in my head, the less likely it felt true.

It wasn't as if I felt lonely. It wasn't like I'd never been with a woman before. I knew the soft curves of a woman's body, knew the sounds they could make. I knew what they felt like under me, their legs around my waist and their cunts tightening around my cock. My actions surrounding this whole thing were not simply because of physical desire.

A memory rose in the back of my mind, a memory I could not stop.

It was a week after my father had taken me to the basement and basically told me I would be his replacement, that I would run this family when he retired. He was getting older, he'd said, and he wanted to see the world and its wonders... and do it with all of his wives.

He had a lot of them. My father collected wives like no other. They knew about each other, too. Whether it was the money or something else, whether it was genuine love for my father that made them all stick around, I had no idea. I wasn't really interested.

Father had told me to dress to impress for tonight, so I'd donned a suit. Felt a little snug on me, for I was not accustomed to wearing one, but such clothes were what my father wore nearly every day. I supposed I'd have to get used to it.

I met my father in one of the lounges of the house, and he appraised me with a smile. "You look good, son," he said. He stood near a cabinet of liquor, and within seconds, he got two crystal glasses out and poured some whiskey for us both. I was not twenty-one yet, but it would not be the first time I'd tasted alcohol.

When you were a Scott, not every law applied.

Father sipped his, and that's what I did with mine. It was strong stuff, but I did not wince as it burned while falling down my throat. "I have a surprise for you," he told me. "A surprise and, of course, a lesson."

We finished up the drinks, set the glasses down, and then we were off. I walked beside him, but I let him lead us. He took us down to the first floor of the house, his hands in his suit pockets.

"As you know, nothing matters more than getting the job done. Whatever it is, whoever needs to meet their end—for this family to keep going, it needs to run without a hitch. You can't let emotions control you. You can't let the heat of the moment get out of hand."

I nodded along, fully agreeing with every single word he said, and because of that, I said nothing. What was there to say? I was still young, there were still things I would have to learn before he left us, the financial aspects and everything else, but that much I already knew.

We stopped before a closed door, and my father turned to face me, staring at me with an intensity even I could not match. “There is one weakness many men share, and I don’t mean the penchant for blood your brothers have. It is a weakness that has nearly tripped me up on occasion. Can you guess what that weakness is, Markus?”

I thought, but I didn’t say anything, because I wasn’t sure what could’ve tripped my father up on multiple occasions. He always seemed so strong and collected; whatever it was, he hid it well.

When I said nothing, my father gave me a smile. It was not a warm smile; more of a cold one, the kind of smile I was used to receiving when it came to him. He set a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently as he said, “Women.”

All I could do was blink.

It was clear I was not quite understanding what he was saying, so he dropped his hand and went on, “Men share an almost universal weakness, and that is a weakness to women. To their bodies, to their screams, to the pleasure they can bring you. To the feeling of being their protector, their defender.”

My eyebrows creased, and I said, “But you have—”

“Wives that bear me sons and daughters, the ones who will carry on my legacy. I will admit this to you, but I don’t want you to ever repeat this to any of your siblings.” My father lowered his voice to a whisper, “Your mother almost convinced me to leave it all behind, to start a new life with her somewhere. It was right after your grandfather died. I... almost agreed with her.” Shadows danced across his features, and I was momentarily struck by the sudden truth of it all.

Father had almost run away with a woman. It didn’t seem right. It didn’t seem right at all.

“But I realized this family needed me, so I put my foot down, refused to let her be a weakness of mine.” He lifted his hands and gestured around us, at the house. “And here we are. I think I made the better decision, don’t you?”

I nodded. Of course he did.

“I tell you all this because I want to prepare you for the future. Women will try to sink their claws into you. They will try to use you, to claim you, to bend you to their will... but you are a Scott, my son, and no son of mine will fall to his knees for a woman.” He spoke those words with such intensity, such belief, that I could not say anything in reply.

My father moved to the door we stood near, setting his hand on the knob. He pushed inside, walking in, and I was right behind him—and then I saw what surprise he had in store for me tonight.

Women. Young women. Pretty women, all in various states of undress. They lounged about the room in lingerie, the curves of their bodies tempting. They chitchatted with each other, though when we entered, they stopped and stared at us. Mostly at me, eyeing me up like I was a piece of meat.

My father leaned in to whisper, “Do not worship what’s between their legs. Instead, let them worship you.” He said nothing else, backing away from me and leaving the room, shutting the door behind him.

I surveyed the room, the women, their smiles and, of course, their bodies. They started to get up, to move toward me, and as they began to swoon over me, to touch me, to touch each other while I watched, to do anything and everything I wanted, I swore one thing to myself.

I would never be like my father. I would never let a woman get to me.

Wasn’t it ironic that it wasn’t a woman who’d gotten to me but instead a girl? A girl who was just barely eighteen, a girl who was pretty but should not have caused me to look twice. Juliet

was a girl I never should've cared about, and yet somehow it felt as though I had to keep watch.

All these years, I'd made sure... I'd watched, I'd paid attention. I knew the truth about her father, and I knew what he would do to her if he was not put in line.

And I would not see that happen to her. I would much rather take every shred of innocence in her body myself—or let one of the others do it. Did that make me no better than my brothers? Did that make me as weak as Vaughn, who ran off with that girl to try to make a life for themselves as Ed and Lincoln had before meeting and courting Stella? Did it make me as weak as Bennet for denying everything this family was and wanting to do what *I* wanted to do for once, instead of what was best for the family?

I believed I was better than them, but was I really? Deep down, could I say that without any hint of irony?

A knock brought me out of my mind, and I spoke, “Come in.”

Jaxon and Juliet walked in. Jaxon pushed in first, and he stepped aside, letting me see the girl. She'd changed into more of Stella's clothes; really had to get her some of her own, ones that fit well and didn't make her look like a wannabe librarian. Her blonde hair fell over a shoulder, her blue eyes meeting mine almost hesitantly.

Fuck. Everything about her screamed innocent. I was surprised to hear that Fred had let her be. I'd thought... well, I'd thought a lot of things, none of which mattered as I stared at her.

“Good morning,” I said, mostly to Juliet. “Sleep well, I hope?” My words were laced with an edge she immediately noticed, and I watched her break eye contact to stare at her feet. Her bare feet. Had to get her some shoes too, I supposed.

“Sure,” she whispered, barely audible.

She was scared of me, as she should be. When we'd first met at that masquerade, she'd had no idea who I was or what I was capable of. She had no idea that I was worse than the

monsters she heard about on the news. A methodical, organized beast who did what he did because he simply had to.

“Your father came home last night,” I said, watching her gaze quickly snap back up, those entrancing blue eyes of hers widen to new depths. Oh, I had her attention now. “From what I heard, he was positively wrought with concern over his missing daughter. He had no idea where you went, if you ran away because you wanted to... or if someone stole you out from your bed.” At that, I shot a glimpse at Jaxon.

Jaxon shifted his weight, but I noticed how he swallowed, how he looked down. Don’t tell me he felt bad about all of this? Don’t fucking tell me he’d started to grow a weakness for her, too?

Had to stomp that out immediately, but one thing at a time.

“What have you done to him?” Juliet had the balls to ask, taking a step closer to my desk. Though she practically trembled in fear, her spine was straight, and she waited for my answer, bold. Too bold.

“I’ve done nothing to him... yet,” I said, breathing evenly as I stood. I moved around my desk, walking toward her as I unbuttoned the two buttons on my suit jacket. The deliberate movement caught her eye, but she remained firmly planted where she was. I stopped when I stood before her, towering over her easily.

Such a tiny girl she was. She had some curves, yes, but she was quite short.

“And I’m not going to—not without your help, that is.” As I spoke, I lifted a hand to her face, swiping some of her blonde hair behind an ear, a soft, gentle gesture that made her shiver. “You and I, Juliet—we’re going to send him a message.” I was slow to cock my head. “Is there anything you’d like to tell dear old daddy?”

“I don’t—no, there’s nothing. I don’t want—”

“Do you think you actually have a choice in this?” I asked, causing her fumbling to stop and those eyes to become even wider as they gazed up at me. Those eyes... one could definitely get used to those eyes under you. “When I say we are going to send Daddy a message, I mean it.”

Her cheeks blushed, and I wondered if that was because I’d mocked her. She called him Daddy. It was such an ugly display of love and adoration. *Daddy*. No matter what Daddy ever did to her, she loved him. He could keep her locked away in that fucking house and she would still die defending him.

I hated it. I hated him for it.

My eyes moved to Jaxon, who was currently doing his best to ignore the way I towered over Juliet. He said nothing to me, but I could tell he wanted to. The fool. I’d sent him to fetch her because he was loyal and not a little prick like Bennet. He was not supposed to get close to her; he was only supposed to watch her. Key difference there.

“And you,” I said, “are going to tape it for us.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Do you think you can manage that, Jaxon?” More vitriol than I’d intended seeped into my voice, but I didn’t care. Let him know I saw the beginning cracks on his mask.

Let him know, and let him either fix that mask or own up to it.

Because she did not yet know her place here, Juliet spoke, “And what’s stopping my dad from going to the police? From showing them this video?” As I refocused my attention on her, she lost her gusto. “He knows who you are. He’s not going to sit back and—”

My hand shot up, instantly cupping the lower part of her face, right over that spunky little mouth. “You think you know it all, don’t you? You think I’m the bad guy,” I muttered, frowning down at her as I held onto her face. “What you don’t know is that when I hurt you, I will do it with a purpose, whereas he would have no reason.”

I let her go, turned my back to her, and returned to my chair. She practically pouted like a child, leaning her hands on my desk, meeting my glare with one of her own. “My dad would never hurt me, if that’s what you’re saying,” she spoke—and so proudly, too. Like dear Daddy was the best man she’d ever known.

More like the only man she’d ever known.

“Oh, Juliet,” I whispered, “before you leave this house, I will open those eyes of yours and make you see how ugly the truth really is. There are no good men in this house, but out there? Out in that big, wide world you have no idea about—in case you forgot—there are even fewer. Fewer good men. More animals.”

“If they’re all animals out there, what does that make you?”

The corners of my lips curved upward in a rare smile. A tiny thing, really, gone within seconds, but it was there, if only for a moment. “The devil, of course. And right now, I’m your devil. You should count yourself lucky.” I pointed to the space beside my chair. “Now, come here.”

Juliet did not want to; I could tell she fought with herself, but in the end, she walked around my desk and stood where I told her to, like a good girl.

I reached forward, grabbing a phone I’d set on the desk. Not my personal one, of course, but one I used for business dealings on occasion. I turned on its screen and handed it to Jaxon. When I was not using it for business, it was locked away in a safe in my room.

Jaxon took it, and his fingers deftly hit the right app to record. He positioned himself near the leather chair facing my desk, and I said, “Make sure you get the desk, too.” After I said that, he took a few steps back and nodded.

He was listening to me, so that was good, but I could tell he was still a bit too concerned over the fact that Juliet stood so close to me. If he did not appreciate that, he had a world of hurt coming.

“Let me know when you begin,” I said.

Jaxon waited a moment, and then he hit the screen and gave me a thumbs-up. Those eyes of his kept flicking up and glancing to Juliet, which irritated me to no end.

“Hello, Fred,” I spoke slowly, deliberately taking my time. “I bet you’re wondering where your precious daughter is. As you can see, she’s right here.” I reached for her, running a hand down her arm. I knew she resisted every impulse she had to move away from me. “You and I have had many discussions over the years. You work for me. Not the other way around. Lately, I feel as if this particular detail in our relationship has been ignored.”

That... that was actually not saying much, with everything the man had done, how he’d put us all at risk like the stupid fucker he was.

“I know what you’ve been up to. I’ve known for years. I’ve told you to stop, and yet stop you apparently cannot. So, here we are. At an impasse.” I leaned forward on my desk, folding my hands over each other as I stared at the phone in Jaxon’s hands. “That is why I took your daughter, and I’m going to keep her until you prove to me you can actually listen to instructions.”

Measuredly, I stood, pushing my chair back as I did so. I grabbed Juliet by the back of her throat, moving her so that she stood between me and the desk, her face clear as day on the camera.

“You know me, Fred. You’ve known me for years. You know by now I do not take disobedience lightly,” I said. With one hand on the back of her neck, my other moved to her side. “And since you are not here, since I have this lovely daughter of yours here instead, I think I will make her pay for your crimes. How does that sound?”

Juliet trembled a bit, and I could not blame her. She did not know what was coming, didn’t know what exactly I was capable of. She would find out. She would find out what we were all capable of here; even Jaxon was no knight in shining armor.

Without saying another word, I tore at her shirt. The blouse ripped without resistance, revealing the bra she wore underneath. Out of the corner of my eye, Jaxon tensed, but I was too busy making a show for the camera.

The hand on the back of her throat curled around so it now held onto the front, and I squeezed her harder than would be considered gentle. I made her body lean back into mine, breathing in her scent as I scowled down at her.

“Such a pretty, innocent girl you have, Fred,” I whispered, my other hand making its way up her stomach. A slow crawl, an agonizingly slow and steady movement up to her chest, where her breasts heaved with uneven breaths. “I’m going to take more pleasure than I should from her.”

I dropped the hand from her tits, and in the next moment, I forced her to bend forward, to bend right over my desk, giving me her ass. She whimpered—of course she did. When I’d touched her, I could feel how fast her heart beat, and I knew she was terrified. I would be, I supposed, if things were different and I was in her shoes.

Or, rather, her torn-up clothes.

“I’m going to break her,” I said, moving to hold her down and positioning myself behind her. “I’m going to take that precious innocence of hers and shatter it into a million pieces. I’m going to destroy everything about her, and when I’m done, you’ll get her back—as long as you’ve held up your end. I’m always watching, even when you think I’m not, and you know I’m a man of my word. This girl is mine, and until I’m swayed to believe you can play by my rules again, she will remain mine.”

Juliet’s face was sideways, her cheek pressed down upon my desk. She did not fight me, mostly because she knew she couldn’t.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need a moment to remind your daughter who’s in charge in this house. Maybe if she learns to beg, I’ll be gentle with her. Goodbye for now, Fred.”

Jaxon stopped recording, and he lowered the phone, green eyes studying my position with Juliet. He was trying not to appear too interested, but he failed miserably, in my opinion. Or maybe that was simply because I knew the masks each and every one of these men wore, and I could tell the beginnings of an obsession when I saw one.

Obsession. Whether it be power, blood, money... or even getting off on screams. It ran deep in my family. Everyone knew it. We felt obsession for one thing or another in our very core, and Jaxon was no different. He might not be a Scott by blood, but he'd been raised here, taught by us, molded into what he was today by us. So, no, the one before me was no different at all.

“Leave us, Jaxon,” I growled out. The show was now for both Jaxon and Juliet.

Jaxon hesitated. He hesitated, and I noticed right away. In the blink of an eye, his hesitation was gone, and he set the phone down on the leather chair facing my desk before leaving—but not before tossing a quick glance over his shoulder at us.

At her.

I was slow to turn my gaze down toward her, gripping the back of her neck once more as I leaned down, pressing upon her and whispering, “You seem to have Jaxon under your spell already. I must admit, I’m impressed. He’s always been loyal... but then again, he’s never seen such a defenseless girl before. I imagine he wants to protect you. Instinctual.”

She said nothing, which was probably for the best. If she said something right then, if she defended Jaxon in any way, I might snap—and I *never* snapped.

“Do you know what my instincts are telling me to do right now?” I whispered to her, moving her hair aside so I could get a better look at her face. Or, rather, the side of it that wasn’t leaning against the wood of my desk. “They’re telling me to show you exactly who’s in control here.” It felt almost too good to have her bent over my desk, her ass in a perfect position for me to grind on.

I'd held it back, my body's craving, while we were recording, while Jaxon was here, but to have her alone in such a vulnerable position was almost too much. Before it'd been business; I was able to focus on that.

If I was honest with myself, this wasn't strictly business, not anymore... but I supposed we'd known that all along.

I was hard. I'd gotten hard almost instantly. It was not because she was so helpless. It was not because it'd been so long for me. It was simply because she was the ultimate temptation, the tall glass of water suddenly appearing after wandering the desert for miles. She was the light that shouldn't exist, the angel among demons, the breath of fresh air amongst the blood and gore.

She was everything I shouldn't want and yet everything I craved all the same.

But to her, to Juliet, I was the opposite. I was the desert. I was the dark, the devil, the blood and the gore and the danger. I wanted her... but that did not mean she would ever want me.

I drew myself off her so I could spin her, so I could lay her on her back on my desk and gaze down into those eyes. The same eyes I'd seen for the first time in person that night two years ago. She'd been so ridiculously innocent then, too. Wide-eyed and excited to be free. I'd wanted to take her then, but for more selfish purposes.

This was not just a job.

Juliet gazed up at me, the shirt she wore torn from my earlier actions. She still breathed harshly, unevenly, panting for air as if she couldn't get enough. Color flushed her cheeks, and not just because she'd been pressed down upon the wood before. No, the way she stared at me—it was not the stare of a frightened girl, not the stare of someone who knew they were royally fucked.

It was defiant. Strong. The kind of stare someone had when they were not afraid.

Her next words said just that: "I'm not scared of you, Markus." My name on her tongue was damn near the best

sound I'd ever heard, and I swore I felt everything in me tighten as a result. My soul, my heart, my cock.

The part of her shirt that didn't rip was the hemline around her neck, but I fixed that. I tore the damn thing open all the way, let my eyes eat her up. The soft, white flesh on her stomach, the rounded skin above her bra. The way even her neck was flushed. She was flustered, emboldened despite the position she was in.

And she was beautiful in the way only something good could be. Untouchable—but at the same time, very touchable.

I drew my hands along her, meeting her eyes, slow to lean my top half over hers, lowering my face to hover mere inches above hers. “You should be,” I whispered back. “You should be very afraid of me, Juliet. The things I'll do to you... the things I'll make you enjoy.” My hands moved to her chest, cupping her tits and instantly making her gasp. “The things I'll make you beg for. Everything about you, I will take, and I won't stop until every part of you is tainted, until you look in the mirror and don't even recognize yourself.”

There was something so delicious about it, wasn't there? Something so appealing about making this girl mine. Mine in every way possible.

“I'll make you never want to go back to him again,” I murmured, my thumbs running circles on her bra. I could feel the pebbled nipples trying to poke through. “You'll be begging to stay here, Juliet. Begging me.”

I bet she'd never had someone touching her like this. I bet she'd never felt an ounce of bodily pleasure in her life. Maybe I should show her what that body of hers was capable of, the things it could feel, the way her muscles could clench.

Just this once. Just a momentary lapse of weakness on my part; it didn't mean I was weak for her.

“I won't,” she whispered back, and this time she tried to get up, tried to push me off her, but I took her neck in my hand and slammed her back down.

“You will,” I told her, reaching down between us. She wore leggings. Stella’s. The Butcher had a thing for leggings, and I had to admit, on Juliet, they looked good. They hugged every part of her tightly, just as they should. When my hand neared that space between her legs, she glared. She glared at me so hard it almost made me smile.

Such fury. Did she hate me? She’d be better off if she did. Hate and fear; the only things this girl should feel toward me. Nothing else. Never anything else. We both had to remember who I was and why we were here. Not because we wanted to, but because we had to.

“Speak again,” I warned, “and I will make you regret it.”

To her credit, she did not attempt to speak; however, she did try to reach down and pull my hand away. I responded by releasing her neck and taking her wrists in my hands. Such small things, much like her. Once I had them situated above her head, I easily held them both with a single hand, thereby immobilizing her.

“Well?” I prodded, feeling suddenly too warm in my suit. “Don’t tell me you’re actually going to stay silent? I’m impressed. I thought I’d have to drill obedience into you—not that I would’ve minded.”

Juliet puckered her lips, silently glaring, as if daring me to continue, to do what I was about to do. I shouldn’t. I knew I shouldn’t, but in the back of my mind, I knew Jaxon waited outside, knew he was too concerned over her.

I also knew that I wanted to continue a bit too much. In fact, I couldn’t remember wanting anything quite as badly before.

Make me a villain. Make me the thing that kept you up at night. Make me everything you feared and more, the ebbing darkness always at your toes, threatening to devour you whole. I was no hero, nor would I ever be—nor did I wish to be. I was the devil and this was my hell. God help anyone who got stuck here with me.

Like Juliet. Poor, sweet, innocent Juliet, about to get a taste of temptation herself.

I stared into her eyes, holding her wrists above her head while my other hand resumed its location between her legs. She held her thighs tight, as if that would stop me. As if she could. My hand curved along her, slipping between those thighs; I could feel her through the leggings, that hot, forbidden place.

Juliet's lips parted, and for a moment, I thought she was going to speak, to swear at me, to cuss me out or deny me again. To call me what I was: an evil, cruel monster of a man. But she didn't speak. She only panted, unable to catch a full, deep breath. Her pupils were dilated; I could tell she was turned on. I knew it, and maybe that's why I could not stop myself.

She would never admit it out loud, but she was curious about the darkness. We all had bits and pieces of it inside ourselves, some more and bigger than others. She was Fred's daughter, and though some might claim genetics didn't play a big role, others would argue. She had a monster inside too, and I would lure it out to play.

I took my time in rubbing her over the leggings, feeling the fabric slip between her slit. I found her clit, that small nub of flesh ever so sensitive to touch, and I applied more pressure to it, causing her to suck in a breath. I wanted so desperately to slip beneath those leggings, to feel how hot she was, to see if she was indeed as wet as I imagined—but I held back. Just barely.

"It feels good, doesn't it?" I whispered. Her arms no longer struggled, and instead her lower half squirmed in a much different way. With the position we were in, I could no longer press my midsection upon her, and I could feel the low ache in my balls, the dull throbbing of my cock. It'd been so long, so very long.

I was not one to seek out bodily pleasure, not addicted to it like some of my brothers were, but I longed to feel her body

under mine, no clothes between us, her core clamped down on my length and every part of Juliet helpless beneath me.

Those were not thoughts I should entertain, I knew, and yet I could not stop them from dominating my mind, much like how I wanted to dominate her.

She was just a girl. She shouldn't make me feel like this, shouldn't make me want to throw all caution to the wind. The last thing I should feel for Juliet was the urge to claim, to keep, to protect.

I rubbed her harder, causing her to moan beneath me. Her hips bucked, her back arching somewhat, as much as it could, given her position. Her body, I'd bet, was on overdrive. What she felt, every little sensation coursing through her body from my work between her legs—it had to be amplified.

“You think you're not like me, not like any of us,” I murmured, “but the truth is you're just like us. The sooner you admit it to yourself, the sooner you shed that good girl persona you wear, the sooner you'll start to enjoy it.” The dark part of me wanted her to lose it; that meant I affected her, and it would only be fair if I affected her as much as she affected me, would it not?

A whining sound left her, and her thighs clenched together. I did not relent, stroking her clit through the leggings rougher, pinching the skin around it, drawing what must be her first orgasm out of her.

And then, like a glorious, long-awaited explosion, it happened. It happened, and I drank in every detail, memorizing it. The way her facial muscles spasmed, the sound that escaped her slender throat, the way her entire lower half tensed. Her arms tugged down, but I did not let her wrists go, instead sitting back and watching her unravel, all thanks to a hand. A single hand.

How fast would she come for me with more than a hand? Without clothes involved? Would Juliet still be so innocent even when she could fully appreciate everything bodies could do together? I guess we'd have to wait and see.

I pushed off her, lumbering to get to my chair, to sit myself down. The blood in my body ran too hot right now; I had to get my hands off her, lest I decide to continue this... whatever it was. My eyes were slow to move to her, watching as she sat up, every inch of skin on her flushed. Her cheeks, her stomach, her chest. The shirt hung wide open on her front, and she tried to hold it together.

Right. I think we were beyond that by now, weren't we?

"I'd leave, if I were you," I warned. I let the threat end there. Surely, after that, she had enough of an imagination to picture what would come next.

Juliet said nothing to me, and she hurried around my desk and out of the room, leaving me alone to wrestle with what I'd just done... and the still-raging cock in my pants. I probably shouldn't have done that. No, I definitely shouldn't have done that. It wasn't smart. It was taking things a step too far.

I'd lost control. I couldn't let that happen again, as delicious as it had been... and as tempting as it would be.

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Chapter Seven – Juliet

I ran out of that room like a bat out of... well, you know the saying. And, okay, I didn't so much run as I did power walk, but still. The same saying applied. I could not get away from Markus fast enough, mostly because I was still reeling from everything.

And I meant everything.

The message he had taped, the one he'd send to Daddy. Tearing my shirt like that, touching me like that, saying those things to rile Daddy up—it was wrong. It was all wrong.

You know what else was wrong? Everything that happened *after* Markus made Jaxon leave the room. The things he'd whispered to me, how he'd touched me, how my body had reacted... my mind raced, my heart beat fast. The space between my legs was like a heater, aching and hot for something I didn't understand.

It was as I left the office that it actually hit me: that was an orgasm. I'd just had my first orgasm at the hands of a man who had me kidnapped. A man who I should hate on principle.

Jaxon stood a few feet away from the door, and when he saw me and the look on my face, he knew something was wrong. I didn't know if he'd heard what went on in that office, but I didn't doubt his imagination ran wild.

Did he think Markus... I couldn't even finish that thought, mostly because it was closer to the truth than I wanted to admit. I also didn't want to admit to anyone how much I didn't hate it, how much I kind of, sort of liked it—just a teeny, weeny bit. Just a little, really. It shouldn't even be worth mentioning.

And that was me trying to logically explain it all away, but this, none of this was logical. None of this made sense. I

shouldn't even be here. No matter what Markus had said, I didn't belong here. I was a prisoner.

Jaxon's eyes dipped to my chest, and I imagined every bit of skin on me was beet red. He averted his eyes immediately, going to take off his shirt. In one, smooth motion, he took off his t-shirt and handed it to me, saying, "Here."

Right, because my shirt was torn, because Markus... well, because he was a jerk.

More than that, really, but I didn't swear, so.

I took the shirt, grateful, and slipped it on. I didn't drown in the fabric, but it was clear the shirt was meant for a muscular guy and not a muscle-less girl. I should feel violated. I should feel something else, something more. I mean, I did feel a little mortified by it all—mostly by how effortless it came to Markus, how easy it was for him to play me and my body like a freaking fiddle.

Whatever that saying meant.

I should be mad, right?

Together, Jaxon and I walked away from the office, and the silence between us was almost too heavy. Before we reached the stairwell, he pulled me aside. We were alone, no one else nearby, and it was as he positioned himself before me that I realized he was shirtless.

I mean, duh, he'd given me his shirt, but it didn't register until now. I'd been too in my own head about the whole orgasm thing and whether or not I felt as violated as I should be to realize it. Before I knew what I was doing, my eyes dipped low, taking in his shirtless form. He said something, looked quite concerned too, but I couldn't hear him, the blood in my body pumping too hard, too hot, to pay attention to any words that might have been spoken.

Jaxon's body was exactly the kind of body all the heartthrobs had on TV. Lean and muscular, fit with tantalizing abs on his stomach. His body was one that had been trained for years; you didn't wake up one morning and have abs like that. I found myself wishing I could lean toward him, wishing I

could touch him, dance my fingers across those muscles and see for myself how they felt.

But maybe that was just leftover confusion from what Markus did to me.

“What?” I barely got the word out, forcing my eyes up. Way to be completely obvious that I was checking him out. Way to go, Juliet.

“I asked if you were okay,” Jaxon spoke, brown eyebrows creasing in concern as the jade in his gaze zeroed in on my face. He sounded so candid, too—really freaking confusing, since he was the one who kidnapped me and brought me here, all because Markus told him to.

I found myself shrugging. “What does it matter? It isn’t like you can do anything if I’m not okay.” That much, at least, I knew to be true. Jaxon was too devoted to his family, loyal to a fault, although I supposed I couldn’t blame him. These people, Markus—they were the only family he’d ever known, and I was just a girl he’d been told to bring here.

Just a girl. Nothing else.

Jaxon looked as if he wanted to say something, like he had an argument planned out for me, but in the end, all he did was shake his head.

We went back to my room, so I could change and give him his shirt back. I’d never seen a guy’s chest in person before, never seen abs in real life... I could’ve added having an orgasm to that list too, but not anymore.

What was my body’s problem?

Never been on a date. Never been kissed. Been touched between my legs, yes, but a kiss? That was just too much, apparently. My life could not even pretend to be normal anymore, not while I was in this house, subjected to the men who lived here, especially Markus.

I couldn’t believe it. How could I know what an orgasm felt like before knowing what a kiss was? It was backward. Completely, utterly backward, I decided, and as Jaxon and I made it to my room, as I turned my back to him and went

toward the closet, where I'd hung the clothes Tori had brought me, I figured it was dumb. So dumb to worry about this when clearly there were no boundaries here.

I pulled out a shirt, its fabric soft in my hands, and my mind went back to Markus and what he'd whispered to me once Jaxon left the room. Why didn't I fight him more? Why didn't I do something besides let him make a fool of me?

Because that's what it was. I was naive but I wasn't stupid. That was him showing dominance, and I greedily lapped it up, like I couldn't get enough.

Seriously, what was *wrong* with me?

"Um," I started, once I held onto the shirt I'd change into, and Jaxon gave me a wicked grin—along with a wink that sent my insides tumbling—before turning around and giving me his back.

I watched him turn, wondering if he wouldn't sneak a peek. Just to see, just to know, I decided to take off his shirt while staring at the back of his head. I dropped it on the floor, sure to make enough noise that he'd hear me, but still he didn't turn. I took off the torn shirt, mostly just its sleeves were intact now, nothing more, and I let that fall, too. I stood there in nothing but my bra and the leggings for a good thirty seconds before slipping on the other blouse—and not once did he glance over his shoulder at me.

I wasn't sure if that put me at ease or not, honestly. After what happened with Markus and my body's reaction to it, I was just so confused. So confused I didn't know what to do with myself. I was never this confused at home, but then again, I was never near such testosterone-riddled bodies at home. Just Daddy, and Daddy didn't count.

Slowly, I bent to pick up Jaxon's shirt, moving toward him with quiet footsteps. As I inched closer, I studied his back muscles, his shoulder muscles. Everything about him was perfect, really. I couldn't see a single scar on him, at least above the waist.

What about beneath it?

My cheeks burned when my mind went there; I should *not* be thinking of anyone below the waist. Not here. Not about the one who kidnapped me and not about the man who basically said he was going to torture me and break me for whatever Daddy did.

“Here,” I whispered softly, “your shirt.”

Jaxon turned, meeting my eyes, a slight twinkle to their green hue that instantly drew me in. Oh, he was cute. He was insanely cute, and I knew right then what girls meant when they said they felt butterflies in their stomachs.

A girl shouldn't have her first orgasm before a kiss.

It might've been the stupidest thing I could've done, but I found myself leaning forward, on my toes, bringing my mouth to his. Who knew? I might run, Daddy might listen to Markus and I might be let go... and then I'd be stuck in that house again, wondering. Always wondering.

His lips were softer than I imagined. They felt nice as they brushed against mine, but before anything else could register, Jaxon pulled back, setting a hand on my arm and pushing me away. The expression on his face was unreadable, and I could not fight the instant hurt growing inside.

God, what was I thinking? I was horrified. Horrified and embarrassed, because I'd bet anything that kiss was awful. Someone like him, I bet he had a lot of experience. Me? I was as inexperienced as they came, and three times as awkward as a normal person.

“I'm sorry,” I blurted out. “I shouldn't have—I didn't mean to.” The words came out in a rush, and I wanted to throw myself on the bed and hide. Hide because Jaxon currently gave me a look that said the last thing he wanted to do was kiss me. Just because he was cute and near my age didn't mean anything. He might have a girlfriend outside of this house, for all I knew.

“No, no, it's...” Whatever he was going to say, he stopped. He stopped to put his shirt on, as if hiding his muscles from

me would stop me from making a fool of myself again. Which, hey, might not be wrong, but it didn't make me feel any better.

“Oh, God,” I muttered, stepping away from him, getting out of his grip. Holding me at arm's length, like I was repulsive; it didn't make me feel too good about myself. Not that I had much self-esteem to begin with—hard to have a lot of it when I didn't have any experience dealing with people my age.

Or people in general.

Jaxon looked like he wanted to say something, but before he could, a child's voice rang out from the doorway, “There you are! I've been waiting.” Tori stormed into the room, her mouth puckered like she was pouting. “Come on.” She offered me her small hand, and I could not even look at Jaxon as I took it.

Yes, I'd rather have a playdate with this strange girl than spend another moment under his confused stare. No, thanks. He didn't have to worry, though, something like that would never happen again.

Tori pulled me along, and I let her, not resisting in the slightest. At least the girl would get my mind off what happened with Jaxon, right? And what happened with Markus. I could focus on her and block out all of the men in this house, of which there were many.

Too many.

Too many with attractive faces.

Jaxon said not a word as Tori lugged me along, and I didn't dare look over my shoulder at him. My cheeks were still hot; even my neck burned with embarrassment. I really wished my skin didn't get so red when I was embarrassed. It was a key giveaway as to what I felt. It'd be nice if I didn't wear what I was feeling on my sleeves, so to speak.

Keeping things to myself in a house like this seemed like it would be very beneficial.

Tori led me through the halls, and it took a long time for me to find my voice after that little incident, “What are we

going to do?”

She shot a smile up at me. “We’re going to play a game.”

I had no idea what type of game she meant. A game like hide and seek, or a game like a videogame? I’d never done either, obviously. Daddy never got me any videogames growing up, which was why I watched so much TV.

Tori brought me to a room that was full of cushions on the floor, a huge flat-screen television set mounted to the wall. It looked like the perfect room to lay around and watch movies in. I saw the television was on, a cartoonish-looking home screen on it that said *Mario Kart*.

“No one likes to play with me,” she said, sounding a little sad as we sat down on the floor cushions. “Mom tries, but she sucks. The only one who’s kind of good is Uncle Markus, and he always says he’s too busy to play with me now.”

I could not picture Markus ever playing a videogame, especially with Tori. I couldn’t picture him dealing with a child at all, really. “I’ve never played any games,” I told her, fighting the lingering embarrassment that had followed us from my room.

Jaxon didn’t, I noticed. I was alone with this ten-year-old girl, which was probably a good thing, after that stupid kiss of mine. If you could even call it a kiss. Who knew? Maybe I did it wrong.

“Never?” Tori exclaimed, eyes widening. “Not *ever*?”

I chuckled. “Not ever. My dad, he... he’s very particular about things. He never let me play.”

“Your dad sounds like an asshole.”

Again, I could not believe the words that came from this kid. “Are you sure you’re allowed to say those words? I’m not even allowed to—”

She waved a hand through the air, dismissing my worry. “My dad swears all the time, even at my other dads. I’m not allowed to say those words at school, but here? I can say whatever I want.”

Tori had two controllers set up, wireless, and she handed me one. I glanced down at it, feeling... uneasy. Uneasy about everything, to say the least. "Do you... do you know why I'm here, Tori?" Besides the swearing, she seemed like a normal kid, although I supposed I wasn't the best judge of that. Maybe she'd be able to find things out for me.

The truth. The truth about Daddy and what he did or didn't do. Why I was here, why Jaxon had kidnapped me, why Markus was so intent on breaking me and taunting Daddy with me. There had to be more to this than I knew, which wasn't saying much, since I knew nothing at all.

Her thin shoulders shrugged. "I don't know. Mom said you're Uncle Markus's new job, but that doesn't make sense, because if you were, wouldn't you be in the basement?"

"The basement? Why would I be in the basement?"

Tori squinted her eyes at me. "If you don't know what happens in the basement, I'm not allowed to tell you." Her tone was suddenly serious, too serious, and the way she spoke of the basement gave me pause.

What on earth went on in the basement? First off, this house was big enough, why did it need a basement? Secondly... the way she talked about it did not sit well with me. Like the basement was even worse than up here, like it held dark secrets only the Scotts could know.

"But that's okay," she went on, back to her happy-go-lucky self. "You're up here, so we can be friends." She clicked a button on her controller, and the screen on the TV changed. "But not if you get Bowser before me." A bunch of cartoon characters popped up on the screen, and she hurriedly chose a creepy-looking turtle. "Hah! I got Bowser. He's the fastest."

"Oh, okay..." I mimicked the way she was holding her controller before glancing up at the screen. "Who's second-fastest?"

"Hmm." Tori thought on this, and soon enough, after a fit of giggles, she told me the lady in the pink dress was second-

fastest. Princess Peach? What a strange name. But then again, why would a turtle be named Bowser?

We started playing. It was a racing game, with tons of different tracks and things you could use to better your position in the race. I pretty much got dusted immediately; even the computer-driven characters were doing better than me. I took turns too fast and tended to tumble off cliffs.

Tori could not stop laughing at me, either. Every single time I made a misstep in the game, she let me know it. Eventually, she settled with saying, “You suck. You’re even worse than my dads at this, and I thought *they* were the worst.”

She actually had to sit there and wait for me to finish the last lap—although, once the seventh driver crossed the finish line, I was automatically put in eighth place. The stupid game didn’t even give me a chance to finish. What the heck?

“It was my first time, okay? I think I did pretty well—” My words sounded much bolder than my actual gameplay suggested, and Tori gave me a look. It was a look she had mastered at a young age, apparently. The one eyebrow up, mouth slightly frowning look, and it told me she wasn’t having any of it.

I bet the girl I’d do better in future races, and she put me to the test. She put me to the test and even chose the easiest track in the game. Hardly any sharp turns, pretty much a racetrack. I got seventh, at least—and I was pretty proud of my improvement.

Still, Tori was not impressed. “Just wait until Rainbow Road.” Her words were whispered seriously, and I stared at her, not knowing what in the world she was talking about.

“What’s Rainbow Road?”

Someone other than Tori answered me, “Pretty much exactly what it sounds like.”

My heart did a flip in my chest at the voice, and I was slow to look towards the door, where Jaxon stood, leaning against the door frame. He glanced at Tori, but soon enough those

green eyes were fixated on me and me alone. And, in case you were wondering, he was just as cute as I remembered him being before.

“Can I steal her for a few minutes?” Jaxon asked, dimples appearing on his cheeks. Dimples like that made me weak. Who knew? I certainly didn’t, but now that I did, I would try doubly hard to keep my guard up around him.

No more random kisses. None of that.

Tori let out an annoyed sound. “Fine.”

Seeing as how I had no other choice but to go speak with him, I set my controller down and got up, unhurriedly moving toward him. He pushed off the door frame and moved out into the hall, and I followed him, feeling awkward, to say the least.

“Look,” Jaxon started the exact same moment I said, “I—” Both of us stopped, waiting for the other to continue, and when neither of us did, the same thing happened again. We both tried to speak at the same time.

I swallowed down what I was going to say, glancing at my bare feet.

Jaxon rubbed the back of his neck. He tossed a look down the hall, both ways, to make sure we were alone. “Juliet,” he said, so earnest I found myself meeting his stare in spite of everything inside telling me not to. “I didn’t push you away because I... because I didn’t want to kiss you. I mean, look at you. Who wouldn’t?”

Was that supposed to be a compliment? I didn’t know, but I found myself blushing anyways, like a fool. Like a fool, a fool with a crush.

Was that it? Was that why I felt this stupid? Because I had a teeny crush on the guy and he denied me? I mean, why would I even like him when he was the one who kidnapped me? Just because he was the first cute guy in my life didn’t mean anything.

Or, at least, it shouldn’t.

It looked as if he itched to move closer to me, but he remained rooted where he was. His voice came out low, so low I felt it in my soul, “If things were different, I’d love to kiss you.”

“You have a girlfriend?” I shouldn’t have spoken, but I couldn’t stop myself. Him having a girlfriend was honestly the only thing that would make me feel less like an idiot at this point.

To my horror, he shook his head. “No, I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Then why?” It shouldn’t matter, but no matter how many times I tried to tell that to myself, I couldn’t get it through my thick skull. Jaxon was no one to me. I shouldn’t care that he pushed me away. I shouldn’t have even kissed him to begin with.

Jaxon let out a sigh. “No one in this house is supposed to touch you. You’re off-limits—which is why Bennet was lucky it was me walking into the dining room and not someone else. It’s why Markus flipped when he saw Will with you. We’re not... we’re just not supposed to.”

“Says who?” Didn’t know why I was arguing this. It should be a good thing no one in this house was allowed to touch me. It meant I was a little safer, right? Or did that just mean it would only be under certain circumstances when others would be allowed to touch me?

Like during a video to Daddy, for example. Making a point to him, whatever the point was.

When Jaxon spoke again, I wanted to smack myself in the head. “Markus. He was very particular that we stay away from you. Well, keep our hands and other things off you, anyways.”

“Why? Why does it even matter? You kidnapped me—”

“I had to. Markus wanted you here.”

“And I still don’t know why,” I said, feeling like I wanted to pull my hair out. Around and around we went in circles; would we ever stop? Who the heck knew! It got kind of old after a while, not going to lie. “Why have the doctor ask me all

those questions? Why give me a physical? Why keep me here? What did my dad do to deserve this?" My voice quieted. "What did *I* do?"

Seriously, what did I do? I knew I'd made some mistakes, tried sneaking out of the house before, years ago, when I was feeling rebellious. But I'd been a good girl lately; I stayed put, waited for him to come home. I did everything I could to be the daughter he wanted, and this was where I ended up, in a big house full of dangerous men.

"None of this is your fault," he told me. "None of it. Don't beat yourself up over it. There are just some things in life you can't control—"

"Unless your name is Markus Scott," I mumbled, causing Jaxon to grin.

"That's right. So, now you know why I pushed you back. Just... please don't think it's because I think you're repulsive, because I don't." Jaxon's gaze dropped to my feet, slowly traveling up, studying my body in a way he never had before. "For what it's worth, I think you're very, very pretty—too pretty to be in this house."

Well, that didn't stop him from kidnapping me, did it? But I didn't say that out loud. I couldn't say anything out loud, not in response to that. So instead, I simply turned and walked back into the room, where Tori waited for me.

Jaxon thought I was pretty. I didn't know why, but it made me smile. And then I thought about what else he'd said, and the smile faded from my face pretty quickly.

So, none of the others could touch me, but Markus could? That much shouldn't surprise to me, but as I sat back down with Tori and played with her, it was an interesting bit of information.

Why?

The next day, I had another meeting with the family doctor. Theo Ward, I was pretty sure his name was. He gave me vitamins to take every day, told me how much water I should

be drinking each day as well, like I was new to being alive or something.

I sat in the chair facing his desk, eyebrows creasing as I looked at the jar of vitamins he'd given me. The seal was unbroken, and it looked like something you could just go to the store and buy.

"Why do I need to take these?" I asked, looking up. There was something else on his clipboard, but he hadn't given it to me yet. I hoped there wasn't more. The vitamins were creepy enough, don't you think?

"They're good for you" was his answer, and his amber gaze twinkled behind his thin-rimmed glasses. He smiled at me, and just like before, his smile was disarming and almost too easy-going, considering where his office was: in the Scott household.

"But why? I'm stuck here. It isn't like I chose to be here. Why does it matter if I take vitamins?" This wasn't exactly a vacation, and yet Theo looked at me like I was nuts.

Yeah, please sense the irony there.

"Short answer is because I told you so," he deadpanned. "Slightly longer answer is because Markus told me to tell you so." Theo adjusted his glasses as he looked at me. "Just... they're good for you, Juliet, okay?"

I sighed. What else could I do? I guess I'd take the stupid vitamins, even though I didn't see a point. Oh, and drink at least seventy-two ounces of water a day. I wasn't exactly sure how much that was, but it sounded like a whole lot, like I'd be making a lot more trips to the bathroom.

Since Theo had quieted, I started to get up, thinking it was over, but Theo stopped me by saying, "Before you go, there is... something else I'm prescribing you."

I sat back down, letting out a disbelieving chuckle. "Oh, my God. Of course there's more. Why wouldn't there be more?" When I met Theo's eyes again, I said, "What else is there? What else could there be?" I rambled when I was nervous, obviously.

Theo took the other thing off his clipboard and slid it over to me. I had to reach toward his desk to grab it. It was a small, rectangular thing. At first glance, I wasn't sure what it was. Plastic, obviously, but beyond that, I was clueless. Literally clueless.

“Is this supposed to be good for me, too?” I asked, holding it up. Whatever it was.

“Ah, that—that’s actually, uh, not quite like the vitamins,” Theo spoke, unable to give it to me straight, apparently.

Since he was being so unhelpful in telling me what it was, I pressed on the edge of the plastic and opened it. It was sort of like a small, thin box, and when I saw the rows of pills inside, labeled by weeks, I was even more confused. More confused, mostly, because I think I knew what these pills were for—and, Theo was right, they were not like the vitamins at all.

“Tell me this isn’t...” I couldn’t even get the whole sentence out, mostly because my heart started pumping so fast I couldn’t think straight. I could not look away from the pills. Such small things, white and circular. I’d never seen them before in real life, but again, it would be hard to not know what these were.

Theo broke into my thoughts, “Birth control pills.” He sounded like he was going to say more, but I jerked to my feet, both afraid and fuming.

“Birth control?” I echoed, raising my voice.

He was slow to stand, his button-up shirt tucked into his pants like the doctor he was. “I’m very aware that this might be startling for you, but—”

“Are you?” I cut in. The vitamins were left forgotten on the seat, while I clutched the birth control packet so hard the plastic squeaked. “*Startling*. What is wrong with you people? I’m not stupid. There’s only one reason why you’d put me on birth control.”

Theo looked so ungodly uncomfortable. It was probably a good thing he wasn’t a normal people doctor, because he didn’t have great people skills, either.

I whirled around, not saying a single thing more as I stormed out of his office. I passed Jaxon, who instantly looked alarmed. Theo must've followed me out, but I didn't stop, I kept going. I heard Jaxon ask him, "What's she doing?"

"I don't know," Theo answered. "But I have the feeling it's not going to be good."

I didn't hear whatever else they said, steam coming out of my ears as I stomped all the way to Markus's office. Pushing in, I didn't even knock, which was sure to irritate the man, but I didn't care. How could I? How could I care when apparently I needed to drink more water, take vitamins daily, and, oh, get on the pill so I wouldn't get pregnant?

"What is this?" I waved the birth control packet in the air.

Markus sat at his desk, writing something down, and the blasted man didn't stop to look at me. He didn't even glance up at me. It was like looking at me was the last thing he wanted to do.

I threw it at him, and the packet landed on his chest, sliding down to his lap. "Take your own birth control," I told him. If I started taking it, that meant... that meant, what? That we would—that I would—I couldn't even think it.

"I highly advise you to take these," Markus said as he slammed the birth control on his desk, finally looking up at me with those intense black eyes, "and have your tantrum somewhere else."

Tantrum? Was that what he thought this was? Oh, this wasn't a tantrum. This was... well, okay, fine, a bit of a tantrum, but I think it was warranted, given the birth control and all. I mean, how was I supposed to react to being given a pack of pills like that?

"No," I said. "You don't just get to give me those pills and think everything's going to be fine. You don't get to do that." Behind me, I heard the office door swing open, and I figured it was Jaxon, having followed me from the office.

Jaxon or Theo. Either one, didn't matter.

"I'm not taking those," I stated, holding my head high.

A harsh sound that was halfway between a breath and a growl left Markus's chest as he set his pen down and got to his feet. He grabbed the white packet and moved around his desk, heading right for me. Before I knew it, my throat was in his other hand, fingers curling around it, reminding me once again he was the king, the one in control. Not me. Never me.

“You will start tonight,” Markus growled out at me, frowning, his annoyance plain as day. “If you do not, I will have Jaxon force it down your throat.” His towering height dwarfed mine, and for a split second, I was reminded of how easily he'd bent me over his desk, how I didn't fight him nearly as much as I should've.

Maybe birth control wasn't such a bad idea, but that didn't mean I would ever admit that out loud, especially to him.

He handed the birth control to Jaxon, and then he walked me backward, to the door, never once breaking eye contact, never once letting go of me. “Now, get the fuck out of my office,” he hissed, and once we were at the door, he pushed me out.

I stumbled back, sending him a glare. Jaxon exited the office, slipping between our glaring contest before Markus slammed the door shut. My ever-present shadow looked at me, and then he looked down at the pills he held onto. And then he swallowed, because he knew what those pills meant.

He might not be allowed to touch me, but Markus was. Why else would he want me on the pill? So he could further remind me that he was the one in charge here, not me. So he could take things further with me, so he could show me just how much he was in control. Control of this house, of me, of my body.

I know I didn't swear, but right now I really, really wanted to. At Markus, at Theo, even at myself—because I was curious. Of course I was. I had hormones. I'd been locked away my whole life and now I had all these cute guys around me. So what if they were crazy? So what if they were dangerous? That didn't mean I couldn't wonder, couldn't be attracted to them even though I knew it was wrong and dumb.

I didn't linger there. Instead, I turned and stormed away from that stupid office and the man inside, furious at myself and at him, at this whole situation. Sure, I'd dreamed of my freedom before, but never like this.

My legs took me away from Jaxon, past Theo, who'd come to try to smooth things over, or something. I didn't know, and I didn't really care. All I cared about was understanding this and obviously getting away from the shackles Markus clearly wanted me in.

I missed home. I missed Daddy. Even though sometimes I didn't like being locked up, I would much rather be locked in my room than in this house, with these strange men that made me feel all these weird things. Because, the feeling in my heart, the way my body got all hot and bothered when they were near—it wasn't normal. It couldn't be. A good girl would not even be curious.

But I was, and I think that's what bothered me the most.

Eventually, I found my way outside, to the large concrete patio the house seemingly wrapped around. I made it to the pool's edge, breathing in the chemicals in the air before plopping myself down beside it and laying down on my back, staring up at the sky.

It was a clear day, the sky a bright, pure blue. No clouds to be seen, nothing but the sun shining down, dancing across my skin, soaking in. It felt nice to just lay there, but I'd bet it would also feel nice if I was anywhere else but here. This place might look like a freaking castle, but it was the opposite of heaven.

Someone crouched down beside me, and I didn't look to see who it was. I wasn't feeling very talkative, that much should be clear to anyone. I realized I didn't have good people skills, but I liked to think I wore my emotions on my sleeve. All these years, I'd never gotten good at hiding them.

"I know it's a lot," the man beside me spoke, and I saw it was Theo, not Jaxon. He was crouching, at first, but then he moved his legs out and sat beside me, his hands hooked in front of his knees as he gazed out at the pool, then at me. The

sun sparkled on his brown head, making the amber eyes behind those glasses seem even warmer. “Being here, I can’t imagine what it’s like for you.”

No, I supposed he couldn’t. I supposed no one here could, because no one knew what I’d come from. No one knew how badly it hurt me to think of Daddy and what he’d feel when he saw that video. No one could possibly know how much I hated to disappoint him.

After realizing I wasn’t going to speak, Theo went on, “I’ve been here for quite a few years now, you know. I thought it would get easier. I’ve never seen what they do firsthand, but I know. Some days it’s hard.”

I was slow to turn my head towards him, staring up at him through squinted eyes. From this angle, he looked almost sullen, morose, not at all the usual laid-back doctor he pretended to be. Did anyone in this place not wear a mask?

“But, like you, I don’t really have a choice. Once you’re in debt to the Scotts, that debt is never settled.” He sighed, and then he met my eyes. “You might think you can escape, you might think you can wait for the first opportunity to run, but you can’t. They’ll find you, they’ll bring you back, and they’ll make you wish you’d ducked your head and did everything they asked.”

Silently, I sat up. Theo was less than a foot away, and as the warm breeze blew between us, I felt my shoulders slump. I could see Jaxon standing just inside, watching Theo and me from the window, still holding onto the blasted birth control pills, along with the vitamins—Theo must’ve given them to him. My stomach twisted at the thought, but maybe not from the righteous indignation it should.

I... I wanted to. I wanted to know what it was like, just like a kiss. And I didn’t mean that pathetic attempt at a kiss I’d tried with Jaxon; I meant a real, world-stopping one. A kiss that made me forget everything about my situation, about my life. A kiss that made my knees weak and my heart go wild in my chest.

And then... and then I wanted to know what everything else was like. I knew I'd never get a chance at home. Daddy never let me out, he didn't want me going to college unless it was online, and he'd never let me date. This might be my only chance, as sad as it was.

Maybe I wasn't such a good girl. After all, what good girl would want something like that?

That said, I didn't like anyone making the choice for me, and I refused to sit back and let Markus make every single decision when it came to me. It was my life, and I would not let someone else drive.

Not that I had a license, but that was beside the point.

"I'm sorry," Theo whispered. "I know it's not worth much, but... I know you don't belong here. You shouldn't be here. This house is no place for someone like you."

"And what about you?" I asked, needing something from him. Needing to know I wasn't the only semi-normal one here. Surely if anyone was not a hulking creep or a sadistic freak, it was Theo.

"What about me?" he echoed, smiling softly. "My family's been in debt to the Scotts for a while. My father used to be their family doctor, and once I got old enough, they paid for my medical school so I could take his place. I'm pretty much stuck here like you, forced to do whatever they want."

"But you're not. You could leave." I stopped myself from telling him he could take me with him; I knew enough to know Theo would never willingly go against the Scotts, and even though I'd seen the power of feminine wiles on television, I didn't think I had it in me to seduce and try to get him on my side.

Theo shook his head. "I can't. From what I hear, Juliet, you've lived a sheltered life. You don't know the ways of the world. You're..." He paused, letting out a chuckle of disbelief. "You see everything through rose-colored glasses, but out here, things are just different. If you have no loyalty, then what are you really left with?"

I said nothing, because I didn't know the answer.

“And, anyway, do you think Markus would simply let me be if I walked out of that door and never came back?” Theo grinned and shook his head again, his good mood having returned. “No, he'd send someone to find me, or he'd find me himself. I might look like I have power here, but I don't. Just like you, I'm forced to defer everything to Markus.”

I sighed. “It sucks.”

“It does, but we have to learn to live with the hand we're dealt,” he told me. He looked like he wanted to say something else to me, but he bit it back, slow to get to his feet. He extended a hand to me, offering to help me up, and even though I didn't want to, I took his hand and let him pull me to my feet.

Theo's hand was soft in mine, softer than I expected. It made me remember the physical he'd given me, how gentle he was with me. I tilted my head back, gazing up into those amber eyes, wondering how he could work for a family like this and still be so sane.

You know, comparatively.

“I know it might not seem like it, but everything's going to be okay,” he told me—and then he realized he was still holding onto my hand, and he quickly dropped it, taking a step away as he adjusted his glasses, a fidgeting gesture if I ever saw one.

I followed Theo inside, stopping near Jaxon. I watched Theo walk away, replaying what had just happened in my head. How sincere he was, how tender he'd held onto my hand, how fast he'd dropped it. And then I remembered what Jaxon had told me: no one was supposed to touch me. Markus's orders.

Jaxon stared at me, not saying a single word, though his gaze did drop to the pills and vitamins he held onto.

I didn't want to take them. Taking them from him felt like I was accepting this, whatever this was, but then again, what choice did I really have?

I did nothing but take the stupid things from him, not saying a single word as I turned to storm away. Away from Jaxon, away from everybody in this stupid house. Away from all the crazy males that made my mind think of things it shouldn't.

“Uh,” Jaxon’s voice broke through the silence of the hall, “if you want to go to your room, it’s going to be that way.” He pointed in a different direction, and even though I didn’t want to listen to him—didn’t want to listen to anybody right now—I went.

My room was the only safe place here, go figure. Although, that little fact changed once night fell and Markus himself appeared out of nowhere, like the angel of death had come to take me in his embrace.

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Chapter Eight – Markus

I went to her because I knew she would not listen to me. I went to her because I had to show her that I was not above creating pain—whether it was pain in her little body or someone else’s—all to get her to listen, to do as I said.

Everyone else in this house understood, but Juliet felt the need to spit in my face and challenge me any way she could. It was insanely aggravating, and I was done playing nice. I had to remind her that she was here because I brought her here, because I took the initiative to steal her away from her precious father.

Jaxon stood just outside her room, looking anything but stoic. I knew what he was thinking, knew why he looked so torn. He liked the girl. I supposed I couldn’t blame him, for sometimes the monsters in us craved someone who would look upon our true face, see our darkness in all its blood and glory and revel with us. Such as it was with Lincoln, Ed, Killian, and Stella.

But sometimes... sometimes the beast inside cried out not for another monster to dance with, but for the opposite. For the pure. For the innocent. For the light in the ever-lasting darkness that was this life.

For what was the devil if there was no God? What was sin if there was no virtue?

Her door was closed, and I stopped before Jaxon, causing his gaze to snap up to me. Though a part of me wanted to wrap my hand around his neck and squeeze, remind him that she was just a job—remind us both of that fact—I held back and asked, “How is she?”

My guess would be not too well, not after her meeting with Doc earlier. If her mood when she’d stormed into my office was any indication, she would still be quite pissed off at me

now. Was it wrong to be a certain sort of thrilled to know I could rile her up so easily?

Hmm. I supposed the same could be said of the opposite, because that girl made me want to lose control like no other. And I never lost control.

“Not happy,” Jaxon replied. “She refused to eat dinner.”

Hearing that did not make me pleased, and my teeth ground as I glanced toward the door. “Get me a glass of water, will you?” Though it sounded like I was asking him for a favor, I was not. I was simply telling him to get me water. Or, rather, get Juliet water, because it wasn’t for me.

Needed to make sure she actually took her pill, you see. Couldn’t trust that girl to listen to me and do as I said, so I would have to play the dictator and punish.

As Jaxon nodded and walked away to get that glass of water, I pushed into her room. I didn’t even knock. I found Juliet sitting on her bed, wearing those hideous fuzzy pajamas—I would burn them if I could, but she seemed to hold them quite close to her heart, as fucking stupid as it was. I supposed I’d let her keep the ugly pajamas.

Her big, blue eyes glanced up, her face instantly hardening when she saw it was me. I could tell she wanted to say something, but whatever it was, she managed to hold it back, which was probably smart. Anything she might say would only rile me up further, and having her on a bed was all too tempting.

“I sent Jaxon for some water,” I told her. “You’re going to take your pill.”

Her chin jutted out, and she stared at me defiantly. “You’ll have to push it down my throat.”

I took a step closer to her bed, cocking my head as I studied her and those ugly as hell pajamas. “Was that an invitation?” I mocked her. I saw the vitamins and birth control sitting on her nightstand, and I almost smiled—but then I remembered what Jaxon had told me. “You didn’t eat dinner.”

“I wasn’t feeling very hungry,” she mumbled, still glaring at me, as if her glare was a weapon. How ridiculous. She was like a kitten giving me a pouting look—it wasn’t very intimidating. More laughable than anything else.

“No more skipping meals.”

She shot me a frown, her full lips redder than they should be, given the fact she wore no makeup. “Why does it even matter to you? Why does it matter if I eat, if I take the stupid vitamins—”

In the next moment, I was at her bedside, leaning over it, over her. Whatever other words she might’ve said were caught in her throat, and she fell backward. I took hold of her hips, pulling her to the edge of the bed, so I could better block out everything in the room from her. Her small, wriggling body was all too easy for me to maneuver, and once she was under me, she ceased her struggling.

Kind of like what she did when I had her bent over my desk. Oh... I’d be lying if I said I never thought of that encounter.

“It matters because I say it does,” I told her, grabbing her wrists and holding them to the side. She had no strength, no muscles compared to me. She was small where I was big, and it was almost effortless to remind her that she had no power here, even though she desperately tried to gain just an ounce of it at any opportunity.

“Why?” she asked, her voice hitching, a breathless word I felt in every part of my body. I should let her go, I should take a few steps away from her, but I found I could not. Releasing her would be like cutting off my own skin; I didn’t want to do it.

Could I? Yes, but I would feel her loss immediately.

“Why does it matter to you?” Juliet tried to speak again, this time getting a full question out, at least. She breathed through her mouth, practically panting, her blue gaze both livid and resigned to whatever fate would take her tonight.

Fuck. Of course I wanted her. I had wrestled with myself quite a bit when it came to this girl and the invisible power she seemed to hold over me without trying. She should be just a job to me, and yet she wasn't. She was so much more, and that's why my mind occasionally got the best of me.

I wanted to tear off those stupid pajamas, shred them into pieces until I got at her naked skin. I wanted to run my hands down her hips, dig my fingers into her sides and make her squirm. I wanted to wrap my hand around that slender neck and squeeze as I spread her legs around me. Take her, claim her, mark her, taint her.

I was supposed to be better than everyone else, and yet, it would seem, I still had the baser instincts, too. My father would be disappointed in me. So, I guess it's a good thing the man wasn't here anymore.

"It matters," I whispered, feeling suppressed in my suit quite suddenly, "because when you are here, you are mine. My responsibility, my duty, my job. I will hurt you, Juliet, but I will also make sure you are well taken care of." Just because I was a monster did not mean I could not also be kind. Even the worst of us had our moments.

Pushing myself off her, I straightened myself right when Jaxon returned, carrying a glass of water. He saw me, saw Juliet slowly sitting back up on the bed, but he said nothing as he moved to my side and handed me the water.

I set it on her nightstand, near the pills. I did not look at her as I said, "Now, take one."

Juliet made no moves to do as I said. She merely rubbed her wrists and stared at me hard, just begging for my inner monster to make an appearance. The girl thought she knew what we did here? She thought she knew what I was capable of? Oh, the poor girl. The poor, stupid girl. She really had no idea.

But I'd show her, and I'd start tonight.

I reached down, undoing the buttons of my suit jacket. "Take the pill, Juliet." Still, the girl made no moves to do so,

and I shrugged the jacket off, folding it neatly. I moved to set it atop a dresser behind me.

A mirror sat atop the dresser, allowing me to see Juliet's reflection on the bed as I worked at loosening my tie. "Take the fucking pill," I growled out, staring at her in the mirror, feeling my blood start to pump hotter.

She didn't. Juliet was motionless, watching me. I couldn't blame her. She had no idea about this ritual of mine. She did not know what came after all this, and when she did, I had the feeling she would regret ever riling up the beast inside me.

I set my tie atop the folded jacket, and then I went to unbutton the buttons near my wrists on my shirt sleeves. The fabric was a dark grey, but still. You couldn't be too careful. I was not a big fan of messes, and I hated getting blood on my clothes. Sometimes it must be done and there was nothing you could do about it, but I tried not to be excessive.

"Your last chance," I warned, and still the girl made no moves. Not that I expected her to. This was remarkably on-character for her, which was surprising, in a way, considering how brainwashed her father had her. Her feistiness had come as a shock, but she needed to learn to listen to her master.

And right now, that master was me.

Once my sleeves were rolled up to my elbows, I undid my watch and set it atop my clothes on the dresser. I turned to face her. "I gave you an order, Juliet," I told her. "And you refused. I gave you multiple chances to avoid conflict, and yet here we are. If you're not scared of me, you will be."

My feet drew me to her dresser, and I grabbed the plastic rectangle the birth control was in, tossing it on the bed. It landed right next to her, but she did not move a single muscle.

I watched, half of me wishing she would just take the pill so we could be done with this, but the other half of me wanted to show her just a hint of the darkness residing inside me. She thought she knew all about me after that video we'd recorded to send to her father? She was wrong.

“A pity,” I said, turning away from her as I met Jaxon’s knowing green eyes. He knew. He knew what was coming, and he also knew I would take more pleasure in it than I normally would. Jaxon was motionless as I went to stand behind him, standing taller than him. I set my hands on his shoulders, squeezing as I glanced at her. “You’ve gotten pretty close to Jaxon, haven’t you?”

She said nothing, and Jaxon himself remained silent. Nothing either of them could say would stop this train from coming into town now.

“I find that a little funny, since he was the one who stole you from your home and brought you to me,” I went on. “Now, I like Jaxon, too. I trust him a lot more than I trust some of my own brothers.” My hands fell off his shoulders, and I moved to stand beside him, shooting him a hard look. “But lately I’ve seen things. Passing looks. Body language you wouldn’t see unless you were paying attention. For what it’s worth, Juliet, I think Jaxon likes you, too.”

I gave Jaxon a good slap on his back, causing him to sway on his feet a little. “Normally, I wouldn’t give a shit about who takes up the space in Jaxon’s mind, but you? Oh, you’re not allowed to be there, you see, because I told him you were strictly off-limits in every way.”

Juliet was finally starting to understand what deep shit she’d unloaded onto Jaxon, for she started to look between us with concern on her petite features.

“He’s not allowed to touch you, and he certainly isn’t allowed to think about you,” I went on. Moving, I stopped when I stood before him. He and I stared at each other for a few long moments, the silence of the room stretching between us. When I spoke again, I spoke to Juliet, even though I wasn’t looking at her, “You should’ve taken your pill, for his sake.”

And then, without warning, my fingers curled into a fist and I punched him across the face, clean along the jaw. I hit him once, but I hit him so hard he stumbled. I didn’t hold anything back. I let every ounce of power inside me out in that punch, and I was certain Jaxon saw stars.

“No!” Juliet cried out once, her feet dangling off the bed.
“Don’t—”

I glared at her. “Don’t what? You seem to think you’re invincible here. I told you I could hurt you, but what I didn’t tell you is that I can hurt anyone I want. Whoever will serve the best purpose, to finally get it through your skull.”

Jaxon straightened himself, and he said not a word even though his jaw was already beet red. Oh, that would leave a terrible bruise... but I wasn’t quite done yet.

The next punch was to his stomach, an underhanded blow that knocked the air out of his lungs. Jaxon wheezed, and I hit him again in the same place, causing him to double over and fall to his knees before me.

Juliet launched herself off the bed, racing to my side. “No, please, don’t—” Again, she tried begging me; she even tried to grab onto my arm, the fool.

While she was latched onto one arm, my other snapped up, a hand curling around her neck and forcing her off me. “No,” I hissed. “You don’t get to tell me what to do. You’re going to watch while I beat Jaxon into a bloody fucking pulp, and you’re going to do it while knowing it’s your fault.”

I pushed her away from me, causing her back to hit the lower frame of the bed. All she seemed to be able to do was stare at me with wide eyes, to stare at Jaxon with equally wide eyes. Oh, she definitely cared about him, all right. Didn’t know how the fuck that happened or why, but I didn’t particularly like it.

When Jaxon got up, I hit him again. And again. His nose started to bleed, his face all bruised. I went to town on him like I’d never gone to town before, and even though my knuckles should ache with each blow—it wasn’t long since I’d cracked the skin on the tiled wall in the shower—I felt nothing. No pain, no soreness. I felt nothing but the rush of adrenaline in my body.

Adrenaline, and... something else. Something I couldn’t quite describe. A hidden anger inside of me, a fury that was

only there because I didn't want Jaxon to have a connection with Juliet.

Was it jealousy? Was it envy? I couldn't say, because I had nothing to compare it to, and yet, when I tried to describe it as anything else, nothing else felt quite as right.

"Stop," Juliet cried out, rushing to her nightstand and fumbling as she opened the plastic packet to get at the pills. "I'll take it, okay? I'll take the stupid pill." Her hands shook as she pushed out a single pill, its small white body lying flat in her palm as she grabbed the glass of water.

I had Jaxon's neck in my hand, about to punch him again in the face—he looked like he wanted to pass out, but he was fighting it. Jaxon was, if anything, a trooper. I paused, my eyes on Juliet, on watching her place the pill onto her tongue. I didn't even blink as she lifted the glass to her lips and drank from it.

Once the pill was swallowed, she set down the glass and said, "See? There you go. You can stop hurting him now."

"Come here," I growled out, and Juliet inched to my side begrudgingly. I still held Jaxon's throat in my hand, my other still curled into a fist. I would not let him go until I was sure she'd actually swallowed the damn pill and wasn't trying to pull a fast one on me. Once she was beside me, I said, "Open your mouth, let me see."

Her lips parted, and she moved her tongue around, showing me.

"Your gums," I added.

Juliet looked as though she wanted to roll her eyes, but she held back, reaching a finger to her lower lip and pulling it down, doing the same to her upper lip. "There, are you happy? It's done. Please, Markus, stop hurting him."

I shoved Jaxon away, and he fell to the floor, too beat up to catch himself. I towered over Juliet. "It didn't have to be like this," I told her. "We could've avoided all of this if you'd just taken your damn pill like I told you to. Look at him." I pointed to Jaxon, watching as her blue eyes darted to him, to his

disheveled, crumpled form. “That’s on you. He might be a part of the family, but he knows his place. The only one who can save him from another beating is you.”

Juliet opened her mouth, and I could only imagine what she’d say to me in that moment. I didn’t give her the chance to speak, for I walked away from her, away from Jaxon. I gathered my things, and then I left. The longer I lingered there, the more I would feel the jealousy inside.

Oh, I could imagine what she’d say to me after that. I was a monster. A monster who could hurt his own family without even blinking. That didn’t say much, for I could hurt anyone without blinking. Pain... I never felt it, never understood it, and yet it could be a great tool.

Pain. I was not above inflicting pain on anyone to get that girl to listen to me. Sooner or later Juliet would realize everything I did, everything I would do was all for her. To keep her safe.

That’s what I told myself, anyway, but the truth was murkier than that. Her father was a piece of work, but Juliet... she was everything I never had. A delicate, pretty flower that needed constant care in order to bloom. Beautiful and entrancing, far too innocent for the world she was in.

The monster in me wanted an angel. A virtuous, pure angel it could protect and claim, taint and cage. Someone who could remind me of everything I never felt, teach me everything I was clueless about. Pain, jealousy, obsession.

One thing was certain, though. A man like me could never learn to love.

Chapter Nine – Juliet

I didn't sleep well that night, obviously, and I was too petrified to get up. Jaxon didn't want to talk after what Markus did to him. He hurried out of my room, not even looking at me, and I felt so bad. So, so bad, I couldn't even describe it.

I shouldn't care, but watching violence like that while knowing it was only happening because of me... I didn't like it. No, more than that. I *hated* it. I hated it more than anything else in the world.

Even though Jaxon had kidnapped me, even though he was the reason I was here, I didn't want to see him hurt, especially *because* of me. Watching Markus go at him like crazy was not something I ever wanted to see again. If that meant I had to swallow my pride and take the stupid birth control pills, I guess that's what it meant. Markus had me caught between a rock and a hard place here.

As I lay there in the darkness, unable to sleep, I thought about running, but the realist in me knew I'd never make it out of this house, off this property—and more than that, what would Markus do to me if I failed in my escape attempt?

Of course I was afraid of him. He was a monster, a brute of a man. He could hurt others without even flinching. He was unlike the Prince Charming I'd wanted him to be in every way, the very opposite.

I should've known, given my life, I would never get what I wanted. I never did. Everything I was today was just so I wouldn't disappoint others. Daddy, now Markus.

The morning came, and I didn't get out of bed. I didn't want to. My stomach was empty and a bit starved, but I refused to go down and eat breakfast as if nothing was wrong. But then, if I refused, would Markus just beat Jaxon again? How much could one body take?

It was as I wrestled with myself, as I lay there under the covers wishing I could blink and make everything better, that I heard a knock on my door. A knock, which meant it wasn't Markus.

I sat up, my lips pulling into a frown as I stared at the door. "Who is it?"

"It's Theo."

What on earth was he doing here? Even though I didn't want to see him, I muttered, "Come in."

"I would, but, uh, my hands are a little full right now. Could you maybe get the door for me?"

Sighing, I rolled out of bed and headed to the door, opening it to see Theo's bright-eyed and bushy-tailed self. Clearly a morning person. I, on the other hand, was not, especially this morning. Not after last night.

My eyes fell to the large plate of eggs, bacon, sausage and pancakes he held onto, along with a glass of orange juice in his other hand... and a small plate of toast balancing on his forearm. A lot of food, and in spite of my best efforts, it all looked really, really good, and my stomach gurgled in hunger.

"May I come in?" Theo asked, giving me a gentle smile as he struggled to maintain his balance with all the stuff he held onto. He wore black pants paired with a dark blue button-down shirt, and for the first time ever, his shirt wasn't tucked into his pants.

I nodded, stepping aside, unable to say anything else as I watched him bring in the food. He set everything on my bed, but the glass of orange juice went on my nightstand, where the emptied glass of water still sat. I'd thrown the pills and vitamins inside the small drawer after the ordeal last night, so at least they were out of sight for now.

"I brought you breakfast," he said.

"Why?"

"Jaxon came to me last night, told me what happened. I figured you could use a good breakfast, after a night like

that.”

I was at Theo’s side the next instant, asking, “Is he okay?” The food was suddenly forgotten; the only thing on my mind Jaxon and his well-being. I couldn’t imagine he felt very good today. Probably worse than last night. I wondered if I’d see him or if he’d avoid me.

For whatever reason, the mere possibility he might avoid me made something inside hurt.

Theo nodded. “He’s fine. Bruised, but fine. I gave him some painkillers, which I bet he won’t take because he’s too tough for them or some equally stupid reason.” He paused, staring at me behind his glasses, an unreadable expression on his face. “What happened to him... it’s not your fault, you know.”

I had to look away. “It is, though. It’s my fault. Markus wouldn’t have beaten him like that if I’d just taken the pill.” I closed my eyes, wanting to push away the memory of last night out of my mind, forget it completely.

His voice lowered to a whisper, “If you blame yourself for everything Markus does, you’ll be at it all hours of the day and night. No one can change what that man does, or why he does things the way he does. Jaxon will be fine. Don’t worry about him. Honestly, Juliet, I’m more worried about you.”

His words should’ve been comforting, but they weren’t. I rubbed my arm, slow to meet his amber gaze. It was strange, but I felt so seen beneath his eyes. “And why would you be worried about me?” I whispered, a part of me already knowing.

“I don’t want this place to change you,” Theo replied. His shoulders went up and down with a sigh. “Markus might say things, he might do things, but I don’t think he wants it to change you, either.”

At that, I couldn’t help but laugh. “Right.”

“No, I mean it. If you were different, I don’t think he’d care so much. It’s not just who you are or where you came from. It’s not just about who your father is and what he does

for Markus. It's about you, because you're you, Juliet. This house has never seen someone like you before." Theo took the tiniest step ever, inching towards me. "If you ever need someone to talk to, someone to listen, you know where to find me. I won't judge. I won't even talk back if you don't want me to. Sometimes having an ear to listen can help keep you sane."

Oh, God. Things were so messed up here, but not messed up enough for me to not realize his offer was sweet. It was sweet, and honestly, I might just have to take him up on it one of these days. The more I was here, the more I felt my sanity slipping away, intangible despite my attempts to get ahold of it.

"Thank you," I whispered back.

"And if you don't feel like coming down and eating, I can bring you up meals. Or, hell, we can even eat together in my office, if you want." Theo gave me a soft smile, reaching up and gently patting my arm. "Just know you're not alone here."

I wanted to say something to him, something more than thank you, but no words left me, and then he was gone, shutting the door behind him and leaving me alone in a bedroom that wasn't mine with food that smelled heavenly.

Well, I guess I'd have to eat eventually. Starving myself didn't sound like fun, plus that bacon looked *really* good.

I kept to myself, sticking to my room all day. I didn't even change out of my pajamas. The only time I left the room was to use the bathroom, and the one I used was practically right across the hall. I didn't think any of the other rooms nearby were being used by anyone else, because I never heard a sound, never ran into anyone.

Not that I was complaining. This house was so big it had to be home to more people, but I didn't think I could take the craziness of meeting anyone else right now.

It went like that for a whole day. I felt strangely lonely, but I refused to seek anyone out. Theo kept his word and brought me up meals, though I didn't let him stay with me while I ate.

Jaxon didn't come around, not that I blamed him. Everything was just so messed up.

One day, after three o'clock in the afternoon, my door flew open and a short girl skipped inside. Her black hair was straight today, its lengths tumbling past her shoulders. She had a backpack, and she flung that bag down as she raced to hop onto my bed.

Tori.

"Don't you get bored in here?" she asked, looking around.

I shrugged. "Sometimes I think it's better to be in here than out there." And that was the honest truth.

"Why? Did something happen? You look sad."

I shook my head, not wanting to explain it all to a child. "I'm okay, really."

She gave me a look she should be too young to have mastered, the one eyebrow raised look that said she wasn't stupid. Heck, I didn't even have that look as down pat as she did. "You don't look okay—and you weren't the one sitting in school bored for the last seven hours."

I chuckled. I sat on my bed, on top of the sheets, my legs crisscrossed. "I never went to school," I told her quietly, remembering all those years of homeschooling. Fun times. *Not.*

Tori blinked. "Never? Not ever?"

"Not ever."

"I thought you had to go to school. That's what my mom tells me when I tell her I don't want to go."

"My dad homeschooled me," I said. "He didn't like me leaving the house, so he kept me close. I never went to school, never had recess, never made friends." Realizing what I said, I quickly added, "Besides you, of course." She beamed at that last part.

"Well, everyone in my class is fucking stupid, so I don't have many friends either," she boldly declared, once again

swearing like it came naturally to her. “Sometimes I hate them, because they’re so different.”

That last bit caught me off-guard, and I asked, “Why do you hate them?”

Tori glanced down, picking at her tights. She wore a black skirt, along with a dark top. I couldn’t tell if it was a uniform or not, since every Scott I’d ever met seemed to prefer colors on the darker side of the spectrum.

“They don’t have to worry about things. This girl, Bettie, she wants to be a teacher like ours when she grows up.” Tori looked up at me, her normally jubilant attitude clouded over by anxiety. “I don’t get to decide. I’m a Scott, so Uncle Markus will get to choose what I do.” She sounded quite sad about that fact.

“Why does he get to decide? Why don’t you?” This family, I swore... I didn’t understand any of them or what they did.

“I don’t know. It’s just how things are.” Tori bit her bottom lip. “I mean, I guess I could go, but then I’d have to leave everyone, and I don’t know if I could do that, not like Uncle Vaughn. Plus, Uncle Markus gets really mad when people leave. I don’t want him to be mad at me.”

Oh, that was something I could understand all too well. “But if there’s something you really want to do, you should be able to do it. If you want to be a teacher, a doctor, a—”

“A dancer?” Tori cut in with a grin.

I chuckled. “Or a dancer, you should be able to. It’s not fair to expect you to stay here for the rest of your life and do whatever Markus says.” Markus. I could not shake the image of him beating Jaxon up out of my mind, and I hated it.

I hated him. I hated that I’d dreamed about him for two years, hated I found him so unnervingly attractive. It was all just stupid on my part, utterly stupid, but I couldn’t go back and change the past.

“What about you? What do you want to be?” Tori asked, cutting into my thoughts, eager to hear all about me, as always.

Now it was my turn to fiddle with my fingers and think back to Daddy and how he never wanted me to do anything. “My dad, I think, doesn’t want me to do anything. If he had his way, he’d keep me locked up in our house until the day he died... and the sad thing is, until recently, I never hated it. I always thought he was doing what was best for me.”

It wasn’t a lie. Even when I’d tried to bust out and see the neighborhood we lived in, I got too scared, and I was too worried about disappointing him. Eventually I settled for daydreams, but even those sometimes were stale.

“He never let you out?” Tori whispered. She sounded even sadder than she had before, when she was talking about her own future, and to hear such pity in her voice hurt. To have the pity of a ten-year-old girl was not something I ever thought I’d have. Made me feel really good about everything.

“No,” I whispered, the word hushed. “Sometimes I’d do something to make him mad, and he’d lock me in my room. I always thought I deserved it. When he would leave for work, I would watch so much TV. I saw high schools and kids like me and all the drama they got into, but at least they were free. Even though I knew it was wrong, I wanted what they had.”

“But it wasn’t wrong,” Tori said. “Your dad sounds like an asshole. No one should lock you in your own room. It’s supposed to be a safe place.”

My eyes fell to the area on the carpet that had a few new bloodstains after last night. Was Daddy wrong to have kept me locked up all these years? Was I wrong for accepting it and not trying to push harder? I mean, when he left for work, I could’ve gone out. I could’ve tried more, but I didn’t.

I didn’t, and that was all on me.

When I said nothing, Tori reached over to me, grabbing my hand and squeezing with a force a kid should not be capable of. Her strength seeped into me, and I lifted my eyes and looked at her. “If anyone in this house is mean to you, tell me,” she said. “Tell me, and I’ll make sure they’re never mean to you again, I promise.”

Such bold, strong words, words I knew she believed. But of course, Tori had no idea why I was here or just how badly I could be hurt. I knew I could never burden her with anything, so I simply nodded and said nothing.

“Now, I gotta go do homework,” she whined as she let go of me, shooting me a frown. She slid off my bed, grabbed her bag, and bounded away. I watched her go, feeling strange once I was alone.

That girl, I liked her. I did. She was nice. A bit... abrasive, sometimes, with her penchant for swearing, but I guess swearing was better to take up than her family's craziness. Yeah, that was probably something that was best left to the older generations.

I collapsed backward, my head falling onto my pillow. I stared at the ceiling, alone in my room, wishing I had normal problems like homework. But, I guess, problems like that were in the past. I'd graduated my online school, been refused to go to college unless it was also online. I'd never know what it was like to be a normal eighteen-year-old. I felt... I felt so far removed from everyone my age. I felt older.

Different. I felt different.

I couldn't say how long I was alone in my room, but it was at least thirty minutes before I heard heavy footsteps down the hall. I sat up the same moment someone burst into my room, carrying bags upon bags. Seriously, his arms and hands were loaded with them, from stores I never even heard of. I could hardly see who it was through the plastic and square paper bags.

But then he dropped them in the middle of my room, and I saw who it was.

Will straightened himself out after the bags were strewn across my floor. He shot me a smile, and though it was a smile meant to disarm me, to make me at ease, it did anything but. My stomach twisted, and I hesitated to get to my feet and move closer to the mini-mountain of bags he'd brought in.

“Uh,” I started, feeling a bit awkward, “what’s all this?” I met Will’s hazel eyes, having almost forgotten how easily they could peer into me, how much I felt like squirming under them. It was almost like he knew all of my dark secrets—not that I had many of those.

“Clothes,” Will said. “For you. So you don’t have to wear Stella’s things. I can tell her style isn’t really yours.”

Hmm. Could he also tell I didn’t really have a style of my own because Daddy had always bought me my things? That was probably assuming too much.

“Plus those pajamas just look ridiculous,” he said. “What are you, five?”

“Hey,” I huffed, folding my arms across my chest. “I happen to like fuzzy unicorns, thank you very much.” Still, even though I was slightly insulted at his words, I was also keenly aware that he was an attractive guy and I was usually in my unicorn pajamas when he saw me. I was a little embarrassed, I guess.

Will stared at me, grinning widely. “I never thought I’d ever say this, but you might just be changing my mind when it comes to unicorns.” He chuckled. “Although, to be fair, I don’t think anyone else in this household would ever be caught dead in something like that.”

Heat crept up my neck, flushing my cheeks, and I could no longer hold his gaze.

“All that aside,” Will paused, hands shoved into his pockets as he stepped closer to me, “Markus told me this morning to go out and get you some clothes, so I did. I also got you a few things I think would look good on you—in the small black bag.”

I did not know how to respond to any of that, especially the Markus bit. Did the man feel bad for what he did to Jaxon, or was that giving the man too much credit? Psychopaths didn’t feel remorse. Guilt was not something they could comprehend, right?

“Why don’t you and I have a little date tonight?” Will suggested. “Wear whatever you like.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to be alone together?”

He smirked. “We’re not, but it can be our little secret, just like our rendezvous in his office.” He stepped closer to me again, and I swore I could feel his body humming with anticipation. “What can I say? I’m dying to get you alone. I don’t care what Markus says.”

I didn’t say yes. I knew saying yes to his proposition would be stupid... and I also was well aware I had no idea what this supposed date would entail. Will didn’t seem like the most stable guy around; doing anything alone with him would probably be something I’d grow to regret.

But I also didn’t say no. I didn’t outright deny him or his suggestion because I knew he could tell Markus about my snooping. Or, well, my pathetic attempt at snooping in his office, trying to find out something about Daddy.

I think I might have to play Will’s game for a little bit, at least until I knew more. I’d be as careful as I could possibly be, but then again, how careful could you really be in a house like this, surrounded by people like him? Dangerous and unstable, yet alluring all the same, and what was worse, I didn’t outright hate it.

What did that say about me?

“I’ll swing by your room after dark. Wait up for me,” Will said. “It’ll probably have to be after everyone else is asleep.” He gave me a smile, a lingering look, and then he was gone, leaving me alone with all of the bags and the clothes in them.

Well, I guess I had a date tonight. Not sure what we’d do, since I wasn’t supposed to leave this house, but I had the feeling Will already had it all planned.

I went searching for the little black bag Will had spoken of, the bag containing things he’d gotten because he’d thought they’d look good on me. It took a while to search through the mountain of bags, but I eventually found it—and once I did,

once my fingers dove into the little black bag and fished out one of the tiny things inside, every part of me warmed up.

Lace. Black, intricate lace that was perhaps the softest thing I'd ever touched. Something that, by the look of it, couldn't possibly hold all of me in. It had to be a garment that was more for the man than the woman. A sexy thing.

He thought I'd look good in *this*? Every single part of me burned up, and I hurriedly stuck it back in the bag, glancing over my shoulder. My door was wide open; couldn't forget that. I'd never even dreamed of having underwear like that, and I couldn't imagine it was too comfortable.

And then it hit me, though it should've hit me sooner: if Will thought I would look good in something like that, it meant he'd imagined me wearing next to nothing. That thought shouldn't surprise me at all, given how he acted around me every time he was near, but it did. I mean, that meant he found me attractive too, right?

I never got reassurance like that. I never knew what I looked like, compared to other girls. I'd never had a boy do everything he could to date me, give me compliments, tell me I was the most beautiful girl in the world. I didn't think I was ugly, but it felt wrong to say I was beautiful. I was just me, and Will wanted to see me in a thong.

I shouldn't even entertain the idea, not after what happened with Jaxon, and yet... I didn't want to sit back and let Markus control me. I wanted to push back however I could, and if that meant donning that flimsy little lace for Will, then maybe that's what I'd do.

I could be a rebel.

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Chapter Ten – Will

Juliet's hair splayed around her head. Its blonde lengths were unkempt, her cheeks flushed with that adorable twinge of pink she wore more often than not. Her body had not an ounce of clothing on it, and that was exactly how I wanted her. Naked, writhing beneath me, her tits swaying back and forth with each thrust of my hips.

God, I could imagine it perfectly—and that's what I did as I showered that night, before getting ready. Couldn't get myself too worked up on the date. Had to hold back, just a little. Just enough to prove to Markus and myself I could keep it all contained, keep the thing inside of me chained up.

The warm water pelted my head as I stood there, eyes closed, picturing Juliet beneath me, taking my cock, soft moans escaping her lips every now and then. My fist stroked my length, hard and erect and ready to burst.

But then, for just a split second, it wasn't Juliet. It was someone else under me, someone else's eyes looking up at me with disapproval in their grey depths. Blonde hair that was shorter and pink on the tips, a smaller rack, a slender, slightly anorexic body.

My jerking off stopped, and I opened my eyes, pushing the thought of her away. I should not think about her, not ever. It'd been years since then, so many years, and I'd been reborn in this house, under Markus and Stella's watchful eyes. I was remade into their image, reshaped and molded to be what I had to be to live and survive.

Out there in the world, I would've died. I would've been caught. My world would've crumbled if a certain tattooed smoker had never brought me here.

The hand that had been running along my length until now moved to my stomach, where a scar sat, where she'd stabbed me. I believed with every ounce of my being that she was

mine and she would always be mine, that my brother and I could share her and be happy together. Everything I did was always for him... until it became for her, and that's when everything got so fucked up.

I messed up. I knew I did. I was too sloppy, too rushed. I shouldn't have done what I tried to do; the logical part of me knew that now. It was hard to regret it though, because now I was here, and I didn't believe I'd be able to say that if I was still out there.

Who knew? Maybe I would've self-destructed and destroyed my brother and the girl we both cared about. Maybe by now there would be nothing left of any of us.

I breathed evenly, my cock still hard. I didn't let myself think about any of them, not really. Anytime I felt myself thinking back, reliving my old life, I had to remind myself that I was here and I was no longer that guy anymore. I was different. I was a Scott now.

A Scott who could not get that innocent little blonde girl out of his head. Juliet was not made for this place, and yet something inside her called out to me, took hold of me forcefully. Of fucking course I wanted her. Not just to have her in my bed, but to *really* have her. To have her depend on me, to trust me... to love and adore me.

I guess maybe not everything had changed about me, then.

Once I had my mind under control, I closed my eyes and imagined Juliet on my bed, beneath my sheets again. The way she looked up at me, how her back arched when I drove into her deeper... how tight that sweet cunt was, dripping wet for me. The sounds of our sex in the air, the smell of sweat and ecstasy around us.

My fist returned to my length, and I resumed my pace.

Juliet was perfect in every way, but I could see there was something more to her, something she tried to keep hidden beneath the surface. She might be innocent, but that didn't mean the darkness didn't call out to her. She was curious, and

I couldn't blame her. If she'd let me, I'd show her a whole new world.

My hips began to rock along with my hand, my chest shuddering with heavier breaths. I pictured how it would feel with her legs wrapped around my midsection, how she'd draw those soft hands down my face. And those lips... fuck, those lips, I could do a lot of things to them. Kiss them, fuck them, cover them in cum and lick it all off.

Was it wrong of me to want her so badly? After all, what did I really know about her besides the fact that Markus had Jaxon bring her here? Nothing, really. But you didn't have to know someone to want to fuck them, to want to make them yours. Some things were just instinctual like that.

Unfortunately for me, my last instinct when it came to a pretty girl had nearly gotten me killed, so I had to be more careful this time.

My speed quickened, the hand pumping up and down my length doing so roughly. I imagined myself pile-driving her into the bed, feeling my balls slap against that ass and feeling her tight walls clamp down around my cock.

It would be bliss, pure, indescribable heaven.

I lost control, my body heaving forward with one last thrust as my balls clenched. My cock let loose its seed, cum shooting out of its tip and landing on the tile across from me. A sigh of relief escaped me, and I dropped my hand to my side, my dick still throbbing with need.

A hand was all well and fun, but it just wasn't the same. It'd been so long since I'd felt happiness, since I'd sated the thing nestled inside of me, and I couldn't help but wonder what she would actually feel like. I bet Juliet's body would feel even better, so good I couldn't even imagine it.

Being on good behavior tonight would be difficult, I knew. So very difficult, because even though Markus didn't want me alone with her, I craved it. I craved her. Whatever it was that drew me in was intoxicating, and like an addict who had gone

cold turkey for years and just rediscovered his addiction, I needed more.

So much more.

I turned the water off and got out, drying myself off. I got dressed quickly, my mind thinking up what we'd do. I already had something planned—I'd asked for Ed's help in the kitchen for a little secret dessert. He didn't want to make anything for me, but after fifteen minutes I reassured him it was only for me and not for anyone else.

Yeah, I'd lied. So what? We did worse things in this house, and it was almost time for another wave of marks in the basement. The Scotts had a lot of clients, from what it seemed, all over the world. Markus coordinated and sent off some guys and girls to do the job out there, but others... others weren't so lucky. Others were brought here, their last final moments taped for the clients to see later.

Yeah, things got bloody in this house. I could never hate Travis for bringing me here. This was where I belonged, and it was where I'd stay.

Night came upon the world all too quickly, and I kind of felt nervous. I know, I know, funny, right? Considering everything I'd done to get here, everything I did in my past... everything my fucking father overlooked and tried to write off, having a secret late-night date with Juliet was nothing. It should be easy-peasy.

But it wasn't, and it wouldn't be, because I felt like this was the true test. I'd been reborn, but were my old habits gone? Could I be with a pretty girl and want to make her mine and not start killing people to keep her safe? I guess we'd have to wait and see to find out.

One thing was for sure: I played a very dangerous game when it came to Juliet, and it was made even more dangerous by the fact she was under Markus's watchful eyes. Did I care, though? No, and I knew I should, but I just didn't. Maybe that was wrong of me, maybe that was stupid, but I couldn't change how I viewed things.

Markus was an ass. I didn't like him, and even though I owed this family for what they did for me, I didn't owe the man himself anything. If I owed anyone, really, it was Stella. She was the one who came to me, the one who talked with me, the one who tucked me under her bloody wing and showed me what it was like to be a Scott. Not Markus.

I waited until it was nearly midnight before I left my room, all dressed and ready to go. Had to be sure everyone else was asleep before I went to her room to pick her up. Couldn't be strolling along with her, alone, and have someone see who shouldn't.

No, tonight Juliet was all mine. Every part of her was mine.

My eyes were used to the darkness, so it was not hard for me to navigate the halls and the stairwell of the house with all the lights off. Seemed to be a cloudy night outside, so no silver moonlight shined through the windows to illuminate my path. That was fine. I was more than used to the darkness by now. Being here, you kind of had to be.

I had one hand in my pocket, the other hand hanging limply at my side as I walked. I tried to focus on tonight, on Juliet, but just like in the shower, my mind wanted to replay the memories of years ago. Everything I did... a better man might feel guilt over it, for surely my past was as stained as a past could be.

But that was the thing. I wasn't a better man. I wasn't even a good man. I smiled and joked around, wore my mask, believed wholeheartedly in what I did and the reasons behind my actions—but things were not always what they appeared. The mind was such a fragile thing. Sometimes it played tricks on you and you didn't even know it. Stella knew all about that, and maybe that's why I'd grown so close to the Butcher.

I wound up before Juliet's door, and inside my chest, my heart hammered, my nerves frayed even though the night hadn't even started yet. I'd like to say I believed in myself, but that would be a lie. This was a test, and if I could pass the test, why shouldn't I see Juliet more often? It wasn't like I was free

to roam the world like some Scotts were. It'd been a miracle that Markus had let me go out and get her clothes.

I moved closer to her door, rapping my knuckles on the wood softly. I saw a dim light on beneath the door; maybe a lamp, not the full ceiling light. Juliet was being a little sneaky; I found I rather liked that.

I heard rustling inside the room, and within another moment, the door was opened and Juliet stood there, her blonde hair cascading over her shoulders, its lengths just slightly curled, natural waves. She wore an oversized sweater that hung off one shoulder, allowing me to see her bra strap.

Shouldn't be looking there, but I did.

The sweater went past her ass, and I saw her legs were clad in dark blue leggings. I imagined her ass looked great in them, and I resisted my urge to pull her close and run my hands all along that slender, curvy body.

Juliet wore no makeup, but she was gorgeous anyway. She had the type of beauty that was effortless, the kind that simply was, no matter what she wore or what she was doing. Full, luscious lips that begged to be nipped and kissed. Big, bright blue eyes that seemed to stare right into you, radiating innocence.

Oh no, she definitely didn't belong here, and yet here she was. And, what's more, she wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. Juliet was stuck here, just like me, so why not make the most of the time we'd have together?

"You look good," I told her, grinning. "Although you always look good, so I'm not sure if that's a compliment or not."

Those lips of hers were slow to curl upwards into a smile. She appeared almost shy as she bit her lower lip and glanced down at her outfit. "Thanks, I think." Her voice came out soft and faint, unsure, and I couldn't help but wonder if she'd ever been shown interest before. It didn't sound like she came from the most normal background.

But then again, neither did I. We were two peas in a pod in that way, I guess.

I turned, offering her my arm. “Ready for our little date, Juliet?” Fuck, I really liked the way her name tasted on my tongue, liked how it sounded when it came out. I wouldn’t mind saying her name more often... every day. But that was probably getting ahead of myself.

That was the old Will talking. Had to remind myself of that.

Juliet glanced at my arm, very clearly not knowing what to do, so I reached for her, gently taking her hand in mine and bringing it up to my arm. I hooked my arm over hers and set her hand near my elbow. She could honestly hold onto me however she wanted, and I would not complain. Not a single bit.

We said nothing as we went. I took her down to the first floor, where I’d gotten things set up after my shower. One good thing about this house being so large was there were dozens of places you could hide, where no one would find you.

I brought us to a lounge, though I did let her go to close the door behind us, just in case. You could never be too careful. I’d found a candle and lit it near the windowsill; the low, flickering lighting in the room lent to the ambiance. Sensual, quiet, lighting everything with a warm and soft glow.

Juliet sat down on the leather sofa, and I took a place beside her. On the small table in front of the sofa sat the remote for the television hanging on the wall and two slices of what I’d asked Ed to make me. I had no idea what she liked, so this was all just grasping for straws on my part, at least for now.

Once I got to know her better, once I got to know her likes and dislikes, I would do better than this.

“I’m sorry if this isn’t exactly a great date,” I whispered, my voice low. I couldn’t help it. It wouldn’t feel right to talk at

a normal volume, not here, not with her beside me looking so damned pretty.

“It’s okay,” Juliet said, those eyes meeting mine in the dim light. They looked blacker than they really were, since the candle was behind her. Her face wore the shadows well. “I’ve never...” She stopped herself from saying anything more, but I caught on quick.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never been on a date before, Juliet,” I said, a secret part of me very happy to hear that. I mean, if there was one thing you should know about me, it’s that I did not take too kindly to other guys sniffing around.

But, again, that was the old Will. Had to keep reminding myself I’d turned a new leaf. Or I was supposed to.

She reached up, tucking a tendril of hair behind her ear before giving me a shy smile. “No,” she admitted. “I don’t have much experience when it comes to guys... or people in general. Or, well, anything, I guess.” Her hands fiddled on her lap, toying with the sweater’s equally oversized sleeves. “This is actually the longest I’ve been away from my house.”

My eyebrows came together. “What do you mean?” Whatever smug happiness I felt about the fact she didn’t have experience with guys faded somewhat when she said that last part. I didn’t know how to take it. She’d never gone on vacation, or—

“My dad is very protective of me. He homeschooled me, kept me where he could keep an eye on me. I was never supposed to leave the house, not unless it was with him.” Juliet sounded almost embarrassed about it.

She shouldn’t be. If anything, she should be mad. Fucking pissed off, because no one had the right to keep her locked away forever. No one but me.

Ah, bad Will. That was yet another thought I shouldn’t have.

“He kept you locked up like some kind of pet?” The words escaped me before I could water them down, before I could calm myself down. I mean, how the fuck was I supposed to

react to hearing that her dad kept her in a house for her whole life? What kind of life was that? I could ask myself the same question about here, but this prison was a necessary one.

This gave me life. What purpose did keeping her locked up have?

“No,” she was fast to say, “nothing like that. He didn’t... my dad just wanted to protect me, I think.” When I still looked like I wanted to rage, Juliet reached for me, setting a hand on my leg. “I’m not upset about it, not really. You don’t have to get mad on my account, Will.”

“You can’t live your life locked away in a house,” I told her.

She shrugged. “Maybe not, but I’m not at home right now, am I? I’m here with you.” The words, though they were meant to be sweet, fell a little flat, for she knew she was only here because Markus wanted her to be.

Knowing she was just a pawn made me rage a little, but I swallowed it down and gave her a grin. “True, and I have just the thing to celebrate it with.” I leaned forward, grabbing the plates off the coffee table. I handed her one. The forks were already lying beside the cut pieces.

Juliet made no moves to take her fork and have a bite. She simply stared down at the plate on her lap, her fingers gingerly holding onto the edges. “What is this?” she asked, glancing up at me.

“Cheesecake,” I said. “Ed makes the best desserts. You met him before, in the kitchen, when we first—”

“I remember,” she whispered. It was another moment before she added, “I’ve never had cheesecake before. My dad, he, uh... he never really made desserts, and when he was gone for his job, it was always up to me to feed myself.”

“Tell me you’ve at least had chocolate chip cookies,” I begged. “Otherwise, I might have to go into the kitchen and make you some right now.” Seriously, what kind of life was it if you never had desserts? The sweet, delicious taste of decadence. Life was boring without desserts.

It was also boring without a girl in my life, so I'll leave you to put two and two together.

She laughed. It was just a soft, fleeting sound, but I felt it in my soul. A laugh like that held no malice, no hatred or ill-will. Not an ounce of contempt or anger. She was so much better than me; I'd known it before, but hearing her laugh really hammered in the nail. There were cruel, terrible people out there, many of them in this house, myself included, but there really weren't many good people left in the world.

Juliet, though? She was one of them. She had to be. I could sense it; I knew it in my heart of hearts, in every fiber of my being. She was an angel, here to deliver us all, make us repent for our sins and beg for forgiveness.

"Yes, I have had cookies," she said, still smiling. "That's about the only dessert I've had, I think. We never did cake." Juliet was measured in picking up her fork, and I forgot all about my piece as I watched her sink the fork into the cheesecake.

"Not even for birthdays?" I was hardly aware of what I was saying, so intent on her and watching every tiny move she made, memorizing everything about her so that, when we weren't together, I would be able to picture her perfectly.

She shook her head, bringing the cheesecake bite to her mouth. Juliet parted her lips and tasted it. Her eyes met mine, and then they widened. She looked as though she'd just tasted heaven itself. "Oh, my..." She spoke with her mouth full, but I didn't care. Manners could go fuck off. This girl had me enraptured.

"Do you like it? Is it good?"

She swallowed, and then, without another word, she went in for a huge follow-up bite. "It's so good," she said. "I don't even know how to describe it." She brought the second bite to her mouth and let out a hum of approval as she ate it. "Whoever came up with this was a genius."

Now it was my turn to chuckle, mostly at her and her awe-filled expression. Juliet couldn't get enough of the cheesecake.

She devoured her whole slice, and since I was more than okay with watching her have her fill, I offered her mine.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “I probably shouldn’t... but I really, really want to.”

“Go ahead,” I told her, grinning from ear to ear. “I don’t mind.”

She took my plate without another word, setting it atop her clean one, and then she got to work on that, too. I didn’t think I’d ever seen someone demolish cheesecake that fast and look like they were having the time of their life while doing it, but I supposed I never really paid attention before.

No. There was no before, only now. Only her. Only Juliet Osborne, the angel that made the ugly thing inside me fall to its knees.

“I’m glad you like it,” I spoke as she ate my piece. “Some people hate it.”

“Those people are stupid,” she muttered, giving me a smile as she took another bite. Her shoulders fell and she closed her eyes, another sound escaping her. Almost like she’d spontaneously orgasmed from the cheesecake.

Hmm. Speaking of orgasms, my mind wondered, what would Juliet look like when her body was racked with pleasure?

An impure, inappropriate thought if I ever had one, and trust me, I’d had plenty in my life. Plenty of inappropriate thoughts along with equally inappropriate actions. Just call me Mr. Inappropriate. It’s what I was good at, apparently.

She finished the second piece all too soon, and before she got the chance to take the plates from her lap, I grabbed them for her, setting them on the coffee table so she wouldn’t have to. When I leaned back into the couch, I turned my body towards hers. She looked utterly content beside me, now full of cheesecake. If I kissed her, would I taste it?

“I’m surprised you’re so eager to be alone with me,” I confessed. “I thought I freaked you out, when we first met.”

“Oh, you did. You definitely did.” Juliet paused, thinking back. “But honestly, everything was just too much. I’d just met with Markus, found out I’d been kidnapped all because my dad works for him and didn’t do something right—I still don’t know the details, after all this time.”

“Was that why I found you sneaking around in his office?”

She nodded. “I wanted to see if I could find something out. I don’t like being kept in the dark, and I... I don’t like the thought of my dad working for a man like Markus, no offense.” She said that last part, *no offense*, because she thought I was like Markus.

I supposed, in the grand scheme of things, we were alike, but we were also so very different. There was no man like Markus. If anything, I was more like Stella, but if she hadn’t met the Butcher yet, that was a comparison she wouldn’t understand.

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t really work for him,” I said. “What we do... we work for other people. People with a lot of money. Markus is just the one who controls everything. He’s a bit of a control freak, if you haven’t noticed.”

Juliet spoke, “Yeah, I kind of figured that. He’s very intense.”

“He is,” I agreed. “But without him okaying it, I wouldn’t be here. I’d be out there, either caught by the police or dead. I didn’t make the best decisions when I was out on my own.” That was putting it lightly. Very lightly. Multiple people ended up dead because of me, and my spree would’ve taken more. Now I was sane enough to realize it.

I was uncontrolled, wild, and I did whatever I wanted. To live a full life doing what we did here, you had to be more careful.

“I remember what you said,” she told me.

I leaned forward, reaching for the buttons on my shirt. I started undoing them, earning myself wide eyes from her. She

didn't question me, didn't stop me, which was good. I wanted to show her my past, wanted her to know I was trying so desperately to not be that Will, as hard and as impossible as it was.

I needed to forget about the past, and what better way to forget than to make a future with someone else?

There was no undershirt, so once I had the shirt fully unbuttoned, I turned toward her and held it open. Even with the dim light, the scar on my abdomen was visible, the skin whiter than the rest of the flesh around it. It was not the only scar on me, but it was the one that hurt me every time I thought about it.

"Here," I said, pointing to it. "That almost killed me. If I wasn't taken here, it would've. I lost a lot of blood, did a terrible job at stitching myself up."

She must've remembered what I'd told her before. "A girl you liked did that to you?" Juliet's voice came out in a whisper, as if it was painful to her to see such an ugly scar on my abdomen—an abdomen which, scars aside, would make any girl swoon.

I nodded. "My girlfriend, actually, but to be fair, I did try to kill her other boyfriend—"

That got Juliet to inhale sharply. "Her *other* boyfriend?"

"Yeah, long story." A long story I did not want to tell, not all the nitty-gritty details of it.

"Why did you... why did you try to kill him?" I could tell Juliet was a little put off by my admission, but she did her best to hide it, her best to mask the apprehension she felt about my ugly truth.

I sighed. "He wasn't good enough for her." And, if you asked me, he still wasn't—but I tried my best to ignore Travis anytime he came home to work in the basement.

Juliet's next question stunned me: "And what gave you the right to decide who was good enough for her?" She spoke it so evenly, so seriously, that all words failed to come out of me.

“Why did *you* get to decide who she was with? Maybe that’s a decision she wanted to make herself.”

Well... fuck. She wasn’t wrong, as much as I didn’t want to admit it.

Her eyes fell to the scar once more. “It kind of sounds like you got what you deserved, Will, but maybe I’m not the best judge.” Perhaps to try to change the subject, she reached for me, her hand lightly touching my stomach. She dragged those fingers along my abs, tracing the scar Ash had given me.

The touch felt like fire in my system, immediately causing my blood to run hot. Hotter than it had in so very long. I was frozen, unable to move, wishing she would take that exploring hand a little further down.

“What’s this one from?” Juliet asked, her fingers tracing the other scar on my abdomen. That one was cleaner looking, as it had been taken care of by actual doctors right away.

“Ah, that one is from my ex’s ex-boyfriend who happened to be a serial killer,” I said.

She took the hand off me quickly, and I felt its loss in my core. “What? You’re kidding.”

I chuckled. “I wish I was, but I’m not. He almost killed me. He could’ve, but I think he was just trying to make a point.” I quieted for a few moments, gauging her reaction to all this. For someone who lived a sheltered life, she was taking it in remarkably well. Or maybe she just didn’t know how to respond at all, too busy processing it. “Things are complicated out here, in the world.”

It took her a moment to say, “I know.” Her eyes rose to meet my gaze, but soon enough they fell to my stomach again. It was almost like she couldn’t take those big baby blues off me, and I rather liked it.

Even though it was probably a mistake, I found myself leaning closer to her. Every inch that gave way between us, I found there was still too much space. Too much distance. I wanted this girl on my lap.

She saw me inching closer, saw me leaning, and she did not move away. She let out a ragged breath, her lips parted, seductive in every way. “There’s a lot of things I’ve never done, you know.” The words sounded almost painful to say, as if she could not be more embarrassed by them.

One of my hands went to her leg, drawing up it lazily. I saw her back stiffen, heard her breathe in, and I felt everything in my lower half start to come alive. A bad idea that would have an even worse outcome if Markus found out, but in this moment, I didn’t give a shit.

“Like what?” I asked her, already knowing all the things she hadn’t done. I mean, unless she did them with her dad, in which case, I’d hunt the motherfucker to the ends of the earth and eviscerate him until he was unrecognizable.

Juliet turned her face away from me, and I picked up the hand off her leg and brought it to her face, cupping her cheek and forcing her to look at me. Our faces were mere inches apart; I could feel the hot breath coming from her with each exhale. I was more than fine with breathing her air. Let me drown in this girl, and if this was the end for me, so be it.

It’d be worth it.

“Have you been kissed?” I murmured, my nose brushing against hers. My eyes were slits, half-open, half-closed, but hers were wide open, as if she didn’t know what to do. “Close your eyes, Juliet, and I can show you everything.” A whispered promise, desperate and hungry. It was a promise that might not come to fruition tonight, but we had time.

Yes, tonight was about exploration.

My other hand snaked around her back, pulling her lower half closer to mine. I watched as her eyelids shut, as she listened to me, and my cock hardened in my pants when I thought about dragging her onto my lap and making that mouth of hers mine in every way.

Our mouths neared each other’s, dangerously close and yet still too fucking far. I couldn’t wait any longer, and even though it was a mistake I knew would lead to many others

down the road, I kissed her. I kissed Juliet like I'd never kissed anyone before.

Hard and fast, yet sweet and tender. It was a delicate balance, an act of willpower to hold back the animal inside—the animal that wanted to go absolutely feral on this girl, to tear off her clothes and make her mine right here on this couch. To fuck her into oblivion and then bring her back to life, all with the steel rod between my legs.

I held onto her like I needed her, and that's because I did. She was so soft, so small, so tender and sweet, and yes, I could taste the barest hints of cheesecake when I ran my tongue along her bottom lip. I swallowed up her moans like I was bottling them up and stashing them away for later. I took everything she would give me, and I craved to claim so much more.

So as to not overwhelm her completely, I pulled my mouth off hers, panting, knowing I'd never taste something as good as her. Never again. Not unless those very same lips were on mine and I was once again drowning in everything she was.

Juliet breathed out, her eyes slow to open. "Whoa," she whispered, speechless beyond that, and I answered her with a grin.

"Did you like that?" I asked, already knowing her answer. When she nodded, I couldn't help myself but say, "Shall we do it again?" Again, she nodded, and this time I could not stop myself from grabbing her hips and pulling her onto my lap. I guided her into the position I wanted, where her legs were on either side of me, where she literally straddled my lap.

I forced her down on me, and I heard her gasp when she felt the hard length bulging against the fabric of my pants. I wove one hand through her hair, the other bunching up her long sweater so I could cup that delicious ass.

Leaning forward, I nuzzled her bare shoulder, causing her to shiver against me. "Do you feel that?" I murmured against her neck, kissing her once. "That's what you do to me. You drive me crazy." I felt her hands on my shoulders, gripping the

fabric of my shirt hard. “You make me feel alive again, Juliet.”

She was just a girl. I shouldn't let her affect me this way; I knew that. And yet here we were, behind Markus's back, our little secret. This girl and I, I had the feeling, would have many secrets together.

I brought my mouth off her neck, angling her face down to me, and then, without another word, I kissed her again. This time, the embrace was more desperate, hungrier, hornier. Every single part of me screamed to get this girl out of her clothes, to lay her down on the couch and pummel her pussy with my cock. I wanted her so bad I could hardly think straight.

With one hand on her ass, while I kissed her and showed her what true passion was, I guided her body on mine, showing her how to grind down on my length. With every movement of her on my lap, it drove my cock to further frenzy, my length throbbing and my balls aching for a release.

My shower time had done nothing to prepare me for this, to soothe the inner beast who wanted nothing more than to have this girl in my bed all night and make her forget the life she'd come from.

It was then I realized something, as I cupped her ass, and I had to break the kiss off to say, “Are you not wearing anything under these?” Obviously, the thought of her naked beneath those leggings made my lower half ache even more.

Juliet blushed, although I couldn't tell if she was blushing because of our make-out or because of my question. I supposed it didn't matter. Either way, I looked forward to making her redden a hell of a lot more. “I saw what you left me in the little black bag...” Her voice trailed off, leaving me to imagine the rest.

Except I didn't have to, for she was here. She was here, and she could be the living, breathing model for whatever it was she put on. Not going to lie, I had some fun at the store.

“Show me,” I was barely able to say the words. If Juliet wanted me to beg, I would. I would get on my knees for her, say whatever she wanted me to say, do whatever she wanted me to do. It was effortless how she had power over me; I just couldn’t help it. I was weak. So weak.

“Show you?” she echoed, eyes widening. “You mean—” When I nodded, it was clear she didn’t know what to do, so I helped her off my lap, standing her directly before me.

“Show me,” I said again, my voice coming out harder, fiercer, more gravelly and growly. Animalistic, in a way. Now that I knew she wore something under those leggings, now that I knew they were from my secret present to her, how could we continue the way we were? I had to see them, had to see how they looked on that delectable body of hers.

Juliet looked as though she wanted to bolt, like a frightened animal backed up into a corner, like a defenseless creature caught in a barbed wire fence. She was too innocent for the game we played, and yet here she was, all too willing to be a piece on the board.

She did not run, and I leaned back as I watched her finger the hemline of her sweater, slipping her hands under it. Juliet toyed with the top of her leggings, and I was unashamed at the hardness pressing against my pants. She wasn’t looking down there, anyway. She could not take her eyes off me. Maybe she noted the change in my demeanor, maybe she liked the rougher Will.

We’d have plenty of time to explore that later. Right now, I needed to see her modeling some panties.

Juliet’s breath caught in her throat, and she pulled her leggings down, revealing her bare legs to me. The sweater covered everything above her thighs, and I dared not take my eyes off her as my fingers clenched into fists.

Fuck, I wanted her so badly. So fucking badly it was insane.

“Lift up the sweater,” I ordered her—because, yes, it was an order. An order I knew she would follow, because even

though she blushed and fussed about, she was here. She was free of the darkness that dwelled within each of us, and yet she was curious and intrigued. If anyone's darkness should lure her in, it should be mine.

I'd been patient. I'd been good. Now I deserved a treat in the form of Juliet.

She reached for the bottom of her sweater again, and she lifted it up, revealing the lacy black thong I'd gotten her. How it hugged the plane of her body, how its thin, see-through fabric clung to the small area above her cunt. She was fucking stunning, and I felt the sudden urge to come again.

"Turn around," I said. Let me see that sweet ass, let me see how that thong disappeared between those ass cheeks. Let me see that delicious curve and imagine it beneath me. I'd never been so bossy before, but being stuck here, being bossed around... it kind of dragged it out of you, whether you were aware of it or not.

The last ten years had changed me, but whether or not it was for the better, we'd have to be patient and see. Right now, I was leaning toward the positive, because I rather liked it when Juliet listened, when she was submissive.

"Stay there," I said. "Don't move." It was a command, and I saw her back straighten a bit when she heard the leather couch beneath me squeak with my body's movement. I leaned forward, reaching out a hand, unable to help myself.

I had to touch it, that round, pale ass. Had to feel its smooth skin for myself. And, fuck it all to hell, her ass felt more perfect than I imagined it would. The softest skin I'd ever felt. As I rubbed her ass, as I touched her and explored her backside with the sexy as hell thong clinging to it, my cock throbbed with a steady need.

I had to do something about it. I couldn't just sit there and touch her. No, I needed to relieve myself, and I'd do it with Juliet standing there, her ass on display.

Taking my hands off her was one of the hardest things I'd ever done, but its difficulty was lessened by the fact that I

would soon have something else in my hands, a thick throbbing member of mine that so desperately wanted to be buried inside her pussy.

Not yet, my guy. Not quite yet. Juliet was something I wanted to savor, something I wanted to taste slow and steady, bit by bit, inch by inch.

Oh, we had started ourselves down a path whose ending I could not see. The tunnel we were in was long and dark, but that didn't matter, because as long as she was here, she could be mine, and that's all that mattered to me.

Call it obsession. Call it love at first sight. Call it whatever you fucking wanted; the name didn't matter. What I felt was real, and my raging hard-on was only evidence of it.

I undid the button and zipper on my pants. Within another moment, I had my pants pulled down just enough so I could get my cock out of its boxers. Its thick length stood straight up, its tip dripping in precum. Honestly, my boxers were probably stained with precum, considering how badly I wanted to fuck her.

I ran my hand along my length once, letting out a husky breath. I didn't care if she knew what I was doing, didn't care if she turned around and watched—but that ass, oh, staring at that ass would help me come a whole lot faster. Such a pretty, round, perfect thing.

Fuck, I'd take being inside her ass just as much as I'd take her cunt. Even her mouth. Any hole on her, really. I'd take her every which way, and then I'd take her again. And again. And again, and again, and again. There would be no sating this beast of mine.

Every part of me was hot. Sweat lined my brow, the muscles in my lower half tensing as I ran my fist along my length, staring at her ass, at the small thong clinging to it. I pictured pile-driving her from behind, my cock buried in her tight pussy, her ass cheeks spread so I could watch myself disappear inside her. Oh, the fun that would be.

My hand's pace grew quicker, and I was a slave to the desire inside. Up and down my length, over and over, every part of me ready to explode. This was me holding back—had to give myself props, right?

I let out a sigh, a moan, a sound that told Juliet exactly what I was doing. I didn't care. I needed to come, needed to erupt. Some things just had to be, and I sought out my orgasm viciously. My hips started to buck of their own accord beneath my hand, and I leaned my head back on the couch, spreading my shirt, knowing I better do my best to aim it on myself since I had nothing to clean up with.

I could feel it coming from a mile away, and every pump of my hand brought me closer to my release. It came over me like a wave, like a storm surge of desire that had finally exploded into searing hot bliss. My balls tightened, my cock twitching in my hand, and I leaned my length back, my arm jerking wildly as I started to come, shooting my seed onto my own stomach, emptying out myself with a low groan of release.

Once it was done, once I finished coming and no more cum escaped from the tip of my cock, I let myself go, feeling tired. I rested my arms on the back of the couch for a few minutes, staring at her ass again.

Juliet hadn't turned around. I didn't expect her to, but I wouldn't have stopped her. Still, that showed she could listen to directions, and anytime she didn't, it was because she was being feisty. I liked that. I liked that a lot.

My cum felt sticky on my chest, and I didn't want to button my shirt or stuff myself away, but I knew I should. I had to, lest this night turn into a fuck fest, and I meant it when I said I wanted to make this last. Markus could go fuck himself. I needed to have this girl, and I needed her to know it.

I tucked my cock away first, then I zipped up my pants and buttoned them, never once looking away from her. Even though I didn't want to, I began to button my shirt to hide the cum. It would stick on it, maybe darken it, so it was a damned

good thing it was already a darker color; it wouldn't be too noticeable.

I got up, standing just inches behind Juliet, and I heard her inhale sharply when I bent to grab her leggings, pulling them up her legs slowly. Once they were back on her hips and that sweet ass of hers was no longer visible, I leaned near her ear and whispered, "I can't wait to see you in everything else." I kissed her bare shoulder. "You should sleep in them."

It was just a suggestion... a suggestion that would keep me up at night as I wondered whether or not Juliet would do it. Hell, I didn't think she'd wear a pair here. I didn't think she ever would, given how much she radiated purity and innocence.

Our date was done after that. I took her back to her room, knowing if we prolonged it, I would only grow weaker and weaker when it came to her. Juliet never said a word about what I did, that I'd jerked off to the sight of her ass, which was probably for the best.

When I dropped her off at her room, I clung to the doorway, grinning at her. She turned around to meet my eyes through the darkness, and even though she probably couldn't see it, I gave her a wink. "Our little secret, Juliet."

She nodded, and I couldn't tell if she was shocked at the turn of the night's events or not. Either way, I left her there, closed her door for her, and I practically skipped to my room to clean off. I'd clean up the lounge in the morning.

Tonight, I'd go out on a limb and say, was a raging success. I'd held myself back, seen her beautiful ass, and managed not to lose it entirely. Definitely a win in my book.

Chapter Eleven – Juliet

Needless to say, I didn't sleep much that night after Will left. How could I? How could I get a wink of sleep when my mind could not stop replaying what happened? I was pretty sure he'd touched himself while looking at me... and I was also pretty sure I should feel some type of way.

Disgusted? Gressed-out? Weirder-out?

But the thing was, I didn't. I didn't feel any of that, and I should've. After all, Will was clearly not the sanest one in this house. The things he'd said to me, how our first encounter had gone—he was not stable. There was something off about him, even I could see that, and I'd grown up locked away.

Still, though, there was something about him that drew me in. Like a moth to the flame, it was almost unwilling. I couldn't put my finger on it. Maybe it was the fact that he was cute, even if he was older than me by ten years. Maybe it was the fact that I was tired of doing everything Daddy wanted me to do. Maybe I wanted to live a little.

And maybe living involved taking risks.

I wanted to sleep. I tried to, but I couldn't. The way he'd kissed me... I couldn't even describe it. Now *that* was a kiss. That's what I always imagined a kiss would be, not the frozen mouth Jaxon had given me when I'd tried to kiss him. Will's mouth had been warm and soft and inviting, but passionate and hungry and strong at the same time. Literally, when he was kissing me, all thoughts vanished from my mind. The kiss was that powerful.

Or maybe I'd just been on cloud nine because it was my first real kiss. Only had it after my first orgasm, totally out of order, but still. I guess it didn't matter.

And... yes, I did sleep in the thong, though it was a bit uncomfortable. Our little secret. Even though it was stupid to have secrets in this house, I didn't care. A part of me was well

aware that by doing this, I was basically giving Markus the middle finger, but maybe that was the point. Rebel against the supreme overlord of this house.

Morning came after an eternity, and I was more awake than I should've been, given the fact that I didn't sleep at all. I still wore the sweater and the thong; nothing else. What I should do was get up and change, but even though sunlight streamed in through the windows, I didn't want to force my body out of bed.

Really, I felt like I needed a freaking nap.

I didn't know how long it was until I heard a knock on the door, and I yawned before sitting up, making sure to keep the comforter bunched around my midsection so whoever it was wouldn't see my underwear. "Come in."

I'd put away the clothes, all the bags piled up on the side of the room near the door. The closet and dressers were now full of clothes that were surprisingly my size, and not too bad, style-wise. I had to hand it to Will.

Maybe I should be creeped out by the bag of lacy lingerie, but with everything going on, I wasn't. I honestly had more to worry about than fancy underwear.

Theo walked in, carrying a tray, like he was a server. On that tray was some milk, a stack of pancakes, and eggs. Way too much for me to eat, although after lying in bed wide awake for the last seven hours, I supposed I was hungry.

"Here," he said, grinning. "Good morning, by the way."

"Good morning," I replied. "Nice tray."

"Oh, you like it?" Theo started to unload the tray's contents onto my nightstand. "Ed found it for me. Figured it would be easier to bring up your food this way, rather than balance everything. You'd be surprised, but I don't have that great of balance. I have good precision when it comes to digging out metal shards in bodies but when it comes to balancing multiple dishes on my arms, I'm out."

I could not hide the smile forming on my lips. "You don't have to bring me food, you know."

“I know, but this way, I can make sure you get what you need.” He stood, tucking the tray under his arm as he stared at me. I squirmed a bit, which was dumb, because he didn’t have X-ray vision; he couldn’t see what I was wearing under the sheets. “You are taking your vitamins and your other pill, right?”

“Yes,” I said. I’d taken to the routine of having the vitamins in the morning and the other pill right before eight at night. It was the least I could do, I guess, since Jaxon had gotten hurt because of it. I didn’t want to see him hurt again.

“Good,” Theo spoke with a genuine smile. “Now, I’ll get out of your hair.” He adjusted his glasses, and then he walked away.

He was moments before shutting my door when I called out to him, “Thank you.”

Theo paused, glancing back at me. “Don’t worry about it.” The smile he gave me then was different than the one he’d given me before, a different emotion behind it, though I couldn’t distinguish which one. I supposed it didn’t matter; I had food to eat and clothes to change out of.

It was an hour before noon when someone else came to see me. This person knocked on the door quietly, and after I told them to come in, when I saw who it was, I couldn’t help but run over to him and hug him.

Yes, okay, it was a mistake, it was stupid, but I couldn’t help it. I felt so bad. So, so bad. Plus, you know how bruises were. They looked even worse after a few days.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered to Jaxon’s shoulder as I hugged him. He, I noticed, was slow to hug me back, and when I let him go, when I gazed at his face and the bruises on it, I felt my heart hurt.

I shouldn’t care. I shouldn’t care at all, but I did. Dumb.

Jaxon shrugged it off. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine.”

“No, it’s my fault that happened. If I wouldn’t have—”

“Don’t,” he interrupted me. “Don’t do that to yourself. Markus had a hunch that hurting me would get you to bend to him, and he was right.” He let out a sigh. “I’m not mad at you, Juliet. Really, I’m not. And I’m not mad at Markus, either. Sometimes things aren’t pretty in the family, but that’s just how things are around here. I’m used to it.”

Used to getting beat up? Or used to terrible consequences? Either way, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“I’m sorry for avoiding you lately, but...” He stopped, rubbing the back of his neck. “I needed time to think.”

“About what?” Not sure I even wanted to know, but the words left me before I could stop them. Staring at Jaxon, knowing his handsome face was so bruised because of me, it hurt. It hurt me more than words could ever describe.

It took him a while to admit, “You.”

I didn’t know what to say, and so I didn’t say anything. Should I feel guilty for seeing Will last night, for totally forgetting what happened to Jaxon while I was with Will? All these feelings inside, they were so very confusing. I didn’t know how people dealt with them—but maybe they had a better handle on them than me because they grew up dealing with them, while I only had to deal with Daddy and trying to make him happy.

“Markus came after me because he was trying to make you fall in line,” Jaxon said, eyeing me up, the emerald orbs clouded over with emotions I could not read. “I thought I was putting enough distance between us, but maybe I didn’t put enough. Maybe he saw something, heard something, I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?” I was almost afraid to ask.

“You don’t like me, do you? You don’t care about me, right? I mean, I’m the one who broke into your house and brought you here,” he said, reminding me of something I was very much aware of. “You don’t have feelings for me... do you?”

“Do I... do I like you?” Was he really asking me that, point-blank? I mean, I didn’t know why I was shocked, but I was. I also didn’t like the way he looked at me while he asked me those questions. It was almost like the mere possibility of me liking him was something he disproved of.

Like it wasn’t something he wanted.

A pang of hurt hit my heart, and I had to break eye contact with him—and then I had to take a step away from him. Couldn’t stand too close, you know. Might give him the wrong idea, that I liked him or something.

I didn’t.

Did I?

And if I did, if I did sort of, weirdly like Jaxon even though he’d kidnapped and brought me here, what did that say about last night and Will? And then, of course, there was Markus, who didn’t want any of these guys to touch me, let alone look at me wrong.

“Does it matter?” I asked, finally able to meet his patient gaze once more. “Does it matter if I do, if I don’t?” I had more to say, but apparently Jaxon could not wait until I was finished; he had his own piece to say.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, it matters, because if you do, then I’m a weakness to you, and Markus will use it. He knows exactly how to use people to break other people, and I don’t want to be a part of it.” He shook his head. “Not because I’ll get hurt. I don’t give a shit about me, Juliet.”

“Then why?” I wanted to beg him to help me see the entire picture, to help me see the truth. Truly, I did not understand why it was such a big deal to have a tiny crush on the guy. I mean, Jaxon was cute, his dimples were adorable, and even though he’d brought me here, he was saner than a lot of them. Plus, he was closer to my age than anyone else, other than that Bennet guy, who’d tried to kill me with a fork.

But we weren’t going to think about him right now.

Jaxon’s expression read conflicted and torn, and yet kind of angry. At me? At Markus? I couldn’t tell. “Because you’ll

get hurt,” he shot back. “Because by hurting me, he hurts *you*. It’s better for you to not care. Don’t you see that?”

“I can’t change the things I feel inside.” And to try, I knew, would be pointless. Some things just were, and even though it was stupid, I’d developed some kind of feelings for this guy, as hot and cold as he could be.

“Try,” Jaxon pleaded with me. “Try, because if you don’t, he’ll use me again, and next time, it’ll be worse. I don’t want to be the instrument he uses to hurt you.” His voice dropped to a whisper, to a bare whisper I felt rattling my bones, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

I stared at him for what felt like forever. At the slight crease between his brows, at how his chest rose and fell with heavy breaths, at the way he stood, as if he was ready to pounce into action, even now. I stared at the bruises on his face, imagined the bruising on his stomach, and as I looked at him, everything inside me hurt. I hurt because he hurt.

He was right. I knew it in that moment. Caring for anyone in this house would be considered a weakness, a weakness Markus would gladly use to get me to bend to his will. Was the cold, hard truth enough to make me change course, though? Was it enough to force me to not feel anything towards the handsome, crazy faces around me?

I didn’t know.

Two words left me while I was lost in my own head, two words spoken so softly, I hardly heard them myself: “Then don’t.”

Jaxon said nothing for the longest while, watching me, waiting for me to explain. But when I didn’t, he finally said, “You know it’s not that simple. Not here.”

“Do I? Do I know that?” I shrugged. “I don’t know. I still don’t know what the heck goes on here. I don’t know why I’m here, what my dad did to make Markus want me here. I don’t know anything, but I know this—” I took a step toward Jaxon, and his entire body tensed. “—you’re not a bad guy. You’re not. Markus is... you’re nothing like him. When I look at him,

I don't feel the same thing I do when I look at you. *You're not bad*, Jaxon."

I couldn't tell if my words affected him or not, if he believed me or not. I mean, who the heck was I? Just a girl. Just a girl who knew nothing about his life, and yet I believed what I told him. Was he rough around the edges? Sure. Did he kidnap me? Yeah, but did that make him a bad person all around?

No.

No, it didn't, and it killed me to know he didn't believe it.

"You can choose whether or not to listen to Markus," I said, taking another step closer to him. I wanted to hug him again, show him comfort, tell him over and over how sorry I was he'd gotten so hurt because of me. "You don't have to let him use you against me. You could... you could go. We could go together."

I knew it the moment I said it: I went too far. One step too far, and I could see the semi-receptive walls I'd started to bust through get built back up, brick by brick until he was firmly against me.

"No," he said. "You're wrong. I am a bad guy, and I always will be. My debt to this family and what they've done for me can never be repaid. I won't go against the family to get you out of here—and if that's not enough to make you realize that I'm not this knight you have built up in your mind, nothing will." He moved away from me, shaking his head. "It'll go better for you if you don't care about anyone else in this house besides yourself."

And then he left, not saying a single word more. Jaxon didn't even look at me as he went, no glances over his shoulder or any of that.

I watched him go, his words slow to sink in, and when he was gone, I felt suddenly so very weak. My legs gave out, and I collapsed to the floor, staring at my hands. They were the hands I'd grown up with, clean hands, not a single blemish on them. Jaxon's hands, I knew, were not as clean. They were

dirty, rough. Those hands of his had done things that I probably couldn't even imagine, and yet, as I sat there, staring at my hands, I couldn't force myself to think of him badly.

Liking him, liking anyone, was a weakness in this house, it was true. I did not want to see Jaxon get hurt again because of me. Did that make me pathetic? In Markus's eyes, probably.

Markus.

As I thought of the man, as I remembered everything he'd told me, what he did to me, as I pictured his pitch-black stare, his tall, suit-wearing body, I got to my feet, knowing I had to have a talk with him, whether he was responsive or not. Whether he cared enough to listen to me or not. Forgive my language, but screw that guy.

I left my room, leaving the door wide open as I went.

I'd be lying if I said I was not afraid of Markus or what he could do. If he could hurt Jaxon that badly—and Jaxon was family, adoptive, but still—what would he do to me to make a point? There was nothing off-limits, I'd bet. He already said as much.

But just because I was afraid of him did not mean I would back down and cower in fear. Just because he had all the power did not mean I would sit down and shut up. I didn't owe him anything. The only man I'd listen to without question was Daddy, and he was not here.

It took me a while, mostly because this place was still too huge and confusing to me, but I eventually found my way to his office. His door was closed, as it always was, and I breathed in a deep breath, readying myself for what would surely become a fight. A one-way fight, probably, but a fight nonetheless. Markus was stupider than he looked if he thought I would back down like an obedient dog.

Okay, the man didn't look stupid at all. That was just me trying to pull an insult from my severely lacking insult repertoire.

I wanted to bust right in, but I knew if I wanted the man to listen to me, if only for a moment, I should knock. The last

time I'd busted in after getting the pills from Theo, he'd taken me by the neck and kicked me out. I didn't want that to happen this time.

No, this time would be different.

I knocked.

His low, commanding voice came from inside, "What?" He sounded snippy, like he wasn't expecting anyone, and I steeled myself for the upcoming confrontation. Markus Scott was not a man you should ever approach when he was angry, but then again, was he ever *not* angry? I didn't think so.

I pushed in, closing the door behind me, holding myself straight even as Markus's dark eyes flicked up at me. He held onto a pen, and whatever he was writing ceased to be of any concern to him the very moment he saw me. A suit, as always, clung to his wide body, his tie a sleek black, the shirt under it a dark red.

The color of blood.

Markus made a deliberately slow gesture in putting the pen down, folding his hands atop each other as he looked at me. "What do you want?" His voice came off snide and cold, the blackness of his eyes narrowing at me.

I moved closer to his desk, standing opposite him. Probably a bad idea to get so close, and yet I needed to make a point, whether he was receptive or not. "You are a horrible man," I told him. "You're cruel, mean, and hateful. I don't like you."

The corners of his mouth nearly smirked at that. "Should I feign insult, or should I only note your feelings for future reference?" Though he deadpanned his response, he still sounded like he mocked me. The jerk.

"How can you hurt someone who's family? How can you live with yourself and what you do?"

"Juliet, I do what I must. That's always the case, and you'll find that never changes, no matter how complicated things get." Markus eyed me up, scrutinizing me intensely. "And, for your future reference, you have no idea what we do here. If

you knew, I suspect you would not be as bold as you are right now.”

I leaned onto his desk, my hands flat, and though I wanted to slink away from him and his stare, I said, “Then tell me. What is it you do? Why am I here? What did my dad do to make you think you had to kidnap me?”

“The truth,” Markus started, and for a moment, I actually thought he was going to tell me. My heart skipped a beat and everything. But all he finished with was: “Sometimes it’s not what we’re expecting. Call me psychic, but I don’t believe you’d be able to handle it, as delicate as you are.” He spoke the word *delicate* like it was an insult.

And from him it was.

“Delicate?” I echoed, aghast, unable to hide how insulted I was by his choice of words. “I’m not delicate. You haven’t broken me yet, Markus.” What I said must’ve been a challenge, for I watched, nerves fraying, as Markus slowly got to his feet. Even though there was a desk between us, he could reach over it and grab hold of me quite easily.

Which was exactly why I pushed off his desk and took a step backward. As long as there was enough space between us that was longer than his arm, he would not be able to reach me. And that was the goal. Keep those big, strong hands off me so I could think straight.

Because if they got on me? When those hands touched me and held onto me like he hated me and wanted to put me in my place? My body did some weird things, things I was not proud of. Was it possible for your body to be on another level than your mind? That was the only way I could explain it.

“Aren’t you?” Markus asked, running a hand down the front of his suit, the movement drawing my gaze instantly. Such a slow gesture, almost tantalizing in how controlled he was in every single way. “Aren’t you, though? Don’t fool yourself by believing otherwise. You’ll only end up hurting yourself worse.”

“I don’t care,” I said, hoping I sounded more convincing than I felt. Truth was, I didn’t know what I was. Weak? Yeah. Too innocent to be surrounded by these men and their immoral, dangerous selves? Definitely. But I liked to think I was not freaking delicate like a flower—I wasn’t waiting for bad weather to knock all my petals off.

He took a step around his desk, and with each step he took, I matched it backward, not wanting to let him close. “Such bold words coming from such a blind girl,” Markus said, angling his head down to me. He was well over six feet tall, definitely the tallest man I’d ever met... not that that was saying much, considering.

“I wouldn’t be so blind if you would just tell me the truth,” I said. “Stop hiding things from me. I can handle it!” I rose my voice, even though it was a mistake. I should’ve realized it then: you never rose your voice when you were talking to Markus Scott. You never challenged him, not unless you were willing to deal with the consequences, and right then I truly had no idea what the consequences would be.

He kept approaching me, and I kept stumbling back... until I backed myself up against a wall. Very stupid. I wouldn’t recommend it.

Markus stood less than two feet from me, his hands hanging at his side, for once not shooting up and grabbing me by the throat. Still, I expected it, and it was like the skin on my neck burned hot in anticipation.

“Not to change the subject, but how is Jaxon doing? Is he healing well? He’s been hiding ever since I took a fist to him that night.” Markus’s voice dropped to a whisper, “I do hope you’re doing what you’re told, Juliet, being the good girl I know you are.”

Those words did not sound right coming from him, and I fought the way a tingling chill swept up my spine as a result. I was not his good girl. If I was anyone’s, I was Daddy’s. This man could... well, screw off.

And to bring up Jaxon, what a jerk move.

“I don’t know,” I said. “He doesn’t want to be around me anymore, probably because you think there’s something going on between us.”

His jaw ground. “I don’t think. I know.” Markus left no room to argue, and his legs closed the distance between us in one long stride. Suddenly that strong, muscular body of his pressed against mine, pinning me to the wall even harder. His hands, however, did not move to touch me. “Even if you’re too ignorant to see it, I do. I can’t say I blame either one of you, although if I had to choose someone to blame, it would be Jaxon. He knows you’re off-limits.”

It took everything in me to lean my head back, to gaze up at him and ask, “Why? Because I’m yours to break?”

“Precisely. Mine to break, mine to control, mine to do whatever the fuck I want with,” he paused, “at least until Daddy gets ahold of himself. He still hasn’t responded to my message. I admit, I’m growing a little concerned.” His dark eyes narrowed down at me, the stare of the devil himself, if he was a man in a suit. “Perhaps we’ll need to send him something more, something he won’t be able to ignore.”

Was he lying? He had to be. Daddy would never ignore a message from Markus, especially if I was in that message. Daddy would want me back. He’d want to do everything he could to get me back.

Wouldn’t he?

“Like I said before,” I whispered, “you’re cruel, you’re mean, and I don’t like you.”

His chest rumbled, and it took me a moment to realize it. Markus Scott was *laughing* at me. Just a low, smooth sound, but a laugh all the same. It instantly riled me up, and I swore if I was not pinned against the wall, I’d have turned around and left.

“Does any prisoner like their tormentor?” he shot back. “You don’t have to like me. In fact, it’ll make things better if you don’t. Either way—” Finally, a hand lifted from his side, and it was slow to curl around my neck. Not squeezing tightly,

not choking, but simply holding. Holding me to remind me that he was the one in power here, not me. “—I will make sure your dear daddy knows you are not in good hands.”

I didn't like it when he called Daddy that. It felt like he was making fun of me, which he probably was. But I said nothing, only glaring up at him as best I could while fighting the innate urge to close my eyes and let the man do whatever he wanted to me.

I mean, that was messed up, wasn't it? He could put a hand on me and all logical thought flew out of the window. It didn't make sense. Not one bit.

“But back to what you said earlier,” Markus muttered. “You want to know what we do? I think I can arrange something. Go back to your room. Wait like a good girl, and I'll come get you when it's ready.” He pushed off me, his large frame giving me his back as he returned to his desk.

I blinked, because there wasn't much else I could do, not while the ghostly sensation of his hand on my throat lingered, not after everything he'd just said. I stood there, my mouth hanging open slightly, wondering if he was really going to show me what went on in this house, why everyone was so cryptic.

Why they talked of attempted murder like it was nothing.

Something wasn't right in this house. You could taste it in the air. It wasn't stale, but there was a heaviness to it, something I could not name. I'd thought it was just because I'd been kidnapped, but now I didn't think that was the reason. This house, these people... I had the feeling if I called it a labyrinth of pain and misery, I'd be wrong.

Wrong because it was so much worse.

As Markus sat down, his eyes were on me once more. “I told you to go,” he said. “If you do not, I will rethink on showing you anything. Is that what you want?” His question was a loaded one, and even though I wanted to stay and argue with him—show him that, somehow, I could still stand tall no

matter what he said or did to me—I pushed my back off the wall and left.

I left because I had no other choice. Of course I wanted to see. At least it would be some truth amongst all these secrets. I needed to know what was going on here so I could try to picture how Daddy fit into all of this.

I still didn't know what Daddy did for Markus, but I had the sinking feeling it wasn't good.

Back in my room, I paced the length of it for what felt like hours. It probably wasn't that long, but I didn't pay attention to the clock. It occurred to me that this could be some kind of trick, a game of Markus's, but was he really the type of man to play games? No, I didn't think so. He was terribly straightforward in everything he did... minus telling me the truth about why I was here.

Would I not like the truth? Would it hurt me? Maybe, but that shouldn't matter. I was here, I was stolen out of my freaking house, so I thought I deserved to know, whether it would hurt or not. Let me be the judge of that, not my jailer.

After a while, the anticipation in my body turned to anxiety, and I began to worry. Every bit of doubt that could've possibly crept into my mind funneled its way inside, blooming and exploding exponentially. I felt like throwing up, which was dumb, since I didn't even know what was going to happen.

My door opened, shaking me out of my thoughts, and with the sheer violence behind the action, I assumed it was Markus—but when I turned around, I found it wasn't. It was Jaxon, and he looked even angrier with me now than he'd been earlier in the morning.

He stalked inside, glaring. “What did you do?” Jaxon asked through gritted teeth. “What the fuck did you go and do, Juliet?”

I had no idea why he was so angry, and I was sure my reaction made that evident. “What are you talking about? I didn't do anything.” Well, besides go to Markus and make

demands of him, but I wasn't going to admit that out loud to him.

“Really? So that’s why Markus came to me and told me to bring you to the second-floor office?” His voice shook with emotion, and I had no idea why. “You don’t know anything, Juliet, but once you do, you’re going to regret it. You’ll regret it, and you’ll wish you would’ve just let things be.”

Everything he said only made my heart pound harder in my chest. If I felt like throwing up before, I felt even worse now. I felt like curling into a little ball, hiding away underneath the bed, and closing my eyes while wishing this was all over. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d done it. The first time in a while, but not the first in general.

“I don’t understand,” I whispered, desperately seeking to do just that. That’s all I wanted, to understand what was going on here, to get the truth. Was it really that bad?

Jaxon’s bruised face scowled. His cute dimples were nowhere to be seen. “You will,” he muttered with a frown. “You’ll understand, and then you’ll wish you didn’t. You could’ve lived here in ignorance—and trust me, in this house, any little bit of ignorance is bliss. But no, you had to go and rile Markus up. He’s going to make you regret it. You might think you’re getting what you want, but you’re not, and you won’t realize it until it’s too late.”

I took a step towards him, gulping down all the anxieties in my system. “Tell me what’s going on—” I tried reaching for him, but he twisted away, sidestepping me with reflexes that were more than enough to have been used to avoid that beatdown from Markus.

“No,” he growled out, “you’ll see for yourself soon enough.”

Before I could say anything, before I could say a single word to try to make things better, to lessen his fury toward me, he grabbed me by the wrist and started to drag me out of my bedroom. Jaxon held onto me harder than he ever had, fingers biting into my flesh so hard I had to wince. Hurting me, being rough with me, not seeming to care at all.

Was the Jaxon I'd known until now just a lie? Was anything in this house not a lie wrapped up in pretty packaging?

As he jostled me along, to the stairwell, to the second floor, I bit back anything I might've said. If this was how things had to be, fine. I'd be fine. So what if I'd come to enjoy the time I spent with Jaxon? None of that mattered, obviously. Nothing at all mattered, and that's what hurt me the most, I think.

I was brought to an office I'd never seen before, practically thrown onto the rug, near Markus's sleek black shoes. I lurched onto my hands and knees, biting back the emotion residing inside over how Jaxon was treating me. It wasn't right.

None of this was right. But I guess that's the thing when it came to Scotts.

Right or wrong; it didn't really matter. Here, there was no God. There was no devil. There were only men... and these men had the blackest, vilest of souls.

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Chapter Twelve – Markus

I didn't even blink when Jaxon brought her in. This office was not mine; it was hardly ever touched anymore. It was also so much more than it appeared to be. A flat-screen television set hung on one of the walls, a small leather sofa facing it. The walls were bare beyond that, save for the hidden door which currently sat wide open.

I'd already picked which one she'd see. From what I recalled, it was quite gruesome and macabre, a Stella and Lincoln special.

Juliet wanted to see what we did here? I'd show her. I'd show her one of the worst, and she would never sleep again, not while in this house, not while knowing she slept under the same roof as cold-blooded killers and extreme sadists.

She thought she could handle the truth? Well, we were about to put that to the test, weren't we?

Juliet was on the floor after a rough push from Jaxon. Jaxon did not look happy, and his attitude made me smile—on the inside, anyway. I didn't really smile outwardly, not unless I had to. There was no point, not when you dealt in death and blood on an almost daily basis, not when you could not feel the rush your brothers did when they sank their knives and saws into flesh and bone.

"Lock the door, Jaxon," I said, never once taking my eyes off the girl.

As Jaxon went to lock the door, Juliet was slow to push back, kneeling before me. Her eyes lifted, meeting my stare, and I felt a peculiar type of wanting just then—something I couldn't say that I'd ever felt before. I wanted to wrap my hand in that yellow hair, pull hard, and force that pretty little mouth of hers to open.

I wanted her on her knees, and I wanted to feel that mouth on my cock.

But those were thoughts I should not have, and I pushed them from my mind, lest I start to show arousal. Now was not the time to lose myself in what-ifs or baser urges. Right now was all about Juliet finding out just who she currently lived with.

She wanted the truth? She'd get it, and then she'd regret it like I knew she would.

I pointed to the leather sofa in the corner of the room. "Sit," I told her.

"Why should I?" She pouted her lips, though she did not get up. Kneeling on the floor made her lose some of her gusto. That, or she was already freaked out by this. Good. "Why should I do anything you say?"

A smirk crossed my own face as I folded my arms over my chest. I leaned back on the desk, holding her stare, making sure she knew how amused I was by her act of defiance. Juliet thought she was so strong, but she lived in a bubble of a world, a tiny house, unaware of the true nature of men and their sins.

"Jaxon," I spoke, "get her up."

Jaxon moved behind her, and without warning, he grabbed her by the back of the neck, lifting her off her knees and to her feet. She tried to struggle, tried to fight him, but he was stronger than her. I think damn near everybody in this house was stronger than her... and they only stayed away from her, kept their hands and their dicks off her, because I said so. If I let them have a free-for-all when it came to her, she just might be dead already.

She was fortunate I cared enough to intervene in that way.

"Take her to the sofa," I instructed, and Jaxon did just that, moving her backward, causing her to stumble on her own feet as he went. It was an amusing sight, frankly. She was such a small girl, maybe five feet tall. Yes, she had the curves of a woman, but she still had a heart-shaped face that radiated innocence and purity.

What she was about to see might age her quite a bit.

Juliet was thrown onto the sofa, and she did her best to hold her head high, though she did sneak a glare in toward Jaxon, who dutifully ignored her. Good. Sewing dissent between the lovebirds was what I wanted all along, really.

She could not be his, you see, because she was already mine.

“Now,” I started, “was that so hard?” The look she gave me right then told me it was, and I held in a chuckle. What an amusing girl. Such fire, which I hadn’t expected, given her life... given everything her father had done. “Why so upset, Juliet? You’re about to get what you wanted. You’re about to see exactly what we do here.”

Her blue eyes shook with silent fury, and she hardly blinked as she glared at me. I could tell half of her wanted to get up and run away in fear, but the other half was a deadly kind of curious. Juliet wanted to know what we did here, and she was willing to swallow her pride in order to see it.

“Now, it should go without saying that what you’re about to see never leaves this house,” I started, moving around the desk and taking a seat. A remote sat in the center of the desk; I’d already had it loaded and ready to go. All I had to do was hit the power button and watch Juliet’s reaction to the truth. “Of course, you must know I don’t show our secrets to just anyone. When you do what we do, you can never be too careful.”

Juliet’s blonde eyebrows came together, and I could tell she didn’t understand.

“But you’re a, what shall we call you? A special case.” I grabbed the remote and hit the power button to the TV, and even though I could only see a slanted view of the television, I knew exactly what was on it, the image that was frozen to its screen, waiting for me to hit play.

Our basement was unlike most basements, I think. We had a powerful incinerator, along with multiple rooms where we kept marks for however long our clients wanted. Sometimes they simply wanted so-and-so dead, which was when I sent trusted family out into the world to get it done.

Sometimes they wanted so-and-so dead, but they wanted to see it, so we taped it and offered it to our clients. There were times when they were precise about how they wanted their deaths to occur. Mutilation, torture, anything and everything. Nothing was off the table when it came to us. As long as you had the money to pay and we accepted the job, we would be at your service.

Occasionally they didn't care either way, and that's when some of my brothers, and Stella, got to have a little fun.

This video was a slight mixture. The client wanted the mark to pay in a certain way before she was killed, and we had a pair of resident killers who loved mixing pleasure with blood. It was not the tamest video we had, but I chose it for that exact reason.

Let this girl see just who we are, who I am, who the people I control are. Let her see the truth, let her judge us, and let her fear us. We were the executioners. We were the hangmen. We were the firing squad, only we tended to use sharp steel instead of bullets. Everything we were, everything we would continue to be, was eternal. We were the monsters above the law, too rich to fall prey to its rules. We were divine devastation, the horrors we unleashed biblical.

There was no escape. Not from us. Once you were in our grasp, you never got out. Surely Juliet would start to realize that soon?

I hit play, and I leaned back to watch Juliet's reaction. Jaxon stood near her, eyes on the screen, though I'd bet anything he was only staring so hard at the screen because he didn't want to look at Juliet, didn't want to see her reaction to this video and what the people in it were about to do.

It wasn't for the squeamish, that's for sure.

Immediately, Juliet's eyes got wide. "What is this?" She could barely get the question out, probably because she was stunned to see a naked woman on the screen. She was in her twenties, an attractive enough girl from what I remember, but she'd pissed off someone with money... and when you pissed

off someone with money, the repercussions were never a pretty sight.

The woman's hands were tied over her head, strung up by chains. She was on her tiptoes, a gag in her mouth. Her back was against the tile wall that was ever-present in our basement, her hair greasy. Her eyes were open, and she whimpered every now and then, struggling to try to break free of her restraints.

But she couldn't, and she wouldn't.

Juliet looked at me. "What is this?" she said again.

"This is what you wanted," I told her. "You're about to see what we do. Congratulations. Most people who see what we do end up much like that woman. Hope you can handle a snuff film, Juliet, because you're about to see one."

I had no idea if she knew what a snuff film was, but judging by her reaction, she didn't quite get it yet. Her eyes returned to the screen, and the sound of a door opening came from the TV. The girl whimpered when she saw who it was, and it took a few moments for two figures to stand before her, wearing all black, masks on their faces. Simple, black things. I required them anytime the cameras were on, though they've evolved over the years.

A tall figure with black hair and shoulders almost as wide as mine stood beside a slender woman with brown hair. As the tied-up woman cried through her gag, begging to be let go, the two figures turned to each other, and though you couldn't see their faces on the screen thanks to his back, you could see the taller figure bending down, lifting his mask, and kissing the other woman.

The man went toward the woman on the wall, and he glanced over his shoulder, saying, "I think we both like it better when we hear screaming, right?" The other one he was with nodded, agreeing with him, and he tore the gag out of the woman's mouth, letting it hang around her throat.

"Please," she begged, "please let me go. I didn't do anything. I didn't—"

The masked woman took two long strides to the side of the room, where knives of all kinds sat, her favorite. “That’s what they all say,” she said, picking up a rather sharp and jagged-edged knife, moving to take her place beside her man.

As soon as the woman saw the knife in her hand, she stopped begging.

“The truth is we don’t give a shit about what you did or didn’t do,” she went on, the silver steel in her hand glinting in the ugly light. “You’re about to pay for whatever it is with your life... but first, we’re going to have a little fun with you.” She let out a laugh, but it was a hollow, foreign sound. It made the woman on the wall flinch.

“No,” Juliet said, getting up as she shook her head. “I’m not going to watch this—”

“Sit the fuck back down,” I ordered her, my voice hard, “or I will have Jaxon hold you down.”

She glanced to Jaxon, and she knew, without a doubt, he would do as I said. It might pain him to do it, but he would. Juliet was slow to sit down, breathing heavily before turning those eyes back to the television.

On the TV, the man had taken a hand to the restrained woman’s neck, squeezing tightly, making her choke. “Too bad she’s not on her knees,” he mused, his wide chest thundering with a laugh. “I like ‘em better when they’re on their knees.”

The woman hummed, wordlessly agreeing, and when he released the other woman’s neck, she brought the knife to her throat. “Make sure to scream for us,” she said. “It’s always more fun that way.” She nicked her neck just a bit, causing the woman to start to sob.

The sound of a belt being undone echoed in the room on the screen as the man began to take his pants off. Watching him do it, the woman on the wall started to sob harder, which only brought the one wielding the knife glee.

Oh, they were psychopaths, pure and simple. It’s why I chose this video to show Juliet. They reveled in blood, they

liked hurting other people, whether they deserved it or not. There was nothing saintly about either of them.

Dragging the knife softly down the woman's naked body, she had eyes only for the man shedding his pants and freeing his cock. After a moment, when his legs were bare, she pulled away from the woman on the wall, dropping to her knees before him. She moved her mask, but it was all off-screen. All you could see from the camera angle was the way the man's hips started to jerk, how his ass clenched with every thrust into her mouth.

"Oh, my God," Juliet whispered, once she realized what was happening. She looked away, but then she caught me staring at her, and she begrudgingly brought her gaze back to the TV, where two of my most deadly psychos were only starting to have their fun.

He pushed her away, and she pulled down her mask, getting to her feet as he moved closer to the woman on the wall. Her legs were not chained up. Her body shook with fear, but most of that was blocked out by the man's wide shoulders.

"No, please, don't—" The woman on the wall became a blubbering mess, tears streaming down her face. There was nothing she could do, really. What was coming was inevitable, and she was as helpless as a woman could be.

He grabbed her by the hips, jerking her up and prying her legs open. Beside them, the other woman stood, watching every movement with interest. The man turned his head to look at his woman, staring at her as he positioned himself between the legs of the mark. He let out a groan when he pushed into her, though the woman's cries drowned out what pleasure he voiced.

And then he started to fuck her, rattling the chains above her head, pumping into her violently as his woman watched and toyed with the knife she held onto. The woman cried out, tried to struggle, but again, it was all very useless. She was fucked, quite literally.

Juliet turned her eyes away, and with a wave of my hand, Jaxon was beside her, grabbing her face and forcing it back to

the TV. Her eyes were slow to open, slow to watch the animalistic fucking on the screen.

It went on for a few minutes, screams and grunts blending together. Eventually, the man came, and when he did, he jerked his hips forward, coming inside her. He did not linger in her; he pulled out almost right away, turning towards his woman. His cock glistened, but the woman dutifully ignored its still-erect length, moving to stand before the mark.

She took the knife between her legs, and the woman whimpered, jerking away, but she wasn't cutting her. Not too hard, anyway. She was only gathering some of his cum on that knife, which she then lifted to her mouth after pushing up her mask and licked off, while the restrained woman shook with fear. All you could see from the camera angle was the back of her head, but you saw enough to know what was going on.

“Fuck,” the man muttered, “that’s hot.”

Knowing her, she was probably grinning beneath her mask, and she turned around to face her man, once again dropping to her knees. If there was anything those two were good at, it was losing themselves in each other and what they did. They were uniquely crazy, in that way. A couple of psychos who killed together, fucked together, and... fucked and killed together.

The woman cleaned off his cock with her mouth, fixing her mask as she got up and instructed, “Do it again, but this time, I want to be there.”

It was not an order he would refuse—and normally, he hated taking orders. It’s why he tried to make it out there on his own. Didn’t last too long, of course.

The woman stood between the man and the one on the wall, her back to her, her masked face staring up at his tall frame. With the knife in her hand, she lifted her arms, and he responded by picking her up and fixating her to his chest. She wrapped her legs around his midsection, knife at the back of his neck, cutting a thin line into his flesh, which neither of them seemed to care about.

Beneath her ass, he once again positioned his cock. This time, he fucked the woman on the wall with his woman between them, so she could feel every thrust of his powerful body. He fucked her like an animal, grunting and groaning, taking as much pleasure as he could in the filthy deed.

Juliet didn't want to watch, that much was obvious, but she managed to keep her eyes glued to the screen as the man came a second time, his hips thrusting wildly into the restrained woman's cunt.

He was slower to pull out of her this time, slow to let go of his woman, who, behind the mask, seemed to be having the time of her life. The woman on the wall had screamed and fought, but it was for nothing. She stood there limply now, realizing there was no hope left for her, and she didn't even flinch when the other woman brought the tip of her knife beneath her chin, angling it up so she could look into her eyes.

And then she stabbed her in the shoulder.

It was such a quick, violent movement, it caught even Juliet off-guard, and Juliet tried to turn her face away as the woman screamed anew, as the new pain coursed through her body. But Jaxon's hands on her face were firm, not letting her turn away... so she sought to close her eyes.

"Open those eyes," I warned, "or I will have them recreate this video with you in chains instead." Of course, I wouldn't let them kill her, but let them have some fun while torturing her? Maybe. They were just tools to me, things I could use to get the girl to fall in line. Threats that were more like promises than anything else.

Juliet didn't want to, oh, she didn't want to at all, but she once again looked at the screen. And when she did, she found that the woman on the wall had gotten her throat cut, blood gushing out of her like a waterfall of gore... and the man was busy yanking down the leggings on his woman, about to fuck her, too, as she continued to stab the one on the wall.

He had stamina, I'd give him that.

Juliet brought a hand to her mouth when he took the woman from behind, pushing her up against the now-warm corpse of the woman, smearing her entire front with blood as he fucked her. Neither seemed to mind the mess; in fact, they both loved it, and that was plain in their body language. Even with masks on, you could see their vicious glee.

I let the video play for a while, let her see the corpse of the woman on the wall when the two changed fucking positions. Her body was full of stab wounds, blood coating her tits and her stomach. The only bits of her that were unblemished were her arms, and that's only because her arms were held so tightly above her head.

I stopped the video, saying, "Leave us now, Jaxon."

Jaxon released his hold on Juliet's head, not looking at me or her as he left, leaving me alone with the girl who, until very recently, thought she could handle the truth.

I folded my hands over the desk, staring at her. She wouldn't look at me. She stared at the carpet on the floor, and I could tell her eyes were teary. Such sweet, innocent emotion. She had to be scared. If she wasn't scared before, she sure as fuck was now, but that was the whole point of this little show.

"I'm surprised you're so speechless," I said. "You were up in arms earlier, so I assumed you'd have something to say after all that." I let a long stretch of silence spread between us, the corners of my mouth quirking upward as I added, "Tell me, Juliet, are you scared of us now? Do you finally get what we do here?"

What came from her was a whisper, a whisper I hardly heard thanks to the distance between us: "You're all monsters. You're... you're evil."

"If I would've known all it would take for you to realize that was showing you that video, I would've started out with it," I told her. I got up, the chair rolling behind me as I moved toward the sofa, where she sat.

Juliet's back straightened, and she still did not look at me. Nor did she get up and try to run. A refreshing change of

pace.

I took the cushion beside her. “I warned you, didn’t I?”

Finally, those big blue eyes rose to meet my stare. “What?” She probably couldn’t think straight, not after watching that, not after seeing how feral this family could get. I imagined she’d be having nightmares for a while.

I reached for her, grabbing hold of her neck and jostling her closer. I did not pull her onto my lap, though I wanted to. Instead I merely whispered as I held onto her slender, oh-so breakable neck, “I warned you. I told you you wouldn’t like the truth, and now that you’ve seen it, now that you’ve borne witness to what we do here, you regret it.”

Her eyes were extra watery as she looked at me. “How could you do that to that woman? How could you?”

It took me a moment to realize what she said, and I let her go, leaning back as I stared at her. “You thought that was me in the video?” Her reaction was enough of an answer for me. “Juliet, the people you saw in the video were worker bees. They do as I tell them. That man wasn’t me. I was behind the glass you didn’t see, watching. I was the one who had the woman brought here, the one who sent a copy of the tape to the woman who wanted her dead.”

She did not look relieved, not that I expected her to.

“I organize it all,” I said. “Those two?” I pointed to the TV. “They would gladly have at you if I let them. Whether or not I do, well... that’s up to you, Juliet.” The hand that pointed to the TV lowered to my lap, and before I knew what I was doing, I was touching her leg.

Juliet could not speak for a few moments, not that I blamed her. It was a lot, especially to someone as delicate as her. The cruel horrors of the world had been bottled up and multiplied inside this house.

As I stared at her, as I waited for her to speak, I wondered if I could really let someone go at her like that. Hurt her, fuck her, make her realize she was nothing. But then... that was a lie, wasn’t it? Because she wasn’t nothing. If she was nothing,

she wouldn't be here, I wouldn't feel the need to control every little aspect of her diet. I wouldn't have had Doc ask her those questions when she first arrived.

There were a lot of things I wouldn't have done if she didn't matter to me.

But she did, and so I could not say whether or not I could actually go through with letting the psychos in this house hurt her like that.

When Juliet did speak, she asked something I did not expect: "Does... does my dad do this too? Is that what he does for you?" She could not stop her voice from cracking, from trembling, and I could tell she wanted to crawl inside herself and disappear.

A part of me felt bad for subjecting her to that video, but I had to. I had to show her, so she knew exactly how serious this was. This was not a child's game. This was not just a kidnapping. My family... we didn't do things lightly. Everything had a purpose, and that included her being here with me right now.

I didn't answer her, and she pulled away from me, getting to her feet, muttering, "Oh, my God. It's true. He does." Her shoulders shook, and before I could tell her she was wrong, she ran out of the office, sniffing and starting to cry.

I sat there, motionless for a while. I didn't know what to do. Tears did not affect me—not usually, but knowing she was crying, it made me feel conflicted. Which was a joke in and of itself.

Let her cry. Let her believe her father worked for me in the same capacity. I would not stop her from thinking it. It was close to the truth, in a way, but reality, as always, was far different than what one would imagine.

The truth about her father was so much worse.

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Chapter Thirteen – Juliet

I didn't know where to go. I didn't know what to do. I just wanted to be alone. I wanted to cry. To scream. To shout to the world and anyone that was listening, to ask them what the heck was wrong with these people.

This wasn't normal. What I watched wasn't normal. How could anyone live with themselves after doing that? How could anyone take pleasure in hurting a defenseless woman like that, and then killing her?

Just... how?

My legs took me away from the office at a full sprint. After asking Markus about Daddy, after getting nothing for an answer, after seeing the look on his face, how could I sit there and act normal? Daddy was a killer, a man who did things like that... all because Markus told him to. That was his job. I couldn't even imagine.

How could Daddy come home to me and act so normal? Why didn't I see any of the signs? Was I too blind? Was I too stupid, or was he just that good at pretending? I didn't know which option would make me feel better, and I suspected I wouldn't, either way.

Markus was right. The truth hurt, and this particular truth felt like a dozen knives in my chest, all stabbing me at once. Like a ton of bricks piled one after the other on my body, squeezing me down until there was nothing left.

My heart literally hurt. It hurt so much I didn't know how it was still beating. I felt betrayed and confused, and I wasn't sure if Daddy walked in right now to take me away that things would ever return to the way they were.

How could they? How could things go back to normal when I knew the truth?

It had to be why he never wanted me to leave the house. It had to be why he kept me so sheltered, why he blocked certain websites from our internet, why I never had a phone of my own, why we still had a landline so he could reach me while he was away. There was no other explanation for it.

And I'd gone along with it like a stupid, brainless child, hardly questioning him because Daddy knew best.

But he didn't. Daddy didn't know best. Daddy didn't know shit.

I found my way to the first floor, stumbling as I went. I didn't know where I was going, but when I recognized the area of the house I was in, I felt the urge to go to the one place I never thought I'd go willingly, a place where, at first, I'd felt violated and examined like a lab rat. But it was the only place I could think of to go.

I didn't knock. I busted in through the door, finding Theo in the middle of organizing his cabinets, where he kept a stash of prescriptions, by the looks of the pill bottles near him. He nearly jumped out of his skin when I rushed in, dropping the two that were in his hands. They fell to the floor, rolling away from his shoes.

"Oh, Juliet, it's you," he spoke, sounding relieved it was only me. "Is there something..." He trailed off when he noticed the wetness on my cheeks, when he saw how puffy my face was. Theo's expression changed, morphing into one of deep concern. He started to move toward me, asking, "What's wrong?"

Maybe it was a mistake, but I rushed toward him, colliding with his chest so hard I nearly knocked us both off our feet. My hands gripped his shirt, bunching up the fabric, and I buried my face in his chest as I cried.

Theo was shocked, at first, at my actions. I didn't think he knew what to do with himself. But then, after a few moments, I felt him sigh, felt his chest rise and fall evenly as his arms gingerly went around me, holding me softly. "What happened?" he asked, his voice so much kinder than anyone else's, the exact kind of gentle I needed right now.

“Markus showed me a video,” I cried out, unable to look at him. I could hardly speak, for goodness sake. My words were broken up by coughs and hiccups... and snot. I felt like a child, crying like this, but I felt so hurt. So unbelievably hurt I couldn’t even describe it. Soul-shattering.

Theo didn’t ask what video, nor did he ask what was on the video, which meant he must know what went on here. He had to know. Did that mean he was okay with it? With what these guys did?

How could anyone be okay with it?

“Am I stupid?” I asked his chest—his chest which, surprisingly, provided a comfortable kind of support. Kind of like the arms I felt hugging my back. I would’ve felt really dumb if Theo would’ve pushed me away.

“What?” Theo asked, leaning his chin on my head, rubbing my back with one of his hands. “Why do you think you’re stupid?”

“Because I never knew. Because I—I never thought my dad was capable of doing things like that. I wanted the truth, but now I don’t know what to do with it.” God, I sounded pretty pathetic, didn’t I?

Theo sighed. “You’re not stupid, Juliet. There are certain types of people in this world. Some of them are capable of terrible things, yes. Some don’t feel any guilt for what they do.” He hugged me harder, and I tried to get myself under control, to reel in my feelings and stop balling my eyes out. “Some people, like you, I think, choose to see the best in people. Does that mean you’re stupid? No, I don’t think so. In fact, I actually think that makes you stronger than anyone else.”

Okay, now that was confusing.

I leaned my head back, causing him to lift his chin off me. I stared up into his amber eyes. “How?” It didn’t make sense to me. Seeing the best in people, in people that had no good in their hearts... what was the point? What did it matter? How in the world did that make me stronger than anyone else?

Theo smoothed my hair, giving me a gentle smile. “It’s a harder path. It’s easy to look at someone like Markus or Lincoln and believe there’s no good in them. It’s a lot harder to look at them and think that, maybe, somewhere in there, they have a heart, even if it’s a tiny one.” He let out a sigh, and the feeling of his chest rising and falling so evenly against my body gave me a sort of peace. “Just look at Tori. You met her, right?”

Now it was my turn to let out a sigh. I nodded. “Yeah. She’s... she’s something else.”

“She’s also Lincoln’s daughter,” he said, although I wasn’t sure who the heck Lincoln was. “He loves her. Even though he might take pleasure in some of the... blacker things in life, he still loves her. So, no, I don’t think you’re stupid or weak.” He brought both hands to my shoulders, squeezing gently. “I think this house and the people in it just don’t know what to do with you.”

I was well aware that everything he said was only to try to make me feel better. I mean, there was no way Theo actually thought any of those things, right? Maybe he was a good guy, but anyone else in this house? No. None of them were.

He dropped his hands off me, and I felt the insane urge to lean into his chest again, only this time not while I was crying. Just so he could hold me.

“How about you be my helper for the rest of the day, hmm?” Theo asked, gesturing to his cabinets after he bent to pick up the two bottles that rolled away from him. “I was just doing some reorganizing.” He gave me a smile, and it was such a warm, welcoming smile that I felt my insides heat up.

Funny how even a small act of kindness could make a world of difference.

“Okay,” I said, wiping at my cheeks, wishing I didn’t look like I’d just been crying. Crying made you all puffy and ugly, and for some reason, I didn’t want Theo to see me like that. I didn’t want him to see me like a crying child. I wanted...

Well, at this point, I didn't think what I wanted mattered much at all.

Everything felt wrong. Off, somehow. I didn't know how or why, but I struggled to open my eyes. I tried to move, but that wasn't right, either. Something caught me, something cold and tight, on my wrists. I felt the floor beneath my feet, so I knew I was standing.

Standing with my arms held high over my head and my bare feet on the floor.

Though it was one of the most difficult things I'd ever had to do in my life, I opened my eyes. My eyelids felt like stone, much heavier than they should be. It was like my body didn't want to work as it should, not wanting to play this game.

When I opened my eyes, when I saw where I was, my heart leaped in my chest for all the wrong reasons. I wasn't in bed, but I wore my fuzzy unicorn pajamas. The only thing I had left from home, the one thing that reminded me of the life I'd left behind when I was brought here. I wasn't in the room they'd given me, not under the sheets of the bed that had been mine since arriving.

No, I was somewhere much darker, much colder. A place where all hope went to die.

I didn't remember how I got here, or why. I didn't remember anyone dragging me down here and chaining me up, but I was too frantic to think about how weird it was, how it didn't make much sense. Too worried, my heart pounding too wildly in my chest.

I looked up, seeing the silver chains clamped tightly around my wrists. No amount of movement on my part caused a difference. I couldn't get out of here. I was as weak as a cat, a helpless cat who was about to be tossed into the river, to a current I would not be able to fight. I would drown, and that knowledge scared me to my core.

The door to my little room opened, metal creaking as someone dressed in black entered. I met his pitch-black eyes,

stopping my struggling immediately when I saw his face. The thin stubble on his square jaw, the unamused, narrowed stare he gave to me, how the suit on his body hugged every part of him as if it was made for him.

Markus Scott, the devil himself. The man above all other men, the one who played the puppeteer, the maestro to this savage song. In all my life, I never imagined I'd look upon the face of a man so cruel, a man so vicious and violent, and yet here I was.

Here I was, and here I would stay.

We stared at each other in silence for a good, long while. He made no moves to step closer, nor did I attempt to break free. I was suddenly so very aware of the state of my pajamas, and I almost apologized to him, as if I owed him anything. But I didn't. I didn't owe this man anything, and yet, like a cat, he had my tongue.

I knew it right then, knew the cold, hard truth in my soul, and it was an earth-shattering kind of realization, something that only came once in a lifetime, maybe. I could never run from him, never escape him, because he would always be there. Always there, ever watchful, ready to smite any and all those who opposed him.

I was not strong enough to fight him. I never was. Trying to... what a joke I'd been. It wasn't a wonder why Markus didn't take me seriously. I mean, look at him, and look at me. Look at us both and tell me which one of us was stronger. It sure wasn't me.

"Why are you doing this?" It took me a moment to recognize my own voice. It came out so tired and weary, dry, and each word felt like a razor blade making its way up my throat. How long had I been here? How long would I stay?

Was he... was he going to kill me, finally put an end to this miserable game? As pathetic as it made me, I didn't want him to. I didn't want to die. I was like everyone else in that respect, I supposed, constantly seeking out whatever tomorrow would bring.

Let me have a tomorrow. Let me have a future. Do not end it all here, not for me. There was still so much left I wanted to do.

“You know exactly why I’m doing this,” Markus spoke, revealing he clutched a large kitchen knife in his hand. Its steel glinted in the dim light, and as I saw it, I felt the need to scream—but I kept it bottled inside, not wanting him to see my weakness.

I was scared, yes, but that didn’t make me weak. I could still look the devil in the eyes as he killed me. Maybe he’d remember me then, remember me as the girl who never blinked.

“Then,” my voice croaked out, my body slumping, “I guess you have to do what you have to do.” Such resignation, I hated it, but what more could I say? What more was there to say? Markus would never be swayed by me or anything I could’ve said; it would only be wasted breath, and at this point, I did not want to waste a single thing, now that I knew I stared death in the face.

His lips curled into a smile. “Oh, Juliet, do you think *I’m* going to do it?” He paused to laugh at me, his deep voice echoing in the room as his chest shook with maniacal pleasure. “I’m afraid I have something else planned for you.” He stepped aside, and I saw he was not the only one who’d come into the room.

Someone stood behind him, someone who wasn’t nearly as large or as intimidating. Someone who, until very recently, I used to trust implicitly. But now... now I didn’t know what to feel as I gazed upon his tired, haggard face.

Daddy.

“This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” Markus’s voice cut through my thoughts, so strong I winced before I realized it. “Dear Daddy, here to save his daughter. Although, I don’t think he’s going to save you in quite the way you hoped.” He stepped aside, handing Daddy the knife.

And Daddy took it.

He actually took it, not saying a single word as he moved to stand in front of me. He blocked out Markus, blocked out the light. All I could see was his face, how disappointed he was in me. Even though I didn't think my heart could break anymore, I felt it cracking inside.

"Daddy," I whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Daddy said, his eyes darker than mine. They weren't blue, but they weren't quite green, either. They were somewhere in between, and never had they looked so sorrowful, so full of disdain toward me. "This is my fault. I brought you into this world... and now I have to take you out of it."

"No," I whimpered. Was it wrong of me to rather want Markus to do it? Was it messed up that I would rather have Markus skin me alive than have Daddy hurt me? All my life, I thought Daddy was God. He was it, he was everything, he was all I ever needed and more. So what if he kept me locked up? So what?

What good was the world outside, anyway? There were no Prince Charmings. No heroes. There was only the bad and the worse, and I'd gotten caught up with the latter, all because Daddy wasn't the saint I thought he was.

Lies. He was a liar. He was a liar, and I was about to pay for being so stupid to believe in him.

"Daddy," I said again, voice breaking when I watched him lift the knife. "I thought you loved me." Wasn't that why he'd kept me locked up all these years? Why he got so furious at me for leaving his side at that party? Wasn't it why Daddy said it was best for me to learn my lesson, locked away in the darkness of my room with no one to call a friend?

He looked as if he was about to stab me, but my words gave him pause. His eyes clouded over, his mouth curling into a frown. "Juliet," Daddy whispered, "I did love you. I loved you more than anything in the whole world. You know that." Still he did not let go of the knife, and its sharp steel was an ever-present reminder of what he was about to do.

“You don’t hurt the ones you love,” I muttered, knowing, deep down, my words would not get through to him. It wouldn’t matter. He would do what Markus told him to; he’d kill me.

Daddy shook his head once, his free hand reaching up and cupping my cheek tenderly. He held onto me softly, the expression on his face agonized. “Oh, baby,” he whispered. “That’s where you’re wrong. You always hurt the ones you love.”

And then he brought the knife to my chest, stabbing me right in the heart.

I woke up with a jerk, breathing hard, my eyes instantly opening. My heart pounded rapidly in my chest, the faint feeling of what Daddy did to me in my dream lingering, an invisible sensation that shouldn’t even exist.

My skin was lined with sweat from the dream, and honestly, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d even had a dream, let alone a nightmare like that. My neck felt scratchy, and I reached up, setting a hand above my heart. I could feel it beat beneath the pajamas.

What was wrong with me? Why was I still here? Why didn’t I try to run?

I had to be insane, I had to be. There was no other explanation for it. But now that I knew how stupid I’d been, how idiotic everything was, what use was it to stay here? Wouldn’t I be better off wandering the streets in a daze, trying to find my way home? It sure had to be better than staying here, under this roof, sharing air with monsters.

I flipped the sheets off me, my bare feet landing quietly on the carpet below. I didn’t stop to think about how stupid this idea was. After all, in the very beginning I’d said I would run. Why didn’t I? Why did I think sticking around and hoping for the best would actually get me there? It was all so pointless.

So why not run? Why not get out of here? Even if I wound up dead in a ditch, did it matter? At this point, I wasn’t even

sure I wanted to go home, not with everything Daddy had kept from me. The lies... how could you justify them?

I exited my room, glancing both ways down the hall. The night was in full swing, the moon in the sky, its silver light shining into the windows on the opposite wall. I left my door cracked, trying my best not to make a single sound as I crept through the house, finding my way downstairs.

The last time I'd made the mistake of going to the front door, trying to snoop in Markus's office, but I knew enough now. I didn't need to know any more of the truth. What I knew was already too much, and it weighed heavily on my heart. I didn't know if I was strong enough to live with the burden of the truth.

I went out the back door, the door that let out onto the patio near the pool. My feet took me out, farther than I'd ever been, past the garden and around the side of the house. It looked like this castle-like mansion was the only one around, no neighbors to be seen. Didn't surprise me, not with what went on in this house.

I could go to the police, but would they believe me? The Scotts were a rich family, and I'd seen and heard enough news stories to know the rich hardly ever got their comeuppance. Everything was different if you had money.

In my heart, I knew it right then: the police were out of the question. Trying to go home was the only thing I could do, and then, if I somehow made it back, I'd confront Daddy and demand to hear the truth from his lips. Would it hurt as much, or would it hurt more? Probably the latter, because until very recently, I used to think Daddy was amazing.

He only did what was best for me, what he had to do to keep me safe, even if I hated it sometimes. He was the only family in my life. I couldn't even remember what happened to Mom. Ever since I could recall, it'd just been Daddy and me, and a part of me thought that's always how it would be.

But now, with a heaviness in my heart, I knew it couldn't be like that. Things had to change. I needed... I needed to be let free, to spread my wings on my own, and whether I failed

or not didn't much matter. The point was I would try. That's all anyone could do in life. Succeed, fail, make it on my own or come crawling back to Daddy with my tail tucked between my legs. Whatever the outcome would be, it would be my choice.

My feet picked up the pace in the grass. It took longer than I thought to get around the house. The thing was huge, no joke, literally like a castle. In the night, it seemed even bigger, more expansive, and I felt sick when I remembered that video and what took place in it.

That couldn't be the only video. There had to be more, which meant... all these people, all these guys, the ones that made my mind and my body curious of things I'd never had before, were all killers. They were all monsters, and I could never look at any of them the same way.

How could I? How could any sane person be okay with that? I wasn't. I couldn't. I refused to swallow it down and pretend like everything was fine. I'd had my first nightmare in what felt like forever—I'd only ever dreamed of that night for the last two years, the night I first met Markus Scott.

How dumb was I to ever think anyone at that party could be my Prince Charming?

I could hear the pounding of my heart in my ears as I rounded the side of the house, finally able to see the high stone walls surrounding the property and the metal gate that blocked off the driveway. The gate would probably be easiest to climb; I didn't trust myself to be able to heave myself over a high stone wall like that, with nothing to hold onto to pull my body up.

As I hurried down the drive, to the wrought iron gate, I was well aware there were cameras everywhere. I had no idea if they had someone watching them twenty-four-seven, but it didn't matter. No one was nearby; it was just me. Now was literally my chance.

I stopped when I stood at the base of the gate, craning my neck back to look up at it in the moonlight. Its top was spiked; I'd have to be careful when I crawled over to not cut or impale myself, but it looked doable.

Knowing every second I wasted was another second someone could catch me, I heaved a giant breath and grabbed the base of the gate. It did not move, didn't shake at all, so it wasn't like I could pry it open and slip through. The gate was motorized, so I would not overcome it with sheer strength. The only way was up and over.

My hands felt clammy and sweaty, which was odd, given the coolness of the night air, but I supposed I owed that to my nightmare and that awful, horrible video. That video, the glee those masked people took in doing what they did... that would remain with me until the day I died. I would never understand how people could be like that.

I would never be like that.

I started to climb, pushing my bare feet in between the bars. It took a bit of maneuvering, but I got the hang of it. My arms were not full of muscle, so it was hard to pull myself up, but I managed. Bit by bit, inch by inch, I climbed that gate, and the higher I went, the more I could taste my freedom. Even though I was outside and the air was clean, it just tasted better once I got my head above the iron spikes of the gate.

I moved my hands to the top of the gate, about to pull myself up and over, but I got too giddy about how close it was. My foot didn't catch the bar it should've, and it caused me to stumble in my climbing, struggling to get another foothold as I held on.

In the end, I could only blame my sweaty hands.

My sweaty hands lost the grip they had on the top of the gate, slipping. Gravity was unrelenting, pulling me down, quick to remind me of my ineptness. It wasn't a long distance to fall, and yet, as I fell, it was like time itself had gone in slow-motion, everything around me slowing to a near stop as I tumbled to the concrete below.

And then, when I was down, the back of my skull connected to the concrete with a hard thud, and everything went black.

I stood in a kitchen that was both familiar and not. I did not remember how I got here, but I knew I shouldn't be here. My ears heard not a single sound anywhere in the house, and judging from the dishes in the sink, it'd been a long time since someone had cleaned.

Glancing down, I found that I wore a dress. The same dress and tights I'd worn to that party all that time ago, even though the memory of that night was fuzzy in my head, for whatever reason. I ran my hands down my sides, not recalling why I wore this, why I was here.

Nothing made sense to me.

When I looked up, I saw a doorway. Like, just a doorway, sitting in front of me in the kitchen, not attached to any wall. It sat there, wordlessly drawing me closer. It was an old, wooden door, something that smelled ancient and dirty, and it was so very out of place here, yet I knew that door.

I knew it, but I didn't know *how* I knew it.

I inched closer, outstretching my arm, ready to open it.

But I didn't get to open it, for in the next moment, I opened my eyes and found that I was back inside the Scott's house, laying in my bed, with a pounding skull and a sore back. I worked to sit up, feeling like I wanted to vomit for a whole host of new reasons, and I saw I was not alone.

Will stood near one of the windows, gazing out of it, his arms crossed. When he heard me rustling in the sheets, he glanced over his shoulder at me and gave me a grin. "There you are," he said. "Doc was worried about you, but I knew you'd wake up. You're stronger than you look."

I closed my eyes for a few moments, squeezing my hands into fists. Not strong enough to get myself out of here, apparently. Just strong enough to get myself hurt in an attempt to escape. How pathetic.

Once I was done hating myself, at least for the moment, I saw a tray of food sat near my bed, on my nightstand. Theo, probably. And it wasn't breakfast food, which meant I'd been

knocked out for hours. The pain in my skull had to be an indication of that. Hope I didn't crack anything.

"What happened?" Talking made the pain worse, and I lay back down, trying to lessen it.

Will moved from the window, walking toward my bed. Sunlight streamed in, enough to fully light everything. Way too much light, if you asked me. He stopped when he stood beside me, staring down at me with secrets residing in his hazel eyes. "You tried to run, and now Markus is so ticked off, he doesn't care that we're alone together. I'm supposed to watch you. Apparently Jaxon isn't trusted enough to do it, not anymore."

I had nothing to say to that. Nothing at all.

His shoulders went up and down with a single sigh as he moved to sit on the edge of my bed. "Why did you run?" he asked.

I didn't want to answer, but after everything, what was the point in dragging any of this out? If Will didn't already know, he might as well be aware that I knew the truth about this place and what they did to people.

"I know what you do," I whispered, turning my head to glare. I probably looked silly, glaring from my pillow, but I didn't care. At this point, glaring was about the only thing I could do. "I know you kill people. I know you hurt them. You make them wish they were dead before you do it. You're all murderers." Hatred filled my tone, and I was not strong enough to hide it.

Will kept grinning, as if this was hilarious to him. "I mean, I never hid the fact that I am what I am. Not to you."

I wanted to argue with him, but I realized he was right. From the beginning, Will had basically admitted what he was to me, but I'd been too blinded to see it. I'd thought he was creepy... but he was the only one here telling me the truth.

I didn't know how to process that.

"Markus told you?" Will asked, brown brows creasing as he continued to stare. He did not seem hurt at all by the venom

in my voice.

“No,” I paused, wishing I could block it all from memory, “he showed me a video. I saw everything I needed to see.”

He was quiet for a while, and then he looked away, gazing off into space. He was quiet for a long while, until he whispered, “You know that’s it, then.” The sentence was vague, and to me, it made absolutely no sense.

“What do you mean?” With every word I spoke, my head throbbed just a bit more. What I needed was more sleep, but I was half-afraid to close my eyes again, lest I remember that video or have another strange dream about a random door.

Better a door than the other nightmare I had, at least, where Daddy killed me.

Will’s eyes were back on me. “That’s it, Juliet. If Markus showed you a video, that means you’re never getting out of this house. You’re here to stay, whether you like it or not.”

That got me to sit up—and another wave of pain to thrash across my skull like a tidal wave. “But he said... I thought once my dad came to his senses, he’d let me go.” I sounded so weak right then, but I didn’t care. I felt weak.

“Oh, little rabbit, you’ve tumbled down the rabbit hole without even knowing, and now that you’re in Wonderland, you’re not going to get back out.” Will almost sounded sad. “I don’t know if he plans on killing you at the end of this or what, but I’m sorry.”

His words cut like a knife. “Don’t.”

“No, I am. I am sorry, Juliet, because I can tell—you’re not one of us. You’re not supposed to be here. You are so much better than any of us could ever hope to be.” While I was looking away, Will reached over to me, lightly running a finger along the side of my cheek. The soft sensation sent warmth through me, and I suddenly remembered that night.

Our date. What happened during it. Kissing those lips and wishing for something more.

Will's hand fell away, and I was slow to meet his gaze once more, seeing the genuine emotion in his eyes. Everything he said, he wholeheartedly believed, unless he was that good of an actor. But then, he'd never tried to hide how off his rocker he was. He was the only one in this house that did not try to fool me.

"It's not going to be pretty," he warned. "So I suggest you do what you can to get yourself ready. When Markus is pissed, people tend to die at a much faster rate than normal." He grinned softly at that. "Then again, the same can be said of any Scott, really."

Somehow, that last part didn't make me feel better. Not even a little.

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Chapter Fourteen – Markus

I'd sent Jaxon to find him, but the boy came back empty-handed after hours, so it was up to me to search for him. I knew Bennet's hiding places in this house, and I was on a fucking mission to find him. Find him, and give him a job that would make him quite happy.

Me? I wasn't happy. I wasn't fucking happy at all. In fact, I was more enraged than I'd been in a very long time. Why? Because that girl had tried to run. She'd tried to run, and she ended up hurting herself.

What a fucking idiot. What a moron. I'd told her she wouldn't be able to run, and I'd meant it because I would send an army to find her—but she'd proved me right herself, being unable to climb over the gate. I wanted to strangle her.

And then I wanted to lock her up so she never ran away from me again.

I stormed through the house, walking past Doc's office. His door was open, and he saw me walk by. I groaned to myself when I heard him get up and call out for me, but I didn't stop. I had a rogue Scott to talk to. This little mission of mine would probably make his fucking day.

"Markus!" Doc called, chasing after me.

I pushed outside, to the patio. The sunlight was harsh, and I scowled. I scowled even harder when I felt a hand on my arm, and I turned my scowl to the doctor himself. Theo Ward. He was not a Scott, not even close, but we had his loyalty, and that's all that mattered.

Still, touching me was a little much, wasn't it? Especially right now, when I felt like I could tear his arms off without even trying.

I must've looked like I wanted to kill, for Doc quickly pulled his hand off my arm and took a step back. He did not,

however, give up on whatever it was he was trying to get my attention for. I wished he would take the hint and leave me alone, let me do what I had to do.

But we didn't always get what we wanted in this world, did we?

"What are you planning?" Doc asked, bold, considering he was only the family fucking doctor.

I cocked my head, taking an aggressive step towards him. "And how the fuck is that any of your business, Doc?" My voice came out more like a growl; I sounded like an animal. Like a pissed-off, enraged, furious animal who wanted to tear someone apart.

I felt like I was losing control.

"Juliet—"

The moment he said her name, I didn't let him finish. I didn't let him get out anything else, actually. "Juliet is none of your concern," I told him. "She's mine, and she needs to be punished for trying to run away. I will not let her indiscretion go unpunished, so don't tell me that I should. You know me better than that."

"I do," Doc admitted, "but I also know Juliet. She's not like you. She's not like any of you. She didn't spend her childhood learning how to torture and kill. She's just a girl who lived her whole life in a house because her father never let her out."

My hands curled to fists at my sides. "I'm well aware of where the girl came from, and I don't see your point."

"My point is," Doc paused, staring at me from behind his glasses, "you already traumatized her by showing her that video. If you do more to her you might just break her—"

I grabbed him by the shirt, heaving him closer to me as I hissed out, "Good." Not saying a single thing more, I shoved him away, turning and resuming my walk to one of Bennet's favorite hiding places.

Doc didn't follow me. His point was made, and he knew I would not hesitate to hurt him should he continue to barrage me about it. I left him on the patio as I walked around the pool, stepping into the garden further out.

Past the garden was sprawling acreage. Our estate sat on the outskirts of Midpark, the largest there was. We never made our money in the stock market or by creating patents and owning companies. No, our money had always come from one of the oldest professions in the book, and that wasn't prostitution.

It was killing.

It took me longer than I wanted to reach the line of trees in the far back. The house looked almost small; that's how large our property was, and the entire thing was lined with a huge fence and cameras everywhere. Again, you could never be too careful when your dealings were always in blood.

I found Bennet sitting in one of the older trees on the property, laying down, a leg hanging over a branch, his hands folded on his stomach as he either napped or stared up at the branches and leaves above him.

"Bennet!" I called out for him, unable to hide my annoyance. Why was I paying for Hillcrest University when he skipped his classes damn near every day? The fool was so desperate to be a part of the family... but the fool also was exactly that because he didn't listen.

And when you did what we did, you had to listen. You couldn't go off on your own. No benders allowed. Bennet wanted to be what Lincoln was to this family, but he was even more unstable than Lincoln himself—and that was saying something.

Bennet was slow to sit up, turning to face me, dangling both legs off the thick branch. His shoulders were hunched beneath the black shirt he wore. His blue eyes, eyes he shared with Lincoln, narrowed when he looked at me. "What the fuck do you want, Markus?" He was never happy to see me, mostly because I was firm in denying him the place in the family he wanted.

“I have a job for you.” My words, though short and sweet, instantly caught his attention, and he heaved himself off the branch, landing hard a few feet in front of me.

He dusted his pants off, eyeing me up suspiciously. “What kind of job?”

“A job you’re going to like,” I said. “I need you to get someone for me. Someone the world won’t miss. I need to make a point, and it’s a point that can only be made with blood.” The more I spoke, the more interested Bennet became.

“Really?” He started to grin. “Anyone at all?”

“Someone the world won’t miss,” I repeated, emphasizing it.

“Right now?”

I nodded, and Bennet said nothing else, pushing past me. I turned to watch him go, and within a few moments, he’d broken out into a run. Oh, Bennet was excited. He probably thought that this was the first step in me allowing him into our inner circle, so to speak, but he would be disappointed.

The reason I sent him was because he was more expendable than most around here, but of course I would never say that aloud. My father would hate the idea of any Scott being expendable, but wasn’t that what some of us were? I had sisters who were too unstable to be of any use, so they were tossed out into the world, sworn to secrecy. Sometimes they self-destructed, but other times they had families.

Take the Fitzpatrick twins, for example. They had inherited the scheming, maniacal minds of the Scotts from their mother, and their mother paid dearly, as did quite a few other people before they left Midpark. I kept eyes on them, watching them, for they were still family... just as I kept watch on Oliver Fitzpatrick, the patriarch of the family, a man who just couldn’t seem to catch a break.

I stood there, in the silence of the trees, for a while. I knew it would take a few hours, at least, for Bennet to find someone. If the boy was smart, he’d go out of Midpark and out of

Hillcrest, to some small neighboring city, where the average household income wasn't so large.

Mostly, I remained there by myself to try to calm down. I would succeed in doing nothing while I was furious. I had to get control of myself. It was just so fucking difficult when all I wanted to do was punish Juliet for daring to run.

You did not run from fate. Once it had you in its grasp, it never let you go, and I was her fate. All these years... everything I'd done, I'd done for her. She thought she knew the whole truth? She was wrong. She was so fucking wrong. I'd gone above and beyond what I normally would've done. I let transgressions pass that I would usually nip at the bud.

The things I let her father get away with...

No more. No more. Fred Osborne would either come to heel, or he would never get his daughter back. That was a promise to him, to myself, and to Juliet. Sooner or later she would realize there was no running from this house.

No running from me.

Bennet returned at nightfall, and just by the look of the man he'd brought along, I knew he'd chosen well. Dirty clothes, long, semi-grey, unkempt stubble. A smell of alcohol that meant the man had been drinking for quite a few hours already. Definitely not someone from Midpark, judging him based on his looks.

I had Bennet take him to the basement, told him which block to put him in. It was almost time for another wave of marks, but we weren't quite there yet, so I had the entire basement to choose from.

Juliet should count herself lucky I was not forcing her into a block, not tying her body to a chair, not taking a knife to her smooth skin and cutting deep. She should thank me for choosing to enact my rage upon someone else.

But she wouldn't. I knew the girl wouldn't.

Doc was worried I'd break her, push her past a point of no return, cause her to have a psychotic break or something, and you know what? I didn't care. She had to know that I would not sit back and let her defiance run free. I was in control here, not her. Never her.

Once it was all set up in the basement, I went to her room, and I found her and Will together. They both sat on her bed, though at least Will sat at the foot of it, rather than beside her. I did not like seeing them together, but in all honesty, I kind of wanted Will to go a little nuts on her. Force her to open her eyes to the realization that no one was good here.

What happened to the good men of the world, you ask? We killed them. We killed them all.

Will met my stare when I walked in, but Juliet didn't. She refused to look at me, which only caused me to grow angrier. I saw the uneaten food on her nightstand, and I spoke, "A pity. You should've eaten, Juliet."

Well, she probably would throw anything in that stomach up, but still. It would've given her body at least some nourishment, because the punishment I had in store for her would not be over tonight. No, it would last, dragging out, and it would only stop when I was satisfied, when she was repentant to me for what she'd done.

She said nothing to me, which was unsurprising, and I stood at her bedside, grabbing the sheets and hauling them off her. Will got up, watching and not saying a single word as I grabbed Juliet by the arm and pulled her to her feet.

So small beside me. So utterly breakable. We'd see how she would handle this. My guess was not too well.

"Where are you taking her?" Will broke his silence.

I shot him a look and said, "We are going to the basement. All of us." That meant Will would be tagging along too. I needed him, just in case, by some miracle of miracles, she got the better of me and tried to run again.

And he would be the perfect one to hold onto her while I did what I had to do.

Juliet tried to fight me, but she was so weak compared to me. So tiny. It was effortless to pull her along, and she stumbled on her feet to keep up with my quick pace. I took us down the stairs, to the first floor, around the main hall and down another hall that held a keypad and another stairwell behind a locked door.

It was not a stairwell just anyone could waltz into, and it only went one way—and that was down. Down into the pits of hell... also known as the basement of this house.

I held Juliet off to the side, blocking her from seeing the combination with my body. Once the door buzzed open, I pushed her into it, and together, with Will on our heels, we headed into the abyss.

Juliet had to be scared. She had to be, even though she sought not to show it.

I never claimed to be a protector. I was not a knight in shining armor. Kindness, gentleness, compassion... I did not know what these things felt like, nor would I ever. I was not that kind of man, and I never would be. I did not get to where I was today by being weak.

Did I want to hurt her? Yes. Yes, I did, I wanted to hurt Juliet because she dared to run. I wanted to hurt her because I could. Because I had her. I wanted to make her mine in every way—every single fucking way—and those were feelings I'd never had before.

So, no, I was not conflicted about what I was about to do. Whether or not it would break her did not matter. Right now, she'd pissed me off, so she had to deal with the consequences of it, and when it came to me, the consequences were never pretty.

It took us a few minutes to get down to the basement. The stairwell here was narrow; we had a more business entrance on the one side of the property, a garage not attached to the house that went straight down, which was good for when we took in new marks. This one served its purpose well enough.

We emerged into a dimly lit hall, and I heard Juliet whimper. The soft, fragile sound made something in me twist, but still I pulled her along, Will just behind us. “This,” I said, “is all because of you. Because you tried to run. I hope you understand that, Juliet.”

We stopped before a large window, a window that overlooked the small block of a room Bennet had brought our victim to. Juliet saw the man fixed to the chair inside the room, and she immediately started to struggle more, which made me smirk.

“Tell you what,” I said, pulling her inside the room with me. Will remained outside, watching, not saying a single word. No one else was nearby, save for the unconscious man in the chair. “If you do it, I’ll let you walk out of here right now.”

Juliet’s blue eyes turned up at me, fury and fear behind their color. They widened somewhat when I said that, but she did not move those lips to speak.

I tugged her to the side of the room, where a vast array of instruments sat, all shiny and clean, ready to be used. My fingers dug into her arm roughly, and I grabbed a thin knife, clutching its handle hard. Within the next moment, we returned to the man.

“Kill him, and I’ll let you walk out of this house,” I told her. “I won’t stop you, and I won’t send anyone after you. Kill him, and you’ll walk free of me and never see me again.” My words came out harsh, acidic, fueled by anger. “That is what you want, isn’t it? To get out of here? To return to your dear daddy and pretend everything is fine?”

She said nothing, just as I knew she would. Juliet was not a killer, and she never would be, but still, I could not help but toy with her. It was almost too easy, and the psycho in me thought it too fun.

I guess I wasn’t so different from my brothers after all, huh?

“Come on,” I egged her on, “what are you waiting for?” I released my hold on her arm only to take her hand and curl it around the knife’s handle, my hand holding hers to it. She was not strong enough to turn the knife on me, so I wasn’t worried about that. I wasn’t worried about anything, really.

Juliet tried to pull away from me, to get her hand off the knife, but my grip around her palm was steel, much like the knife itself. I brought us closer to the unconscious man, lifting the knife to his neck. His head was held back by a strap around the forehead, his ankles bound in a similar fashion to the chair, along with his wrists. Even if he woke up, he would not escape.

He would only scream.

“Kill him,” I said, holding the knife just inches away from his neck. “Kill him, and I’ll let you walk out of here, Juliet. Isn’t that a tempting offer?” Her back leaned against my front, the girl trying to pull away from the restrained man, but my body held firm. When she was silent, I went on, “No? Really? You’re going to turn this down? Fine, but remember my offer when you start to regret it.”

I pulled us both away from the unconscious man, and I peeled the knife out of her hand. She let it go without a fuss, and with the knife in one hand, I dragged her into the hall, where Will stood.

“Hold onto her,” I ordered. “Make sure she watches.” I threw her at him, and then I went inside the room, prepared to do what I had to do.

To make my point, I’d need to get messy.

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Chapter Fifteen – Juliet

I didn't know what was happening, but I had a sinking feeling in my gut I knew but just didn't want to face it. Markus was going to kill that man, and he was going to make me watch.

Will's hands were on me, steadying me, and I jerked when I heard the door to the room close. He held onto me much softer than Markus did, and when I looked up into his light eyes, I saw the concern he had for me.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "But he wants you to watch."

I closed my eyes as Will positioned me before the window, so I could gaze inside and see the whole thing. I heard a bang on the glass, and I opened my eyes to see Markus standing there, clutching that knife.

The knife he'd wanted me to take to the stranger and kill him with. But I wasn't a killer. I couldn't... I just couldn't. I didn't have it in me. I wasn't like that, and I could never be like that. I wouldn't be able to live with myself, but I guess that's the difference between me and the men of this house.

They were monsters, and I was not.

Markus was glaring at me through the glass, wearing the worst glower I'd ever seen on his face. He was not happy with me, that much was obvious. He was also very hateful in everything he said, not gentle with me at all—and my body and head hurt like I'd just been hit by a train.

Okay, more like fell on a concrete driveway, but still.

When he was satisfied that I was watching, he moved to the side of the room, setting down the knife. Every movement he made was deliberate, the way he held himself an intimidating display, as always. Except he seemed more dangerous now, now that someone was in that room with him, tied up, unconscious and unable to defend himself.

Who was he? Did he do something bad, or was he just some random guy who was picked off the street so Markus could use him to make a point? Probably the latter, because monsters did not care about the people they hurt, and they sure didn't care about the people they killed.

That man was going to die, and it was all my fault.

Markus's dark eyes were fixated on me as he reached to unbutton his suit jacket. Slowly, he took it off, folding it before the window all while staring at me, all while drilling it into my head that this was *my* fault. It was the same ritual he'd done before beating the life out of Jaxon before my eyes that night, when I'd refused to take the birth control.

The next thing that came off was his tie, and then his watch. After everything was safely put to the side, he stood before the window and rolled up each sleeve, taking his time.

When he'd done this ritual before, all I saw was his back and his reflection in the mirror on the dresser. Watching him do it, being on the receiving end of his death glare while he readied himself to go ballistic on a poor, innocent guy, made me feel a way I never had before.

This man was terrifying. He was everything I should fear and everything I should hate. Handsome, devilish, cruel to the extreme. Markus Scott was no hero, and once again, he was about to remind me of that fact.

All because I'd run away. All because I'd tried.

There was no escape. I knew it now. I knew it in every bone in my body. Even with the warmth seeping into me from Will's hands, knowing his solid presence was behind me, I couldn't stop my body from growing so very cold as I watched Markus ready himself.

This was going to be ugly, uglier than that video Markus had shown me before—based on the fact that this was actually happening, right before my eyes in live time, and it was all because of me. If I wouldn't have run, this guy, whoever he was, would still be out there, living his life. That knowledge alone made me feel sick.

“Just know,” Markus spoke once he dug in his pockets and retrieved two sleek, black gloves made of leather, “this man’s fate is on you. His death rests on your shoulders, not mine.” He slipped the gloves on one after the other, his glare cutting. He moved his stare to Will behind me. “Do not let her turn away. Make her watch. If she closes her eyes, force them open. I don’t care how rough you have to be with her.” There must’ve been speakers somewhere near the glass, for I was able to hear him perfectly, his voice not muffled at all.

I knew Will would do whatever he said, which was why I tried to ready myself for the worst. I would not look away, no matter how bad it was, no matter what Markus did to that man. I might feel terrified, I might want to turn and run away, never come back to this house, but I would not flinch.

This... this was a punishment. My punishment, and it was as bad as any punishment could ever be. Maybe now I’d get it through my skull, hmm? Maybe now I’d realize there was no running from this. This was inevitable. These men, Markus especially, didn’t play nice, while I had no idea how the game was played in general. I wasn’t made for this.

Holding the knife in one hand, Markus’s other curled into a fist, and he heaved a punch to the man’s face. Just one. Enough to jerk the poor man awake, to get him to open his eyes, cringe, and suddenly realize where he was.

He tried to speak, but Markus grabbed him by the jaw, covering his mouth with his hand. “Nothing you say here will stop this,” he warned. “Scream all you want, cry, piss yourself; it doesn’t matter.” He lifted the knife, and the man’s eyes fell to its glinting steel. “You are going to die here, and before you do, know it’s her fault.” He flicked the point of the knife over his shoulder, at the window.

At me.

The man’s gaze followed the trail of the knife, and his brows creased when he saw me. He was probably thinking something along the lines of how he didn’t know me, and his arms struggled against the restraints. All pointlessly, of course.

If I could, I would tell the man I was sorry, that I didn't know, didn't think it would end up this way. For me, for a stranger. I wanted him to know this wasn't something I wanted, but I was mute as I watched Markus go on with his show.

Because that's what it was: a show. A performance put on for me and me alone.

Still holding his hand to the man's jaw and covering his mouth, Markus went on, "I don't often make a big show about what needs to be done, you see. I just do it, but for her benefit, I will." He pushed away from him, finally releasing him, and the man swore up and down at him.

But Markus ignored him.

He started to circle the man in the chair, studying the knife blade as if he'd never seen it before. Which, I was fairly certain, he had many, many times. "I don't like getting dirty," he said. "I don't like staining myself with blood, but I do it. I do it because it needs to be done, because lessons must be had and learned."

His legs stopped when he stood behind the chair, staring squarely at me through the glass. "Pain. It's always been such a fascinating concept to me. You see—" His jaw ground, the fury in his expression palpable. "—I don't feel it, so I have a hard time understanding it. And yet..." He brought the knife around the chair, digging it into the man's cheek and causing him to cry out as the metal pierced the skin. "It is the easiest way to break someone."

Markus twisted the knife's tip, blood pooling from the man's cheek as he did so. The dark red liquid oozed down his face, dripping past his neck and landing on his collarbone, on his dirty shirt.

He ignored the man as he finished circling him. "This knife," he went on, "is going to end you, all because that girl refused to listen to me." Markus glanced at me, and the look he sent me chilled me to the bone. "Blame her for every single ounce of pain I fill your body with before I end you for good."

The man muttered, “Why, man? Why are you doing this? Please, let me go. I won’t tell a soul—”

Markus threw another punch toward his face, this time landing a blow on the man’s wounded cheek, causing him to whimper. Not saying another word, he reached for the man’s shirt and started to tear it off his body, using the knife when the fabric near the waist caught and refused to rip easily.

With a jerk of his arm, he cut a long line down the man’s chest, the blood from the wound taking a few seconds to appear. I wished I could turn away, wished I could close my eyes and pretend this wasn’t happening, but it was impossible. My eyes were glued to the window, to Markus and his swift, deliberate movements, burning each and every image into my brain.

Markus went at him like an artist would a canvas, a painting no one knew what it would look like until it was done. Back and forth, he cut the man’s torso up, shredded it completely—but he never cut deep. He didn’t dig the knife into him; he cut just enough to make him bleed, crisscrossing the injuries.

The man winced, crying out, taking turns to sweat and simultaneously beg for his life. He offered Markus money he didn’t have, future favors, anything he wanted, but Markus did not listen to him. He was a man at work, focused on the job.

On creating so much pain the man’s eyes started to glaze over. On making his chest and stomach such an ugly, hideous sight, he looked more a monster than a man. But that’s what Markus was, you know: a monster.

A monster who had his claws in me, digging deep.

I dared to take a step closer to the window, feeling my eyes tearing up on their own. I did not want to cry, didn’t want to lose it, but it was so very hard to keep it all together while watching a man lose his life because of me. Will’s hands still held onto my arms, but I was able to put a hand on the glass and say, “Please, stop. I understand. I get it. I won’t try to run again—”

“No,” Markus cut in, stopping me cold. The knife dripped an ugly red color, blood dropping to the floor. “You won’t.” And then he did what I feared all along, something there was no coming back from.

He stabbed the man in the stomach, twisting the blade with a firm hand. The man cried out, his eyes glazing over. Not quite dead yet, but getting there. Getting there on a fast-track thanks to Markus.

I couldn’t even cry out, not as I watched Markus yank the knife out and slash it across the man’s neck so deeply it must’ve hit a vital vein, for the amount of blood that escaped his neck afterward was ungodly. Ungodly, unreal, and unrepentantly garish. So much blood. So much blood everywhere, splashing onto his chest, on his lap, pooling around the chair on the floor.

Blood. So. Much. Blood.

Markus never once let go of the knife, and he held out his other hand. “Bring her in here.”

My heart skipped a beat for all the wrong reasons. “What? No, no—”

But Will dragged me along, taking me away from the window, pulling me to the door. It slid open with such a sickening thud. Will handed me over to Markus, who took hold of my arm with such force I flinched. Fighting was useless, but I didn’t want to be this close to a now-warm corpse.

“No,” I said, unable to look at the man, feeling the blood on the floor with my bare feet. “Stop—” Every single word I said fell onto deaf ears, and Markus once again positioned me between him and the man in the chair. The *dead* man in the chair.

Markus was unrelenting. He threw me at the corpse in the chair, and I stumbled onto his lap. His pants were wet with a mixture of blood and piss, and the moment I crawled off him, Markus grabbed my hand and put the knife in it once more.

His hand curled around mine, and all of my struggling was futile.

He jerked my arm forward, and the knife plunged into the man's chest, sinking deep. "You feel that?" Markus whispered, his chest rumbling with a growl, "Did you feel how the skin gave way to the knife? No? Then let's do it again." He yanked my hand out, still very much conducting the show here.

The knife, slick with red, went into the man's gut this time, and my ears heard a sound I never thought I'd hear. Organs, intestines, slick and warm—and the sound of metal cutting into them.

My hand came away covered in blood, and Markus released his hold on me. I dropped the knife, shaking my head over and over, a single tear coursing down my cheek. The knife clattered on the ground, splattering in the blood. He wasn't done with me yet though, for he spun me around and gripped me by the neck, the blood on his gloves smearing on my skin.

I knew, even though I couldn't see it. I could feel the wetness, and it was one of the most awful things I'd ever felt.

"Having fun yet, Juliet?" Markus hissed out my name, as if it was the worst thing he'd ever had the displeasure of saying.

There were no words. I could not respond.

"No? You want more?" While holding onto me, his other hand shot out. I couldn't see where his hand went, but I found out shortly after, for his arm jerked back seconds later, his gloved hand gripping what looked like slick, wet, gory sausages.

I might've thrown up a little in my mouth, but with how hard he gripped me around the neck, I had to swallow most of it back down. Gross, I know. Not nearly as gross as him shoving the bit of intestines against my chest and smearing it on my pajamas, though.

"How's that for you?" he asked, and as the intestines fell to the floor, he brought the bloodied, gloved hand to my face, wiping blood across my cheek. "Do you like the smell of

blood and piss? I hope so, because you're about to get very acquainted with it. Will! Take out the weapons."

Will looked like he wanted to kill Markus, his jaw grinding, but he entered the room and did as he was told. Markus was focused on me, which let Will throw me looks every now and then, looks the former wasn't aware of. For just a split second, it looked like Will debated on stabbing Markus in the back, but he thought better of it, taking each and every weapon out into the hall and setting them on the floor, one by one.

The last weapon to leave the room was the bloodied knife on the floor, and as Will bent to retrieve it near our feet, his hazel eyes locked with mine.

I wanted to call out to him, to beg him to get me out of here, but Markus's hand gripped my throat tighter, stopping any potential words from coming out. I watched Will go, watched the door close behind him, leaving me alone with Markus Scott and the corpse of his latest kill.

"Just remember," Markus hissed out, "this is your doing. You could've avoided all of this." He didn't give me a chance to respond; he released me, and my knees gave out immediately.

I collapsed on the floor, my hands barely moving fast enough to catch me. My pajama pants got soaked instantly, and I fought to get back up, to get out of the maroon, but I kept slipping. My stupid body couldn't right itself. I couldn't stand. Every part of me felt weak, and I only ended up making myself look dumb.

Dumb and bloody.

He started toward the door. "And like I said earlier, you should've eaten." He tossed a look over his shoulder at me, as if I was nothing to him, as if he hated me for simply existing. "Because you won't get a crumb of food until I believe the lesson is learned." And then he yanked open the door, about to step out.

"Wait! No—"

The door shut, and he didn't even look at me as he went. I managed to get to my feet, finally, racing toward the door, but I couldn't open it. He must've locked the door right as he went out, for no matter how much I pulled at it, it would not open.

My hope, whatever little sliver of it remained, died when I watched Markus and Will leave. They picked up the weapons, and then they left. The only one who looked at me was Will, and even that wasn't much, his stolen glances not giving me anything solid to hold onto. There was nothing but the coldness of the door and the warmth of the freshly spilt blood.

When they were gone, I was slow to turn, feeling like I was going to lose it. My sanity suddenly felt like such a fragile thing, something easily lost. If I lost it, I didn't know if I'd ever be able to get it back.

I didn't want to turn around, didn't want to look upon the mangled, bloodied corpse of the stranger, but I finished turning anyways. Maybe to further torture myself, maybe to let it really sink in. Or, and this was probably the case, I'd already lost my mind. Who could say?

The man looked even worse now, now that I could study his gruesome form without Markus strangling me or making me mutilate him further. He hardly looked like a man. Now that his heart had stopped beating, the blood flow had stopped... but that was also because most of the blood in his body now stained the floor.

And it was all over me. My feet, my face, my clothes... even my hands. I felt like I'd taken a shower in the stuff, and if I would've eaten, I knew I would've wretched it all up and made the room smell even worse.

Markus didn't say how long he was going to keep me in here. Until he thought I learned my lesson. Until it sank in. I couldn't say how long that would be, but I felt my knees weaken once more. With my back against the door, I slid down slowly, inch by inch until my backside hit the floor.

It was too much. The sight of the corpse, the blood... it was all I could see, and it was far too much. The image would be imprinted in my brain, and every time I closed my eyes, I

would remember him, that this horrific fate was because of me. I didn't know him, but I knew he didn't deserve this.

I couldn't say how long it was, but eventually the lights shut off. Even in the hall, the lights went off, and I was left, alone with the corpse, in complete and utter darkness. Pitch-blackness, since there were no windows and no other sources of light. I let out a whimper, an invisible pressure against my chest.

It wasn't the first time I'd been locked away in the dark, but this time felt so much worse than any of the other times. I pulled my knees to my chest, wrapped my arms around my legs, and curled into myself as much as I could. Normally I'd call out, try to reason with Daddy, but this darkness was unlike the darkness of my old bedroom.

At least I had a window. At least there was light from the hall. Something, anything to keep me rooted in reality. Here, there was absolutely nothing, nothing but a dark void swallowing me up, devouring me whole. No light, no hope, no salvation.

There was no point in banging or crying out. No one would hear my screams. No one would let me out, not until Markus said so. This was my punishment, and I had to live with it, for however long it ended up being.

Probably not long.

The truth came to me, and though it had always been the case, it was only just now that I believed it with every fiber of my being. It was a truth that hurt, a truth that further cut me to the bone, heavier than anything I'd ever felt. It compressed against my heart, pulled against every emotion I had.

This house, these men... I wasn't going to survive them.

They were going to kill me.

And the worst part was there was nothing I could do to stop them.

I know, I know, you want MORE! Don't worry, you'll get more very soon...

I hope you guys enjoyed this slightly fucked-up chapter in my psycho world. I always said Markus doesn't play nice, and take it from me, things will only get darker as the series progresses.

Please leave a review if you can <3 Reviews seriously help indie authors so much, I can't even say. Your review might be the difference between someone picking up the book and giving it a chance and that same person passing it over. Every single review helps, no matter how short they are. You don't have to write a novel. Leave that part to me.

Don't forget to preorder book two, Dark Desires, [here](#). It'll release August 1st!

If you haven't already, I suggest reading Cruel Black Hearts, where Markus got his start. In it, you'll meet Tori's parents and see their unconventional love story. The series is complete at four books, and you can find the first one [here](#).

If you want to read Will's backstory, you can find it in Hillcrest University, Year One, [here](#).

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